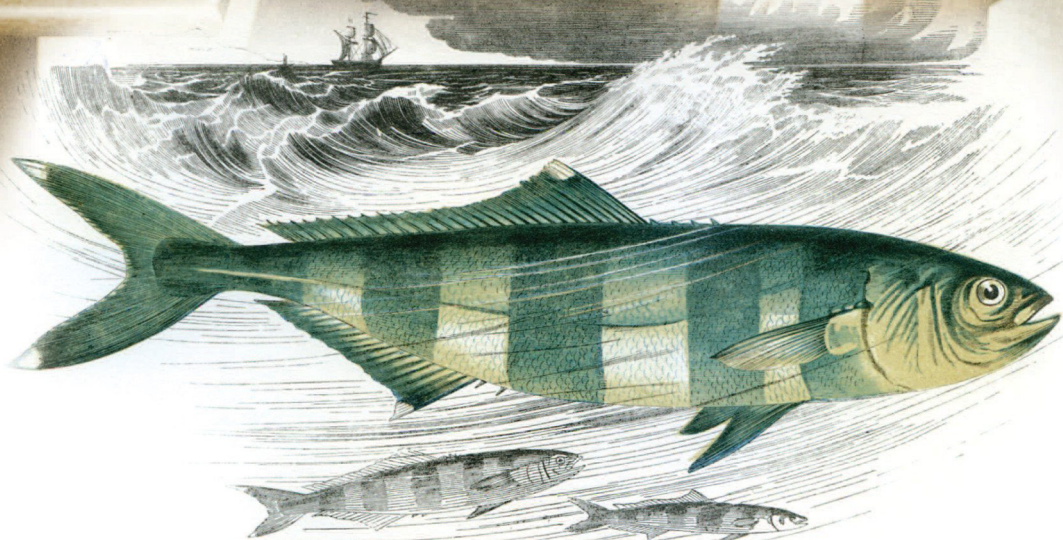


Doctor By Nature

Jonathan Couch: Surgeon of Polperro



Jeremy Rowett Johns

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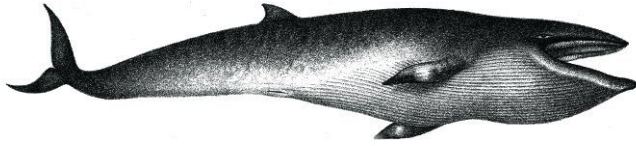
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INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1850 an enormous sea monster entangled itself in the drift net of a boat fishing for mackerel off the Cornish coast. Alarmed by its desperate struggle to escape but unwilling to cut it free, the crew decided to tow it back to harbour where, on arrival, they sent word to inform the local doctor of the catch. Jonathan Couch quickly took leave of his medical practice, collected his sketch-book and made his way down to the quayside where the fishermen had obligingly lifted the huge carcass out of the water for him to examine. On close inspection he declared it to be an unusual species of whale. Seating himself on an inverted fish basket, he set to work, carefully drawing the creature, taking particular care to capture the dark bluish black hue of its skin before the colours faded.

It was a familiar scene: the doctor, dressed in his customary long black coat, surrounded by a curious but admiring crowd of fishermen, boys and women with their knitting, preserving yet another image of marine life for posterity. For Jonathan Couch was a country doctor who chose to work quietly at home in a remote fishing village on the south coast of Cornwall, observing the birds of the air, the fish of the sea and the creatures that move on the earth and he came to be numbered among the great scientific figures of his day. He never courted fame but found it anyway. Rather, fame had to come looking for him down a steep and rocky road on a distant shore. He devoted his life to, and built his reputation upon, painstaking study of the

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natural world in that corner of England. At the same time he was also caring for the bodies and souls of his neighbours, the families of fishermen and farmers around Polperro where he was born and had his being.

Jonathan Couch was a quietly remarkable man in a remarkably noisy age: the tumultuous, heroic, inventive, often cruel and always rapidly-expanding, full-steam world of 19th century Britain with all its energy and thirst for discovery. Here, through time of war, political and religious turmoil and impassioned debate in science, he followed his own intellectual path. Great events might occur elsewhere but the good doctor could be found – as likely as not – sitting on the quay, sketching some newly-found specimen fresh from the sea. He made Cornwall his own Galapagos, a place of discovery.

