

## The College suspended

### Illustrations of the suspension of the College in the Adventures of Baron Munchausen

**ABSTRACT** – A satirical account of the raising of the Royal College of Physicians and its suspension from a balloon for three months is included among Baron Munchausen's later surprising adventures. Portrayals by artists of this flight of fancy involving the College are not widely known. Three pictorial representations of the raising of the College are shown and some of the historical context of the tall tale is given.

In 1951 Richard Asher described Munchausen's Syndrome vividly and memorably<sup>1</sup>. He referred specifically to an edition of *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* edited by John Carswell, published by the Cressett Press in 1948<sup>2</sup>, as the source of his inspiration for the eponym. Carswell wrote a scholarly introduction and also gave a descriptive bibliography of early editions of *Baron Munchausen's Narrative of his Marvellous Travels and Campaigns in Russia*, first published anonymously in Oxford, dated 1786, though it was on sale in November 1785<sup>3</sup>. The book was modest and unprepossessing, limited to 49 pages and devoid of illustrations; only three copies are known to have survived. The Cressett Press edition used by Richard Asher included many additions and was illustrated with wood engravings by Leslie Wood. Carswell also wrote a biography of the author of *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, with the title *The Prospector; being the Life and Times of Rudolf Erich Raspe (1737–1797)*<sup>4</sup>.

By the time Raspe wrote his fantasy, the real Baron Karl Friedrich Hieronymus von Münchhausen (1720–1797), a respected cavalry officer, was living in retirement on his country estate near Hanover, where, among his friends, he had a reputation as a raconteur and teller of tall tales. Raspe was a man of sharp intellect and wide interests, with ambitions at various times to be an industrial chemist, geologist, antiquary, romantic poet and author. But he also became a spy and embezzler. He had a complex and flawed personality, so that much of his life was spent as a fugitive from the consequences of his deceptions. For instance, he had no compunction in using the real Baron's name, albeit in an anglicised form, for the fictional braggart he created<sup>5</sup>. In England, as a refugee from his native Germany, he wrote the Munchausen narrative in English, while he was employed for a time by Matthew Boulton in a tin mining enterprise in Cornwall.

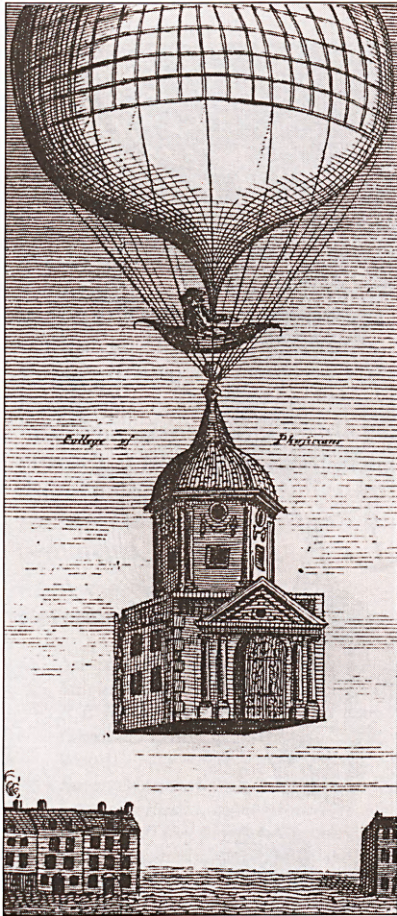
#### Illustrated adventures

The bicentenary of the publication of *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, in 1985, was the occasion for an exhibition at the Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood<sup>6</sup>. Its purpose was to show how imaginative artists had portrayed different adventures in succeeding editions which, after two hundred years, numbered several hundred. From early in the 19th century Munchausen's adventures attracted the talents of some of the best book illustrators of their times. They included Thomas Rowlandson<sup>7</sup>, George Cruikshank<sup>8</sup>, Gustave Doré<sup>9</sup>, 'Phiz' (Hablot Browne)<sup>10</sup>, Strang and Clarke<sup>11</sup>, Heath Robinson<sup>12</sup>, Leslie Wood<sup>2</sup> and Ronald Searle<sup>13</sup>. It is perhaps surprising, in the context of such artistic interest and activity, that the tale of the suspension of the College of Physicians from a balloon has been portrayed only twice in book illustrations. In 1786, the first picture of the College dangling in mid air, duly labelled, was included in the third edition of *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* (Fig 1)<sup>14</sup>. A 20th century edition included a reproduction of the same illustration<sup>15</sup>. In 1944, an American illustrator, Richard Floete, chose a schematic style to convey the scene (Fig 2)<sup>16</sup>.

