

Men and Medicine

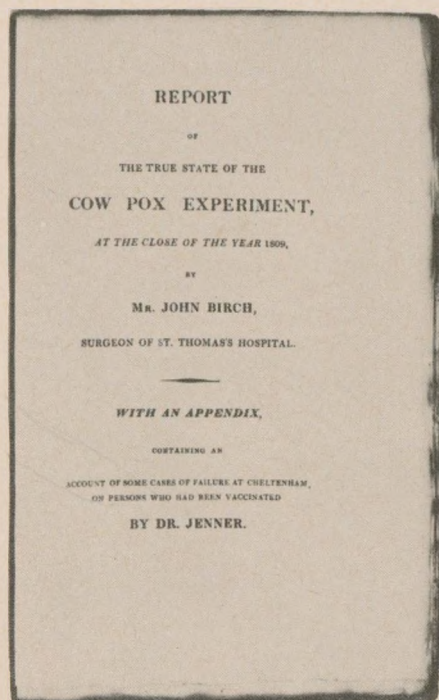


Figure 1

JOHN BIRCH'S

OPPOSITION TO VACCINATION

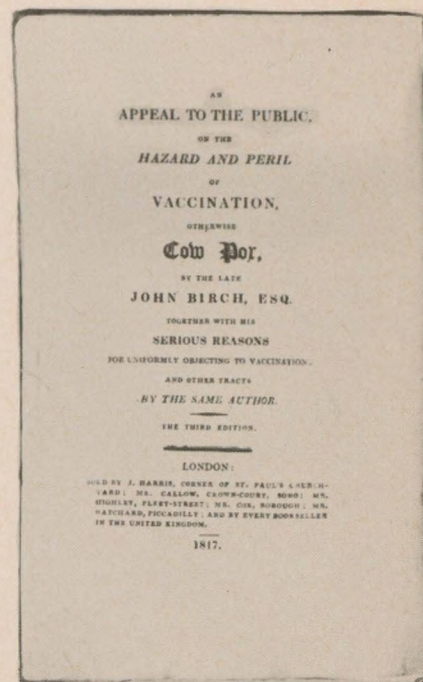


Figure 2

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In 1778 Edward Jenner began to collect observations on the immunity to smallpox of persons who had previously had cowpox. On May 14, 1796, he performed his first vaccination for the prevention of smallpox when he took matter from a cowpox pustule on the arm of the milkmaid Sarah Nelmes and scratched it into the arm of the boy James Phipps. (He was unaware of the fact that a Dorset farmer, Benjamin Jesty, had performed a number of such vaccinations between 1774 and 1789, and that Plett, a physician of Holstein, had done the same thing in 1791.) Jenner's published account of his work in 1798 was followed by research grants from Parliament that totaled 20,000 pounds.

Jenner became the object of bitter attack by physicians, some of whom claimed priority and others of whom considered him to be a faker. The

names of the most prominent among the opponents are usually given as Ingen-Housz, Woodville, and Pearson. It is interesting to note that John Birch, M.D., was also a bitter critic of Jenner's work.

John Birch was born in 1746; he ultimately became known as one of London's leading surgeons. By the early nineteenth century Birch had become surgeon to St. Thomas' Hospital and Surgeon Extraordinary to the Prince of Wales. Birch's opposition to Jenner took the form of letters to the Royal College of Physicians and a series of pamphlets. One of the pamphlets was called *Serious Reasons for Uniformly Objecting to the Practice of Vaccination*. Another is shown in figure 1. Birch died on February 3, 1815, "with scarce a groan or a sigh" and was buried in the yard of the

Church of St. Margaret Pattens, Rood Lane, Fenchurch Street. His sister Penelope had a 47-line epitaph inscribed on his tomb. It praised his persevering opposition to vaccination and also his "many remarkable and almost unhopd-for cures" effected with "medical electricity." Penelope added (on the stone) that she had "raised this Monument, not out of worldly and vain-glorious *Pride of Affinity*; but, in order to hand down an example worthy of Imitation to succeeding Ages." Penelope also collected his anti-vaccination writings in a volume that went through several editions (figure 2). John Birch's opposition to vaccination was perhaps not as vitriolic as that of some other physicians but on the other hand it was disseminated much more widely and for a longer period.