He came into this vigorous world at a time when it was still possible for a gifted individual not only to grasp and follow advances across a range of disciplines but to achieve distinction in wholly separate fields. And he never ceased to learn. It was eventually said of this diligent man: ‘his highest pleasure was to be a learner and a student.’ At the very outset, as a young man, he turned his back on the opportunity of a lucrative medical career in London. Instead he chose to serve with devotion the people of his native village as their surgeon-apothecary and man-midwife for 60 years. He certainly didn’t turn away from medical innovation. He was, for instance, not afraid to fight smallpox through the then still novel means of inoculation and vaccination – and not shy of blaming the spread of disease on poor housing and squalid standards of public hygiene. Late in his long life, he was proud to have known six generations of local families and to have attended four generations in childbirth. ‘If Dr Couch gave a patient up it was no use to call anyone else in. You might just as well curl up your toes and die,’ said his local patients.

But that is only a fraction of the story. Jonathan Couch was possessed of an extraordinarily inquiring mind. In the severe winter of 1795, the five-year-old Jonathan witnessed a salmon frozen so rigid it could be made to stand upright on its tail. It is not difficult to trace a life-long, all-embracing passion for natural science to that small boy’s fascination with a spectacle he would remember all his days. He was a pioneering natural scientist; a world-leading, astonishingly diligent observer of animal behaviour; a trail-blazer for Charles Darwin and other scientific thinkers of towering stature. The

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doctor was the authority on the fish species native to British waters, recording their physiology in loving detail. But his lively mind also turned to the migration of birds and the habits of bats; he wrote about fossils and flowering plants, sharks and shooting stars, porpoises and potato disease, crabs and carpenter bees. He was an early advocate of conservation who worried about overfishing; a recorder of species of fish and birds previously unknown to science, often brought to his door by seagoing neighbours or else picked up on the wayside during his medical rounds.

His reputation is secured by his great works, notably his four-volume *History of the Fishes of the British Islands*, a gargantuan effort which became and remains a standard source of reference, quoted by Darwin among others. His name is enshrined in small things: a species of woodlouse bears his name, *Philoscia couchii*; a previously unrecorded type of coral is called, in his honour, *Rhodophyton couchii*. Couch's Whiting swims off Cornwall's rugged coast; the Dotted Mackerel owes its discrete identity to the man-midwife of Polperro.

Of all the distinctions that came his way he was, perhaps, most proud of his election as a Fellow of the Linnean Society, which placed him among the ranks of the most distinguished men of science of the day. And what a day: the golden age of discovery and classification of species, a field pioneered by the Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus. The learned society was formed 'for the cultivation of the science of natural history' - and Jonathan Couch was from the moment of his nomination pleased to use the letters FLS after his name.

He was a classical scholar; a Methodist preacher; an antiquarian and gatherer of Cornish words; a force behind road and bridge-building works; a tireless correspondent generating innumerable letters, learned papers and published works. And he was also a compassionate family man, himself acquainted with grief. His three marriages yielded 11 children and more than a fair share of loss - his first wife died, devastatingly, only nine weeks after their wedding day. Happily, there is another measure of fame to be found among Jonathan's progeny: Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, man of letters and collector of English verse (still remembered by the pen name: Q), was his grandson.

On his death Jonathan Couch was honoured with this epitaph: 'His memory is precious and endures'. The purpose of this book is to show that it is - and it does.



CHAPTER I

A LIVELY AND ENQUIRING MIND

Four months before the storming of the Bastille in Paris that sparked the French Revolution in 1789, a 44-year-old fish-curer's wife gave birth to a baby boy on Sunday, March 15, in a room by the harbour in Polperro, a remote fishing village on the south coast of Cornwall. He was the sole offspring of Richard and Philippa Couch, a god-fearing Methodist couple who lived in what is now Warren Cottage at the bottom of the Calvinist's Steps. Four weeks later, the child was carried up over the hill to Talland church by his parents where he was baptised and named Jonathan.

So it was that one of the more remarkable figures in Cornish history entered the world. In Polperro at the end of the 18th century most families were engaged in either fishing or farming. The fishing industry served to keep most men busy and reasonably prosperous. Whole families could live for months on the proceeds of one good haul of fish. Among them were the Couches, one of whom fought at the Battle of Trafalgar; another died in the frozen wastes of the Arctic along with the rest of Sir John Franklin's ill-fated 1845 expedition to find the Northwest Passage. Of that original family of yeoman farmers, Richard alone remained in Polperro at the end of the 18th century; a prosperous fish merchant profiting from the brisk trade in the catching, curing and export of fish; a man of property, wealthy enough, at any rate, to be able to pay for his son's education.

