Thomas Wakley (1795–1862): a biographical sketch

David Sharp

Lancet 2012; 379: 1914–21
Published Online
May 16, 2012
DOI:10.1016/S0140-6736(12)60526-1

2 Iron Mills, Minchinhampton, UK (D Sharp MA)

Correspondence to:
Mr David Sharp, 2 Iron Mills, Minchinhampton, Gloucestershire GL6 9AL, UK
davidwsharp@sky.com

See Online for appendix

Thomas Wakley—founding editor of *The Lancet*, member of Parliament, coroner and, for 12 years, all three simultaneously—died 150 years ago. His fullest biography is more than a century old, but still provides a good account of the struggles and achievements of this extraordinary yet at times rather difficult and overstretched man. Nonetheless, there are gaps, and this anniversary provides a chance to fill in a few of them.

Introduction

> "Reformer indeed! Thomas Wakley…was more than a reformer, he was a revolutionary, and who has heard of *The Lancet* except for you medical people!"
>
> *Vic Feather, then Trades Union Congress assistant general secretary (1960–69), in conversation with Wakley biographer Dr Charles W Brook*

Thomas Wakley, founder of *The Lancet*, died on May 16, 1862. The journal has often been asked for his papers, but they are long gone. Thus, Samuel Squire Sprigge's 500 page biography[1] from 1897 has to be the starting point for any appraisal. In inviting Sprigge to write the biography, Wakley's eldest son and grandson wanted to avoid their forebear's story being told "through the imperfect lens of family affection",[1] but Sprigge's own lens is at times rose tinted. There are several omissions—for example, Wakley's wife and daughter are not named; his huge property investment, his being called on to fight a duel, and his challenge to the medical care of King George IV are not mentioned; and his non-*Lancet* writing is incompletely covered. However, Wakley the combative reformer inside and outside medicine is well described by Sprigge and others,[1–6] and his many achievements can surely withstand a critical inspection of his methods.

P Sharp

***Figure 1*: Land Farm, Wakley's birthplace**
The house began as a medieval longhouse and was extended in 1629, and again in the 19th century. Most of the land was sold 40 years ago. Situated hygienically over a still-running small stream, is a three-seater water closet, now used to store garden furniture. Could it have been young Thomas Wakley's "necessary house"?

The man from Devon

At Land Farm (figure 1) in the east Devon parish of Membury towards the end of the 18th century, Henry and Mary Wakley were raising a large family, of whom Thomas was the youngest. Wakley genealogy is complicated by Wakeleys and Wakelys and the pronunciation remains controversial (appendix). Henry was a successful farmer, a vigorous horseman, a defender of the Corn Laws, a local expert on land enclosure, and a Tory—a trait not passed on to his youngest child. In later life he declared himself a gentleman, but he was not well educated; "X The mark of Henry Wakley" certified his marriage in 1772. He died aged 92.

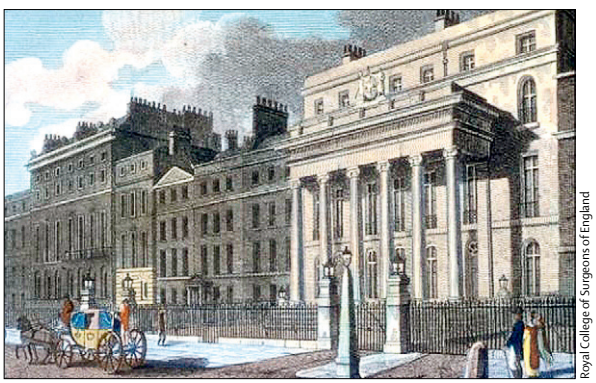
We do not know why young Thomas chose to study medicine. He served apprenticeships under three men. Thomas Incledon, a druggist in Taunton, might have been the first; Wakley's brother-in-law Richard Phelps, a surgeon–apothecary whom Wakley joined in Beaminster in 1812 was the second; and a surgeon called Coulson from a medical family in Henley on Thames was the third (a William Coulson was known to have been "associated with *The Lancet* in its infancy").[7] In 1815, Wakley moved to London and in 1817, he qualified as a member of the Royal College of Surgeons of England (MRCS) (figure 2). Wakley left London for some months[1] but, unable to find a practice near Membury, he returned to London, to rooms in Gerard's Inn, where he saw patients. Aged 24, he married 21-year-old Elizabeth Goodchild, who was the youngest daughter of a wealthy businessman and hospital governor. Established by his father-in-law-to-be in a fashionable London practice, Wakley was set for a prosperous, orthodox career. Had that been fulfilled, he would have disappeared from history.

