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Medical Anniversary

JOHN COAKLEY LETTSOM, 22 November 1744

Photo courtesy of The Medical Society of London

John Coakley Lettsom (1744–1815) was born in Tortola, British Virgin Islands, less than 160 km east of Puerto Rico. He was one of the last of seven pairs of twins, and he and his brother Edward were the only pair to survive infancy. Their father was a plantation owner so he was able to send his son to a Quaker school in Lancashire. A year as a dresser at St Thomas' Hospital was eventually followed by medical education at Edinburgh and Leiden and a London practice with Dr John Fothergill, London's most celebrated Quaker physician. He and his wife Ann Miers had eight children and lived in his country residence The Grove, Camberwell. He became FRCP (Ed) in 1771 and FRS in 1773. His immortality is linked with the Medical Society of London, which he founded in 1773. He also founded the Sea-bathing Infirmary, Margate. After a full and satisfying life helping others, Lettsom died on 1 November 1815 and is buried at the Quaker Burial Ground, Bunhill Row, London.

He was blessed with a sense of humour as revealed in this epigram against himself:

When any sick to me apply
I physics, bleeds and sweats 'em
If after that they choose to die,
Why verily!

— DG James