

**A MEMOIR OF
THOMAS
STERRY HUNT**

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A Memoir of Thomas Sterry Hunt by James Douglas

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JAMES DOUGLAS

**A MEMOIR OF
THOMAS
STERRY HUNT**

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OF

THOMAS STERRY HUNT, M.D., LL.D. (Cantab.),

*Fellow of the Royal Society; Member of the National Academy
of the U. S., the Imperial Carolinian Academy, the American
Philosophical Society, the Amer. Academy of Sciences,
the Royal Society of Canada, the Geological Societies
of France, Belgium and Ireland; Officer of
the Orders of the Legion of Honour, SS.
Mauritius and Lavarus, etc., etc., etc.*

☆ BY JAMES DOUGLAS. ☆

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OBITUARY NOTICE
OF
THOMAS STERRY HUNT.

BY JAMES DOUGLAS.

(Read before the American Philosophical Society, April 1, 1893)

Among the most versatile men of science, of the present generation, must be classed Thomas Sterry Hunt.

He was prominent as a chemist nearly half a century ago, not only in the field of original investigation, but as one of the first interpreters of the new chemistry then being taught by Gerhardt, and he not only grew with the growth of his favorite science up to the date of his death, but helped to enlarge its scope, to expand its relations, and place it on a new and more consistent basis.

As a geologist his work was almost confined to the crystalline and palæozoic rocks, not only because his practice in the field under Sir William Logan, in the Canadian Geological Survey, was among the older rocks, but because the investigation of their origin, decay and metamorphosis in its fullest sense, fell within the scope of his studies as a chemist, and gave wider range to his faculties as a theorist. For Hunt, besides being an exact student of nature, was a poet, and, being a theorist, was possessed of vivid imagination. He brought his chemical knowledge to bear on the geological problems which presented themselves to him in most perplexing profusion, while trying to conceive of the genesis of the crystalline rocks. And he was of necessity led on from the conception of the primal conditions of our own globe to speculations on the constitution of the universal atmosphere and the building of worlds in interstellar space.

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It was natural that the phase of mineralogy, which to him would have most attraction, and which he would most sympathetically elaborate, would be the chemical. Minerals being chemical compounds, he applied to the study of their constitution and classification the chemico-physical law which he had been groping after all his life, and clearly formulated only in 1886, viz., "that the value not only of gases and vapors, but of all species, whether gaseous, liquid or solid, is constant, and that the integral weight varies directly as the density." Under the guidance of that law he propounded an entirely new and original classification of mineral species.

It was therefore preëminently as a chemist, whether he was laboring in the laboratory or in the domain of geology or of mineralogy, that Hunt was most at home, and that he left his impress on the science of his day, an impress which will never be effaced.

Thomas Sterry Hunt was proud of his second Christian name, his mother's patronymic, as more than one of his direct ancestors had made the name conspicuous and famous. He could trace his descent almost without interruption from that Peter Sterry who was chaplain first to Lord Brooke and then to Oliver Cromwell—who could preach Puritanism to the Long Parliament, and astutely secure his own pardon from Charles II. A much more uncompromising and typical preacher of the Commonwealth was a member of the same stock, that Thomas Sterry who wrote *A Riot Among the Bishops; or, A Terrible Tempest in the Sea of Canterbury*.

A branch of the family, consisting of three brothers, Roger, Robert and Cyprian Sterry, and a sister, came to America about 1753, and settled in Providence. Roger alone left legitimate offspring. Two of his sons, John and Consider, attained eminence as mathematicians and edited and published *The True Republican*, a leading organ of the old Jeffersonian party. Nevertheless the world at large will hardly subscribe to the epitaph which commemorates Consider Sterry's fame in Norwich churchyard, Connecticut. "Consider Sterry, aged 56 years; died November 15, 1817.

When the world lost a genius for mathematics and astronomy seldom equaled, rarely surpassed. This monument is erected by the Society of Freemasons, of which he was an ornament, by whose lustre the path to the high eminence to which he attained is made plain to those who strive for equal excellence."

Jane Elizabeth, a daughter of the mathematician, Consider Sterry, was married to Peleg Hunt in 1823. Thomas Sterry, their oldest child, was born on September 5, 1826, in Norwich, Conn.