Contemporaneous impressions

We have a good idea of what Thomas Wakley looked like (appendix). The only photograph (figure 3) was taken in the year he died but the young Wakley was tall, well built, clean shaven, and athletic. He walked between Devon and his London lodgings, which was a journey of about 150 miles. His allowance of £80 a year left little money for strong drink or, in Sprigge's delicate phrase, "the Fleet Street amour".[1] Clean-living, non-smoking, and perhaps slightly puritanical, young Wakley enjoyed boxing, billiards, quoits, and chess in his spare time.

One contemporaneous description gives Wakley a "portly, bulky frame…and a rolling, almost rollicking gait,

his broad, fair face inspired with good-humor, and his massive forehead set off by light, almost flaxen hair, flowing in wavy freedom backward around his head".[8] He looked like a provincial, the account continues, a touch snootily, "and has also the accent of one". A less kind account describes him as "a tall stout man, with fair hair and a rather florid complexion...a round full voice and somewhat low-lived swaggering air, a suspicious cast of countenance";[9] the *Illustrated London News* and *Punch* were also rude. This description does not sound like Wakley the battle-hardened campaigner, but he made enemies. However, another observer described him, more accurately I believe, as a "zealous advocate of the working classes" and an "honest denouncer of invidious distinctions betwixt the rich and the poor",[10] distinctions that Thomas Wakley encountered in all three of his roles and in all walks of life, including his own profession with its complacent, self-perpetuating oligarchies and its downtrodden ordinary practitioners.



Royal College of Surgeons of England

***Figure 2*: Royal College of Surgeons in 1817, the year Wakley qualified**

The Lancet: what's in a name?

Around 1820, high taxation in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, the price of corn, a corrupt electoral system, and repressive legislation were fuelling discontent, and it was a betrayed plot to assassinate the Cabinet (the Cato Street conspiracy) (figure 4) that led, indirectly, to *The Lancet* being founded. In August, 1820, Wakley was seriously assaulted and his home at 5 Argyll Street was set on fire. The 15 room house and medical practice was destroyed. In the wake of the arson and a legal battle over the insurance, the Wakleys led a restless existence, eventually settling down in Norfolk Street, Strand—a district not genteel enough for Mrs Wakley, who urged a career switch if need be. Wakley's decision to abandon clinical practice and to seek, via journalism, change in the way medicine was organised and taught does seem sudden, although he had described the MRCS examination as a farce. If, as Sprigge claims, "[t]he soul of the reformer had always been in Wakley",[1] the young surgeon had been keeping quiet about it.

Most 18th and early 19th century medical journals were short lived.[11] An exception was the *New England Journal of Medicine*, which was founded in the USA in 1812, with "a heritage of British standards and traditions",[12] and one historian has suggested that the physician Walter Channing, who was associated with the Boston journal, was the first to encourage Wakley into journalism. The late Mary (Betty) Bostetter, who never completed her biography of Wakley, described a meeting between Channing and Wakley, presumably in 1822 or 1823.[13] Her sources are no longer accessible but, by 1822, Channing was well established in Boston and his pregnant wife was dying of tuberculosis. Could he have been in London around this time? Furthermore, in the 1850s Channing wrote that he had not, for over four decades, had a long vacation.[14] If the influence of Channing remains to be resolved, that of the journalist William Cobbett (appendix) is on firm ground. His *Political Register* supported Wakley, and the respect was mutual; Thomas Wakley was among the leading mourners at Cobbett's funeral in 1835. Besides

***Figure 3*: Photograph of Thomas Wakley**
This photograph seems to have been taken in a studio on Madeira (where Wakley died) in 1862, because the bound volume of the journal used as a studio prop shows the full years of his editorship of *The Lancet*.

