

# LOOKING BACK

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## Elocution, phrenology, homeopathy: Dr. Barber taught them all

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There is no doubt that Dr. Jonathan Barber lived an unusual life. Who else would have moved his family in 1836 from peaceful Boston to Montreal during the unrest that preceded the 1837 rebellions?

Born in 1784 in England, Barber practiced medicine in London before emigrating to the U.S. in 1820 "for health reasons, having been impaired by devotion to his profession," according to his obituary in the *Waterloo Advertiser*.

He practiced for several years in Washington, but by the late 1820s had switched to teaching literature and elocution, first at Yale and then at Harvard. In *Transcendental Wordplay*, Michael West describes Barber's teaching technique:

"The student stood inside four equal vertical hoops, each angled at 45 degrees. Around them ran three horizontal circles. Constituting a hollow glove over six feet in diameter, the hoops divided

its surface into 32 different apertures.

"The student could thrust his hands into various openings. The postures corresponded to 15 positions that the orator's arms might assume while speaking, each associated by Barber with a specific emotion ... all Harvard students were required to declaim, under his watchful eye, thrusting their hands through designated slats at appropriate points in the text.

"The bamboo sphere was found one morning dangling from a barber pole," notes West.

After leaving Harvard in 1834, Barber began lecturing on phrenology, an early precursor of the neurosciences that suggested that the brain consists of separate faculties, each controlling an aspect of character and personality. The theory was that by measuring and analyzing the bumps of the skull, a person's strengths, weaknesses, personality and behaviour could be predicted. Its proponents claimed it could be used in

selecting a marriage partner, making career choices, hiring employees and improving child rearing. A person's defects could be rectified by exercising the appropriate brain faculty.

Martin Staum, in *Labelling People*, concludes that early practitioners of phrenology believed it was a tool that could be used to lessen the effects of extreme passions on the social fabric. This probably appealed to Barber as he planned his family's move to a political hotbed.

About 1836, Barber moved to Montreal with his wife, Martha Hemming Dunkin Barber; his daughters, Mary, Emma and Susan; and Mary's new husband, Christopher Dunkin (who was both Barber's stepson and son-in-law).

Their contacts in Lower Canada included the young families of Charles Bancroft and Horatio Gates. Both these prominent Montreal business associates with Boston connections had died of strokes in 1834, and their families had stayed in Montreal.

In the *Daily Witness* of Jan.



BROME COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
Jonathan Barber taught at Yale and Harvard before immigrating to Canada.

11, 1896, James Mathewson wrote: "Dr. Barber and afterwards his clever son-in-law Christopher Dunkin about 1836 gave the most interesting lectures on phrenology ever given. His collection of skulls and casts and charts was extensive. Both were finished speakers and both thoroughly understood the subject."

Barber also taught elocution during his first years in Montreal. One class participant was contractor John Redpath, who wrote to a New York friend in 1837 that Dr. Barber was "lecturing on elocution and by attending them I have discovered that I am quite a novice in the service of speaking or writing correctly, although I daresay you will think it did not require any great stretch of intellect to make this discovery."

Subsequently, Barber went back to England, returning to Montreal in 1842 versed in homeopathy, a holistic system that seeks to stimulate the body's natural ability to heal itself: a gentle alternative to the then-prevalent bleeding and purging procedures. In Lovell's directories, he is listed as "doctor" from 1847 to 1852, and as homeopathist until 1859-60.

Knowledgeable in many subjects, Barber was a frequent lecturer at the Mechanics' Institute of Montreal. In 1846, he gave a talk titled *Best Means of Preserving Health of Large Towns*; in 1850 he

gave a talk on *Oratory with Reminiscences of English Speeches*; and in 1853 spoke on *The Philosophy of France*.

By 1859, he was again teaching elocution, and in the McGill archives is listed as professor of oratory, 1859-64. J. D. Borthwick notes in the *History and Biographical Gazetteer of Montreal to the Year 1892*: "The writer well remembers when associated with him in the old [High School Department of McGill College] and Barber's method of Elocution, then in vogue, was one of the most interesting lessons the youth of Montreal learned."

Barber gave an address at the 50th wedding anniversary of Dr. and Mrs. S. S. Foster in Knowlton in 1863. He died the following year at the age of 80 at the Knowlton home of Christopher Dunkin and is buried, alongside Dunkin and Bancroft family members, in Mount Royal Cemetery.

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