Mr. Hunt moved his family to Poughkeepsie, N. Y., when his son was about ten years old. There the father died in 1838, and the mother returned with her surviving children to her old home in Connecticut. She was a woman in whom strength of character was combined with tenderness. She made a successful struggle; by her own exertions educated her children, and was rewarded by their unflagging affection. Thomas' first earnings were devoted to relieving her from the burden of self-support and to providing her with a home of her own. After her death he devoted a large share of his income to the maintenance in comfort of his two sisters.

He was twelve years of age when his mother returned to Norwich. For a short period he attended the grammar school, but it was necessarily for a short period. The financial exigencies of his home were peremptory, and the lad of thirteen had to earn his own living. His first employment was in a printing office. His next master was an apothecary, and his third a bookseller. His inclinations probably dictated his choice in each case, for books and chemicals were already the tools with which he was shaping his future career. But more profitable work offering in the corner grocery of the village of Greenville near Norwich, the future chemist accepted it. Fortunately his duties were not exacting, for they left him time to read and even carry on some original investigation, with the stove as his furnace and the shelves beneath the counter as his laboratory. A scientific career was the aim of his efforts and studies. His most appreciative

advisers and allies were the local physicians and their libraries were his stock of books. His thoughts turned, therefore, to medicine and surgery, as the most available if not the most congenial of scientific pursuits, and a skeleton was hidden away among the boxes and barrels of the grocery store, with his home-made chemical apparatus. But his natural bias finally asserted itself, and circumstances combined with his tastes to enable him to follow the pursuits for which he was best fitted.

The sixth annual meeting of the Association of American Geologists and Naturalists, the progenitor of the present American Association for the Advancement of Science, was held in New Haven in 1845. The young chemist attended it as correspondent for a New York newspaper. There was read at it more than one paper which must have stimulated his thoughts and imagination—above all, a most suggestive rather than conclusive discussion of the atomic theory by that brilliant but eccentric genius, J. D. Whelpley, a paper glittering with such aphorisms as "gravity is affinity at a distance," "affinity is gravity near at hand," and "the extended atmosphere of an atom (Sanskrit *atma*, breath, omnipresent power, first principle) is therefore its proper ether, through which it radiates pulses of heat and light, and is electrically, magnetically and attractively present in the whole space."

Thomas Sterry Hunt's name appears among those of the gentlemen unanimously elected members of the Association. He therefore took more than the ordinary newspaper reporter's perfunctory interest in its proceedings. That of his future chief, William Logan, also stands on the same list, with the strange title, "Geol. Surveyor of Canada."

The elder Silliman had lectured at Norwich, and had there previously seen the precocious boy. When Hunt met him, now again, his wonderful acquirements and natural grace of manner gained for him the friendship of that famous chemist, as noted for his generous appreciation of genius in others as for his own scientific position. He secured his admission to

the Scientific School, and gave him a position in the chemical laboratory. There he at once became so useful to Silliman, Jr., in making a series of water analyses as to earn a salary, and ere long gain admission to the professor's household. His first paper to Silliman's *Journal*, "A Description and Analysis of a New Mineral Species containing Titanium, with Some Remarks on the Constitution of Tellurium Minerals," is dated from Yale chemical laboratory in February, 1846, and exhibits the same care in noting every step of the analysis and every resulting reaction as characterized his laboratory work throughout life.

He wrote to a friend from Yale college laboratory, New Haven, June 25, 1845 :

"I have seated myself in the laboratory with the flasks by my side, so as to work and write at the same time. I am busily engaged in the analysis of corals collected by the U. S. expedition, and now being analyzed for Government. They are almost pure carbonate of lime, with a few thousandths of phosphoric acid and ammonia, and occasionally alumina. One specimen which had been sent as a coral mud or sand, I found to be *white arsenic*; probably put up by mistake on board the ship. . . . I am generally occupied one or two hours each day in assisting the professor (Silliman) in arranging drawings and specimens for the lecture. I have free access to the cabinet, and a key to unlock all the cases. . . . I am boarding in a club of students at \$1.25 a week. We have little or no meat. I do not like this very well, but it is cheaper, though I think I will board myself after a while. The room I expected to have had been occupied, as it was uncertain whether I was coming, and so I have taken up lodgings in the loft of the laboratory building itself, and am so quite at home with chemical apparatus and preparations all around, but they are congenial spirits as Mr. Silliman remarked when he showed me the room."

He writes again on March 23, 1846 :

"My time is wholly occupied in part by chemical analyses. I have made an elaborate analysis of a mineral from Amity,