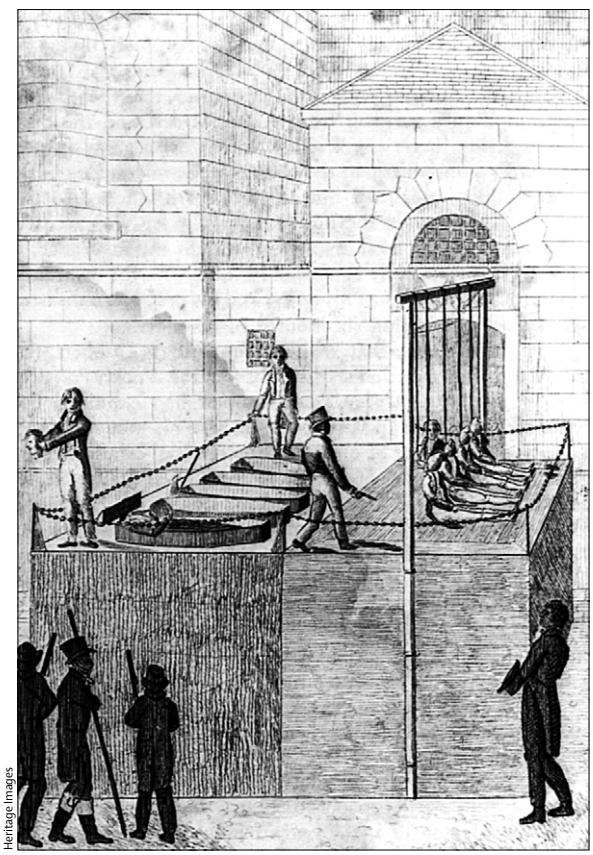

Heritage Images

Figure 4: **Execution of the Cato Street conspirators on May 1, 1820**
Five of the plotters were arrested, tried, and hanged in public. The bodies were then efficiently decapitated (in the image, the assistant executioner can be seen showing the severed head of the chief conspirator, Arthur Thistlewood, to the crowd in Newgate Street) by a masked man, subsequently identified as Tom Parker, who later worked at St Thomas' Hospital as a surgical porter. However, a rumour identified the perpetrator as a surgeon living in London's Argyll Street, and only Thomas Wakley fitted that description. 4 months after the execution came the Argyll Street fire, for which various explanations have been aired: revenge by surviving conspirators; a jealous rival suitor for Elizabeth Goodchild (Wakley had received threatening letters before the execution and had raised his fire insurance as a result); and arson by Wakley himself—an absurd charge that persisted after Wakley's death despite legal actions against his accusers.

Wakley's father-in-law, his schoolfriend Frederick William Collard Jr—whose family had taken over the London piano factory founded by Muzio Clementi— might have helped financially with the launch of *The Lancet*.[7]

The Lancet—meaning a surgical instrument and a window (figure 5) to illuminate (and also a training weapon for the medieval joust)—aimed to tackle corruption in medicine and was first published on Oct 5, 1823. By offering his readers more than medical politics and clinical instruction, Wakley might have been trying to appeal to a wider constituency. However, he showed no firm commitment to this policy; at the end of 1823 he fiercely defended the inclusion of non-medical material, but a few issues later the gossip column, theatre reviews, and chess problems (appendix) were all dropped.[15]

Medical editor (1823–62)

The corruption Wakley wished to lance permeated London's hospitals and medical teaching. Wisely, *The Lancet* did not have bylines, and the identity of the editor was a secret for a while. One waspish contributor (known as Erinensis, probably Peter Hennis Green)[7] preserved his anonymity by being paid in cash, which was handed over in a coffee house. The openly political topics in early issues sound like Cobbett but he never wrote for the journal.[7] He did attend editorial meetings, along with William Lawrence, James Wardrop, and—a wise if not wholly successful precaution, this one—a lawyer. Important *Lancet* campaigns included reform of the Royal College of Surgeons of England (the apothecaries and physicians did not escape); exposition of mishaps at London teaching hospitals (an early example of medical audit?); freedom to publish lectures, for which hospital staff were earning huge sums; the proper supply of bodies for dissection; the establishment of a register of medical practitioners; raising the standard of coroners' inquiries; tackling the adulteration of food; and exposition of fraudulent medical practices and the serious failings of the Poor Law.[1–6] Illumination, via the reporting of advances in clinical practice, came in time.[5]

From the start, Wakley wanted to use plain English. Did he succeed? A long-serving editorial colleague named Clarke thought not; whereas Cobbett's writing was "truly Anglo-Saxon", *The Lancet*'s was "forcible, orotund, and occasionally inflated".[7] Wakley's prose does seem heavy handed now and the tone often blunt beyond the point of rudeness, but *Lancet* readers got the facts too.