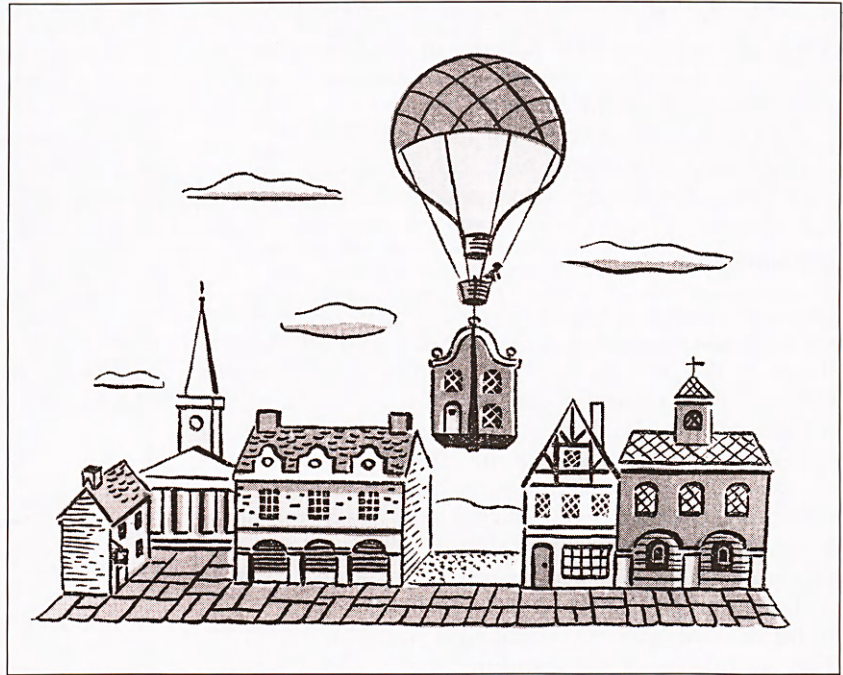
The third edition of *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* was described as 'considerably enlarged and ornamented with a number of views'. Raspe was by then no longer the author of the newly invented adventures. They were written by publishers' hacks, who made up for any deficiency in literary talent by their powerful penchant for satire. Among these 'further surprising adventures' is the account of the suspension of the College from a balloon.

I made a balloon of such extensive dimensions that an account of the silk it contained would exceed all credibility; every mercer's shop and weaver's stock in London, Westminster and Spitalfields contributed to it. With this balloon and my sling I played many tricks, such as taking one house from its station, and placing another in its stead, without disturbing their inhabitants, who were generally asleep, or too much employed to observe the perigrinations of their habitations. When the sentinel at Windsor Castle heard St Paul's clock strike thirteen it was through my dexterity; I brought the buildings nearly together that night, by placing the Castle in Saint George's Fields, and carried it back again





◀ Fig 1. The first illustration of the raising of the College, made from a copper-plate, and published in 1788<sup>3</sup>. It was reproduced this century in an edition of 1930<sup>15</sup>.



▲ Fig 2. Richard Floete's illustration (1944) placed above the chapter heading: 'The sling and the balloon. College of physicians suspended; undertakers, sextons etc., almost ruined'<sup>16</sup>.

before daylight, without waking any of the inhabitants; notwithstanding these exploits, I should have kept my balloon and its properties a secret, if Montgolfier had not made the art of flying so public. On the 30th September, when the College of Physicians chose their annual officers, and dined sumptuously together, I filled my balloon, brought it over the dome of their building, clapped the sling round the golden ball at the top, fastening the other end of it to the balloon and immediately ascended with the whole College to an immense height, where I kept them upwards of three months. You will naturally inquire what they did for food such a length of time? To this I answer, had I kept them suspended twice the time, they would have experienced no inconvenience on that account, so amply, or rather extravagantly, had they spread their table for that day's feasting. Though this was meant as an innocent frolic, it was productive of much mischief to several respectable characters amongst the clergy, undertakers, sextons and grave-diggers: they were, it must be acknowledged, sufferers; for it is a well-known fact, that during the three months the College was suspended in the air, and therefore incapable of attending their patients, no deaths

happened, except a few who fell before the scythe of Father Time, and some melancholy objects who, perhaps to avoid some trifling inconvenience here, laid the hands of violence upon themselves, and plunged into misery infinitely greater than that which they hoped by such a rash step to avoid, without a moment's consideration.

If the Apothecaries had not been very active during the above time, half the undertakers in all probability would have been bankrupts.