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There was another more lucrative trade carried on by the Polperro fishermen at the time. Huge quantities of contraband goods, mainly spirits, tea and tobacco, were being shipped across from Guernsey and sold on for handsome profit. The risk of seizure by the Revenue vessels patrolling the Channel was more than outweighed by the rewards but the 'Trade', as it was known locally, declined rapidly after the murder of a Customs officer near Plymouth in 1798. A smuggling vessel named the *Lottery* was involved and a Polperro man named Tom Potter was subsequently tried at the Old Bailey for murder and executed for the crime. It was an episode that shocked the community and led to a gradual decline in the smuggling trade that had flourished there for decades.

The young Jonathan grew up among the fishing families who occupied the cottages clustered around the harbour in Polperro; a child with a lively and enquiring mind who was happy in his own company, and happier still exploring the tidal pools and coves along the rocky shoreline in the neighbourhood of his home. When the fishing fleet returned to harbour, he would watch fascinated as the catch was brought ashore, learning to identify and distinguish the different varieties of sea creatures. But his formal education began at the local dame school in the village where he learned to read from a horn book, a short-handled oak bat on which was placed a lesson card with the letters of the alphabet, covered by a thin sheet of transparent horn. There it was that Jonathan, seated alongside his little schoolfellows on low benches, first learned to read and write and to memorise the Lord's Prayer. Another equally enduring memory was 'the great frost' in January 1795, the year that the Thames froze over and French troops invaded Holland across the frozen waterways. 'I was then at school; and recollect that I saw a salmon which was frozen so stiff as to be capable of standing on its end. A pitcher of water also burst; and the fragments fell down, and left the water standing solid.'¹

At the age of seven he was sent away to a boarding school in the nearby hamlet of Lansallos run by Thomas Sedgwick Cole, a small, deformed and somewhat eccentric individual who nevertheless employed the very best teachers for the 70 boys there. 'At this age I could read well and write also; for my learning amounted to this long before I left home' he was to recall later. But though he always

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spoke with gratitude of his parents' determination to give him the best education available, Jonathan never forgot the unhappiness he felt at being parted from them at such a young age and strongly disapproved of sending any child away to boarding school.² Another early memory of his time at Lansallos was of the Nore mutiny by sailors of the Royal Navy in 1797, led by Richard Parker in protest at the primitive and brutal conditions of navy life at the time. 'One of my school fellows having on some occasion uttered some seditious expressions in answer to some threatening of the Master, he received from his companions the name of Parker'. The mutinous 'Parker', it seems, was firmly dealt with.³

The school moved to Pelynt in 1798 where it became known as the Winsor Academy. Cole placed an advertisement in the *Sherborne Mercury* for a First Assistant who was to be 'well versed in Vulgar and decimal Arithmetic, Navigation, Mensurations &c'.⁴ It was a fee-paying boarding school intended for the sons of merchants and other relatively well-off parents but within three years the number of boarders had reduced to 45. In 1802 Cole retired as headmaster and was succeeded by John Milton whom he had appointed as his assistant. When Cole died just two years later, his wife then married the new headmaster.⁵ It was at the Winsor Academy that Jonathan was taught Latin by a Catholic priest, Father Arzell, who had escaped the horrors of the French Revolution by fleeing to England where he was befriended by the 45-year-old Cornish baronet Sir Harry Trelawny and allowed to celebrate mass in the private chapel at Trelawne, near Polperro, home to the family since 1600. 'Monsr. Arzell appears to have been an excellent man,' Jonathan wrote later. 'He used to go regularly to Trelawny to worship in the Chapel there in company with another priest to whom Sir Harry had given refuge, and whom, though himself a Protestant clergyman, he permitted to officiate in his private chapel. Through this it came to pass that Popery got introduced into the family of the Reverend Sir Harry Trelawny'.⁶

In due course Jonathan left Pelynt to go to the Grammar School at Bodmin where the Rev. Moses Morgan was the headmaster. Morgan was a mean, crafty man. Every night he would read a long extract from the Bible in a voice like the droning of a bee, and any boy who fell asleep was sent to bed without supper - much to the profit of Morgan.