As a campaigning journalist, Wakley was an opportunist. He seized upon an insult to naval surgeons caused by some mistake at the Admiralty that was soon corrected as ammunition for his long-running argument with the surgical hierarchy. In his conflicts with the medical establishment and campaigns against fraud of all sorts Wakley usually but not always chose his ground well. In an impatient mood he devised the London College of Medicine, but with no guarantee that its qualification would be recognised, his plan was doomed. At one point, though, there were officers and premises for the College. Wakley fought fiercely with John Abernethy about the decision to publish the surgeon's words and then declared, with masterly inconsistency, that they were rubbish.[1] In 1830, Wakley sensed a conspiracy to keep Sir Astley Cooper (a prominent surgeon) away from the dying King George IV and went on and on about the topic.[16] In 1826, the journal's nauseating praise of that despised monarch led to Thomas Wakley, not for the only time, wriggling out of editorial responsibility, here for an item of libellous *lèse majesté*. *The Lancet* was, surprisingly, an ardent admirer of George IV; seemingly the editorial "we" never saw proofs of the rude article. Had the king really intervened on Wakley's side in an earlier dispute about the publication of lectures? Such an intervention might partly explain *The Lancet*'s unexpected respect for

the king and the interest it took in his final illness. These lectures were *The Lancet*'s bread and butter in the early years.

Sprigge notes *The Lancet*'s condemnation of the English Homoeopathic Association but not what prompted it. Wakley and his barrister son Henry (who acted as deputy coroner under his father) brought a charge of manslaughter against a medical student who had arranged homoeopathic management for his brother. Wakley judged homoeopathy to be quackery. All the same, this case was a strange target, in view of Wakley's strong support for medical coroners and opposition to nepotism (since his own son was collaborating with him). The judge threw the case out. Homoeopathy also provides an early example of a *Lancet* rejection letter written in a style that seems designed to leave the recipient feeling almost sorry for the editor. The letter was composed by an editorial assistant in 1844, and addressed to a homoeopathic physician, who was far from mollified. The assistant wrote: "Mr. Wakley's personal regard for yourself has induced him to hesitate about returning your cases... and he has particularly desired me to convey to you his great regret at being compelled to take this course". Would Wakley himself have used such polite wording?[17]

Perhaps we should take Thomas Wakley the editor as we find him—a courageous challenger of the medical establishment who was usually right and whose language, however tasteless it might seem today, was well suited to the rough and tumble of the time in which he wrote and spoke. But what might have been achieved, and with what speed, with a gentler style? Such was his journal's reputation in some quarters that young physicians and surgeons were discouraged from submitting their clinical material to *The Lancet*, and the customary reprinting of items from other journals—in those days a compliment rather than plagiarism—was not extended to *The Lancet*.[15] Wakley mellowed in time, and when his sons James and Thomas took over they formally distanced the journal from harsh words. A hand-written *Lancet* guideline from 1885 advised to "Attack principles and not men" and "Be just to your enemies", but that was not at all their father's style. When the Royal College of Surgeons' charter was changed, Thomas Wakley (then 48 years old) saw in the new fellowship merely another obstruction to the members, and his opposition remained robust; the College was irresponsible, unreformed, antediluvian, despotic, and revolting.

People who dish out insults must be prepared to receive them. A controversial *Lancet* account of a botched and fatal operation by Bransby Cooper drew the assertion that the journal "destroys generous feelings, fosters animosity, despises courtesy, disregards veracity, tramples on reputation, and trifles with humanity".[18] Wakley said that he would either ruin Bransby Cooper or himself in the attempt, and Cooper was left a broken man despite a successful libel action—which he nearly lost, according to one juryman.[7] Perhaps Wakley chose to ignore the possibility that his reporter (a young surgeon called James Lambert) and Cooper might not have been on the best of terms. Lambert's career and life went rapidly downhill after this affair. Wakley was no gentler with fellow editors, in the libel courts or outside them. One victim was the editor of the *London Medical Gazette*, which was set up by the medical establishment as a rival to *The Lancet*.[19]

Figure 5: **A lancet window**
Seven is an unusually large number for church windows of this type and only two medieval examples survive in Britain—one in the supposed birthplace of William of Occam and the other (shown here) from Blakeney, Norfolk.