### The College building in Warwick Lane

After the disaster of the Great Fire, twelve years passed before the building of a new home for the College (its third) was completed, in Warwick Lane in the City. It was a building of which the College could be proud, later described as 'dignified with a hint of opulence'<sup>17</sup>; it remained the home of the College until 1825. The construction was carried out in stages. In 1670, Robert Hooke was commissioned to work on the design. The Warwick Lane building was in use early in 1675, followed by the Anatomy Theatre in 1679. Hooke supervised the building of the theatre, with its octagonal design, and gallery, turret and lantern,



surmounted by a golden ball. For Robert Hooke, to cap a building with a globe was something of a trademark<sup>18</sup>. The golden ball set high above the theatre of the College became nicknamed the gilded pill, and the theatre, the pill box. Sir Samuel Garth made poetic reference to these features in *The Dispensary*:

A dome majestic to the sight  
And sumptuous arches bear its oval height;  
A golden Globe plac'd high with artful skill  
Seems to the distant sight a gilded pill.<sup>19</sup>

### Balloonmania

In their choice of subject matter for the further surprising adventures, the authors who succeeded Raspe at the end of the 18th century were naturally influenced by contemporary exploits and events. The most dramatic of these was the moment when mankind first took to the air, opening the way for extraordinary and extremely hazardous real life ballooning adventures. It started with the Montgolfier brothers. After observing the effect of rising smoke on pieces of paper, they progressed within two years from inflating paper bags to despatching the first untethered and 'crewed' flight in a balloon, in 1783<sup>20</sup>. The occupants of the gondola were, in fact, passengers, not crew: a sheep, a duck and a rooster. On this maiden flight, before a throng of spectators, when the balloon was rent by a gust of wind there were fears for the safety of the barnyard aeronauts; but the animal cargo survived the eight minute flight unscathed. Man's first flight followed only two months later, in November 1783: a young French physician, François Pilâtre de Rozier, accompanied by the Marquis d'Arlandes, ascended over Paris carried by a Montgolfier balloon. By this time, Professor Charles and the Robert brothers were almost ready to take to the air with their hydrogen-filled balloon. It was by hydrogen balloon, in January 1785, that another young physician, an American named Richard Jeffries, accompanied Blanchard on the first successful airborne channel crossing. The maiden flight from England to France was touch and go; they lost height and almost entered the sea just before reaching the French coast. After discarding all possible ballast, virtually naked and their bladders empty, they were aided in the nick of time by an updraft of air, which just enabled them to clear the coastal cliffs of France. In Paris, the first cross channel balloonists were fêted until Jeffries fled exhausted from France; after another ovation in London, he abandoned ballooning for medicine<sup>21,22</sup>.

During the months preceding the French Revolution ballooning became something more than a fashionable amusement. The enormous crowds that gathered to watch the spectacles were elated and unconstrained; people felt that they were witnessing a liberating event, an augury of a free floating future<sup>23</sup>. Little wonder that, following such dramatic individual



Fig 3. An imaginative drawing of the suspended College by Leslie Wood (1988), illustrator of the Cressett Press edition of *Munchausen's travels*<sup>2</sup>.

exploits in ballooning and their effects on the public imagination, the tale of the raising of the College of Physicians was topical and appealing. Munchausen is portrayed in the baroque wickerwork gondola which swung beneath his Charlière.

### Bicentennial portrayal

Forty years after Leslie Wood drew the illustrations for the Cressett Press edition of *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, to which Richard Asher referred in his description of Munchausen's syndrome, the artist welcomed an invitation to create his concept of the raising of the College. The drawing on scraper board, which he made just over two centuries after the invention of ballooning, is the third interpretation by an artist of the tall tale concerning the College. Wood's portrayal closely captures the mood of the written account, and is now published for the first time (Fig 3).



## Acknowledgements

Mr John Carswell, author, editor and an authority on Raspe and Munchausen, and Mrs Tessa Chester of the Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood, organiser in 1985 of the exhibition, *Tall Stories: A Celebration of the Bicentenary of the Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, were both most helpful in guiding me to sources. The late Mr Leslie Wood responded enthusiastically to my invitation to him to interpret Baron Munchausen's surprising adventure involving the College in a style similar to the one he used to illustrate the Cressett Press edition of 1948. In April 1989, Mr Geoffrey Davenport kindly arranged an exhibition of 'Munchausiana' to coincide with the meeting of the Historical Resources Panel, when the paper on which this article is based was given. I am also much indebted to Mr Davenport for information and helpful comments.

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