It was during his time at school in Bodmin that news of the Peace of Amiens, signed in March 1802, brought with it a temporary halt to the hostilities with France that had begun with the French Revolution. Even before the treaty was ratified, the Admiralty ordered all armed ships and hired cutters to be paid off while Polperro celebrated with an 'illumination'; lights were placed in the windows of every house, a bonfire was lit at the top of one of the surrounding hills and a convivial supper enjoyed afterwards at the Ship Inn.⁷ Before the peace, Jonathan later recalled, 'the invasion of this country by Buonaparte was so confidently expected that some of the inhabitants of Bodmin were almost afraid to go to bed'.

As England celebrated the lifting of the threat of invasion, Thomas Erskine, the future Lord Chancellor but then still a struggling and impecunious barrister, dined with Jonathan's headmaster Moses Morgan while he was in Bodmin on a case. Jonathan was one of a deputation of boys who asked him to persuade Morgan to give them a holiday, and this was duly granted.⁸ It was Jonathan's study of Greek and Latin language and literature at Bodmin Grammar School that instilled in him a love of the classics that was to serve him so well throughout his life. The ability to read, write and dissect dead languages was the mark of a gentleman. The more he knew about ancient cultures, the better able he would be to understand his own was the received wisdom of the time.

When the war with France broke out again in May 1803, the massing of troops on the French coast raised fears that Napoleon was now really ready to invade. Not since the days of the Spanish Armada 200 years earlier had the threat been so imminent. Britain, alone and in peril, prepared for invasion. With the renewed threat, Jonathan later recalled, 'companies of volunteers were formed in all directions; and those who were not actually enrolled, had some specific duty assigned them in case of invasion: such as driving of cattle and goods, setting fire to corn, etc. Some honest hearted individuals who lived in continued fear, dreading to go to bed lest they should awake at the sound of the trumpet, or in the midst of the French troops. I recollect the painful emotion with which the French bulletins were read, the people assembling about the post office in Looe, and though it was generally concluded that they held much falsehood, yet everyone was conscious of misfortune.'⁹

There was plenty of patriotic fervour throughout Britain at the time and women in particular played an important part in maintaining morale. Jonathan witnessed both very young and very old women from villages wearing scarlet cloaks and camping out on the hills along the Cornish coast, keeping huge fires burning through the night 'to frighten away the Frenchees'.¹⁰ One contemporary account of the subterfuge described how 'great bonfires were lit which, in the darkness, threw this army into bold relief. 'Twas camouflage. Buonaparte was expected to land with an army in Cornwall and Polperro being so strategic a centre, why not land there? So they march to and fro, looking in the distance like real soldiers guarding the coast against surprise'.

The fear was that the French would attempt a diversion by sending an army into Cornwall to draw the troops there, while the main efforts were directed against London. There had after all been several attempts to land French troops on British soil, including an expeditionary force that actually succeeded in disembarking at Fishguard, Pembrokeshire, in 1797. The Cornish, with more than 300 miles of rugged coastline to defend, felt particularly vulnerable.

CHAPTER XIV

A GOOD HORSE

Two things above all were essential for success as a country doctor in the 19th century: a good reputation and a good horse.¹ Couch undoubtedly possessed the former and there is plenty of evidence that he had the latter as well. He would certainly have been entirely dependent on his horse when visiting patients away from Polperro itself for the terrain in that part of Cornwall consists largely of hills and steep-sided valleys. Travel on horseback was the preferred method of transport for country medical practitioners at the time; for them a horse became their faithful servant and constant companion. The sight of the Polperro doctor trotting round the country lanes in all weathers was a familiar one; as were tales of his cob seen patiently tethered to a gate at dawn while its rider pursued a rare luminous moth or some other elusive insect in the field beyond. In his later years Couch used a gig, and often gentry or farmers at a distance would send out their own gigs or carriages for him.²

Travel by horseback at least provided the doctor with unexpected opportunities to observe the natural world around him. Riding home in a particularly violent thunderstorm one summer's evening in 1832, for example, Couch had a narrow escape when he witnessed a ball of light about the size of an orange shoot across his path at head height about 20 yards in front of him 'as if projected from a cannon ... The whole was the work of an instant; the ball, of a steel blue ... unattended by any noise or explosion and evidently unconnected with the lightning that glared around'.³ And as usual, his keen powers of observation resulted in yet another contribution to one of those scientific journals so popular with Victorian readers, the *Magazine of Natural History*, this time on *Luminous Meteors commonly called Shooting Stars*.