The so-called quackery that Wakley exposed covered both practitioners (most notoriously the corrosive prescriptions of John St John Long and the mesmerism of John Elliotson) and the dubious content of some medicaments. The frauds he tackled went beyond medicine. Julian Xavier Chabert, the so-called Fire King, claimed to be able to resist extreme heat and toxic substances. He fooled Harry Houdini, but *Lancet* readers urged Wakley to expose Chabert. Wakley challenged the Fire King to swallow prussic acid. However, the Fire King declined the challenge, fled the stage, and hid in a coal hole. He ended up in the United States and claimed medical qualifications. Wakley was also interested, importantly, in the adulteration of food. Working mainly with Dr Arthur Hill Hassall, Wakley

set up the Analytical Sanitary Commission; its scientific reports were published in *The Lancet*,[20] and led to tighter legislation for food standards.

Many of Wakley's campaigns required great courage but, as previously mentioned, he did occasionally try to wriggle out of responsibility. A letter in *The Lancet* in 1840 bore an editorial note casting doubt on the honesty of Herbert Mayo.[21] Mayo indirectly (ie, through a colleague) asked Wakley to retract the note, but Wakley refused; a subeditor had acted without his approval and that was that, the editor argued. The quarrel ended with a challenge to a duel, which Wakley declined on the grounds that he was a coroner.

To give an idea of the journal's reception outside London, George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch* is often quoted (appendix),[22,23] but the opinion of the Medical Reading Society of Bristol might be more realistic. Deciding to subscribe in 1823, the Society's members soon judged *The Lancet* "unfit for this Society". In 1825, they took the journal in bound form only, thus receiving "less contamination than by touching the unclean thing in weekly numbers".[24] Later, when the Society again risked full exposure, they soon deemed *The Lancet* "injurious to the respectability and best interests of the profession". Yet, Wakley's objectives and the uncompromising style with which he approached them clearly struck a chord and he found a ready paying readership. *The Lancet*'s circulation soon reached 4000 and then 8000; such success surprised its editor–proprietor.

Member of Parliament (1835–52)

The Finsbury Parliamentary constituency, created after the Reform Act 1832, had a population of over 300 000 but only about 5% had a vote. Once Wakley became one of Finsbury's two Members of Parliament (MPs) on his third attempt in 1835, he never lost his seat. His political activity had begun earlier,[4] with involvement in groups aiming to extend eligibility to vote to the emerging middle class (with whom some reformers wanted to stop), agricultural labourers, and recruits to the factories of the industrial revolution.

Thomas Wakley made more than 900 contributions to debates in the House of Commons and was a conscientious and largely courteous attender.[25] He never held office and was attached to no political party. He hated the Tories and despised the Whigs (the two established UK political parties in the mid-19th century). Wakley was certainly independent and liberal, and he stood for reform (he was a member of the Reform Club). He was not a Chartist (adherents of Chartism, a working-class movement for political reform), although he shared almost all their ambitions for constitutional change. The usual label attributed to him is Radical, who were a quarrelsome bunch: "there was hardly anything upon which the Radicals agreed...[and] they poured on one another a rattling fire of recrimination and abuse".[26] Wakley would have held his own in such clashes; he could be quite a crowd pleaser outside Parliament and cheerfully admitted to being uncivil to his opponents. The House of Commons saw a different man, with a "plain, simple, blunt downright style...allied to shrewdness and common sense", only occasionally uttering "unpalatable truths to ears attuned to courteous fictions".[8] This contrast got him into trouble when he accepted a modification in newspaper taxation rather than outright abolition, because his words outside Parliament on the topic had left no room for such a compromise.

Wakley's political interests went far beyond the medical. Newspaper taxation apart, he favoured free trade and supported repeal of the Irish Act of Union and the abolition of slavery. In 1834, when the six farm labourers known as the Tolpuddle martyrs were sentenced to transportation to Australia for union activity, they found in Thomas Wakley a staunch advocate. His parliamentary contribution on this subject was his most famous and longest, and was a far cry from the foaming oratory some MPs might have expected. The men's eventual freedom was widely celebrated (appendix). He also sought clemency for three Chartists sentenced to death in 1840. The so-called Monmouth three were transported instead and, in 1854, they too were pardoned.

When Wakley collapsed outside his editorial office in 1851, he decided to stand down as an MP. In 1859, he contemplated standing for a different London constituency, and 2 years later some Finsbury voters wanted him back, but by then he was too ill. So, although he had been very active in medical education and registration, he was not in Parliament when the Medical Act 1858 was passed. The first *Medical Register* was published in 1859, and Wakley's name is on it (appendix). Prophetically, he had reservations about the make-up of the new General Medical Council because the generality of the profession was not represented—a matter not resolved until well into the 20th century.

Coroner (1839–62)

When Wakley died he was still coroner for west Middlesex, an area with more than 1 million people. His eldest son Thomas Henry applied to succeed him, but withdrew his application when the authorities divided up the district. Today the area would stretch from Heathrow Airport towards the boundary of the City of London and from the Thames to the Hertfordshire border. Coroner was an elected post until 1888, and to campaign for such positions was very expensive. Without family and friends, Thomas Wakley's ambition might not have been fulfilled. He ran for coroner unsuccessfully in east Middlesex in 1830, when he cheekily reassured voters that he had the necessary free time by describing *The Lancet* as a light literary occupation. He succeeded in west Middlesex in 1839.

A churchyard memorial to Private John Frederick White of the 7th Queen's Hussars is a reminder of Thomas Wakley's most well known inquest.[27]

William Cobbett and Wakley were strongly opposed to flogging (Cobbett had been imprisoned in 1810 for condemnation of it). Flogging was very common—one soldier in every 200 received this punishment in 1845, the year before White's death in Hounslow Barracks. White was not the first man to die after such brutal punishment, but Wakley suspected a military cover-up and spotted a chance to campaign. Sprigge is not alone[28] in sounding unsure about cause and effect in White's death, but the jury was persuaded by the view of the one medical witness (chosen by Wakley), who stated that the soldier would still be alive had he had not been flogged. White's death, which would surely have passed unnoticed without Wakley's persistence, horrified the public. Callous military authorities were harder to persuade, but within a decade floggings in the British Army had fallen substantially, and in 1881, the punishment was abolished apart from in military prisons.

Thanks to the pencil of George Scharf, the pen of Charles Dickens, and some artistic licence (figure 6) we have an idea of what Wakley's inquests looked like.[29,30] The inquests were often covered by *The Lancet* if there was a medical point to be made. Collectively, newspaper reports show that Wakley was a thorough and fair coroner in his inquiries into life and death in Victorian London (appendix). Dickens's experience as a juryman at an inquest confirms Wakley's humanity,[29] and allegations that his inquiries were exceptionally numerous and expensive had no foundation.

Wakley had several disputes about his inquests. Although he had, as an MP, introduced legislation permitting payments for medical witnesses, he felt strongly that the post of coroner should be a medical one—a view that was not universally popular. When he laid down eminently sensible rules about how deaths should be handled, feathers were ruffled. Coroner Wakley was not a team player, and showed little interest in the Coroners' Society of England and Wales when it was formed in 1846.[28] He was rather assertive where jurisdictions overlapped, and risked accusations of gagging the press when he barred reporters from some inquests. *The Times* labelled him a monarch of the morgue, which was not kindly meant. Thomas Wakley might have seemed arrogant at times, but he was certainly neither lazy nor incompetent—just over-stretched. On a typically arduous day you might find him voting in House of Commons in the early hours of the morning, handling several inquests in rural Middlesex by lunch (taken picnic style in his carriage), and back at Westminster by tea time—with *Lancet* business to fit in before he got to bed. As with the enmity to Wakley's journal, peace eventually reigned as people previously offended (in this instance magistrates and workhouse and prison governors) came to appreciate Wakley's work. Nonetheless, his financial accounts were frequently challenged—eg, for a long inquest into the deaths of 15 people in a fire the magistrates sought to pay only one fee. At the end of Wakley's life, fees were replaced by generous salaries—£1800 a year in his case.