Times were changing fast, however, and the old route that led into Polperro from the east down Talland Hill was too steep; it was difficult even for riders on horseback, let alone horse drawn carts or carriages.

Couch's daughter, Bertha, described it as 'a road so steep and rocky, that to scramble up or down it seems a more fitting expression than to walk, ride or drive'.² Plans for a new road to follow a different line down the coomb through the hamlet of Crumplehorn had been proposed by a local engineer and planner named Joseph Thomas. Consent was obtained from Nicholas Kendall, the owner of Killigarth Manor on whose land the road would pass, and in December 1848 the far-sighted Couch presided at a public meeting in the Ship Inn to discuss the project. Improvements had already been made to the ancient road that led from Torpoint and the Cremyl Passage ferry to Liskeard, with parts of the route rebuilt to avoid hills and ensure the swifter passage of the mail coaches. Work on the new road from Torpoint to Looe had also begun and Couch realised that Polperro was in danger of being left still cut off from the outside world by land, with almost everything coming in and out by sea. As a result of his initiative, the money for the new road into Polperro was raised by private subscription, with everyone contributing something, however small.

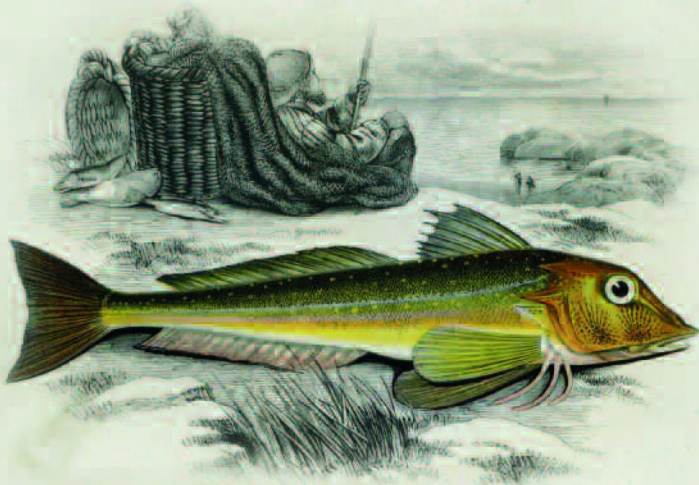
Work began at last in February the following year. Couch recorded in his notebook: 'At 4 o'clock in the afternoon of a very fine day, a commencement was made, by my laying the first stone of a new bridge at Crumplehorn, to be called Kendall Bridge. I deposited there several copper coins of our Sovereign and others, amidst the hearty cheers of several hundred spectators, with numerous flags flying.'³

The New Road, as it became known, followed the line of a narrow farm track that had led up from Crumplehorn Mill to Mortha Gate at the top, a distance of just over half a mile, and was finally opened with much pomp and ceremony on Wednesday, July 11, 1849. It was a fine summer's day and shortly after two o'clock in the afternoon a procession of nearly one thousand men, women and children set off from Polperro up Talland Hill, headed by the Polperro band and a decorated boat on wheels pulled by a team of fishermen. At the junction with the new road at the top of the hill a gate was opened and the procession continued down the new road to Crumplehorn where tea was served while the band played. 'The whole town of Polperro also was ornamented with numerous triumphal arches formed of trees and branches, with flags and a strong rope was stretched from Hard Head across the top of Hobb's Hill decorated with a variety of flags,'

Jonathan Couch (1789-1870), surgeon apothecary of Polperro, was one of the pioneering natural historians of his day, paving the way for others such as Darwin and Huxley to follow. His own county of Cornwall was every bit as much a place of discovery as the Galapagos Islands and his reputation is secured by his great works, notably his four-volume *Fishes of the British Islands* which remains a standard work of reference today. But his lively mind also turned to the migration of birds and the habits of bats; he wrote about fossils and flowering plants, sharks and shooting stars, crabs and carpenter bees, porpoises and potato disease.



Doctor By Nature draws on much previously unpublished material to tell the story of a remarkable man who, born in humble circumstances, rose to become one of the leading natural scientists of the 19th century. As a young man, he turned his back on a lucrative medical career in London, choosing instead to serve the people of his native village as their doctor for 60 years. A classical scholar, Methodist preacher, antiquarian and force behind road building projects, he was also a compassionate family man whose three marriages yielded 11 children and more than a fair share of grief.



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