Other publications

Wakley's earliest signed publication is a letter to *The Times* in 1817, in which the newly qualified surgeon sought to calm fears about a typhus epidemic. Wakley's political journal, *The Ballot*, appeared briefly from *The Lancet*'s office in the early 1830s, and even more transient was *A Voice from the Commons*. In 1836, he issued a pamphlet on freedom of the press.[31] In 1856, he wrote a 60 page guide to parenthood,[32] dedicated gushingly to mothers "whose joyous and delightful occupation it is to direct 'the tender shoot' themselves; to guard the blossom till the fruit is ripe". That same year he leapt, unsuccessfully, to the defence of the convicted poisoner William Palmer (appendix).[33] 6 years later came the *British Medical Directory*, attracting the wrath of the owner of another such reference work who noted that errors in his directories were repeated in Wakley's. Of Wakley the poet we have his provocative claim that he was as good as Wordsworth. A *Punch* cartoon had fun with this idea, as did *The Times*, invoking Gray's elegy with its "Eureka! Here's the thing exactly – Here is mute inglorious Wakley".[34] The rhyming here confirms *The Lancet*'s preferred pronunciation of its founder's name. Nonetheless, poetry, in the form of satirical verse, did have a role in *Lancet* campaigns.[15]

Other activities

Wakley was a devout churchman yet he criticised Lord's Day Observance legislation that discriminated against relaxation for the working man. Typically, when he successfully stood for election as churchwarden, his platform was one of reformation of vestry appointments

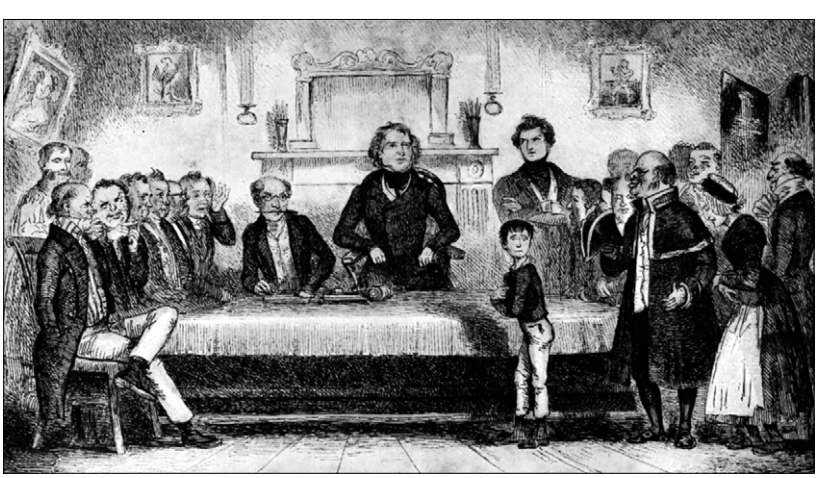


***Figure 6*: Artist's impression of a Wakley inquest**
The scene hints at Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*. We have Wakley, a small boy, a uniformed beadle, and a man standing with his arms folded who looks like Dickens around the year 1840, when he was a juryman at a Wakley inquest. Unfortunately, Wakley's election as coroner was 2 years after the completion of Dickens's novel. This illustration, taken from a 19th century book about London, was published in *Sphere* magazine and later reprinted in *The Lancet*.

(appendix). Too many lawyers, he thought. Signatories on a petition to Parliament seeking change include Wakley's name, 3 years before he himself became an MP. While churchwarden, he visited a notorious rookery (slum) and found 52 men, women, and children huddled in one room. As Michael Faber's novel[35] *The Crimson Petal and the White* suggests, Wakley would have had to stray but a few yards from the comforts of Bedford Square to be exposed to squalor and deprivation; this proximity probably reaffirmed daily his views on social justice. He kept an especially watchful eye on workhouses and the way the 1834 amendments to the poor laws were working (worse, in his opinion). He arranged for publication of two distressingly articulate letters from workhouse residents, one of whom wrote that he would rather die under a hedge than be in the institution.[36] Years later, Charles Dickens noted that this sad preference still prevailed.[37] Dickens enjoyed Wakley hospitality at Bedford Square.[1] The two men used different methods but had the same social agenda.

Wakley owned *The Lancet*, and he and his sons were the publishers for half the years of his editorship (1836–42 and 1847–62). However, he was not good with money, spent more than he earned, sometimes risked the journal, and needed a mortgage based on his wife's income. Nonetheless, in the mid 1850s a non-publishing entrepreneurial streak did emerge. Several life assurance companies were still reluctant to pay for medical opinions. In 1851, Wakley became a director of a more progressive company, which did rather well to begin with. His will refers, with a lawyer's distaste for the comma and affection for well paid tautology, to "all my messuages cottages buildings farms lands tenements and hereditaments situate at Matlock Bath", which he had bought as an investment between 1857 and 1861, possibly at the suggestion of his eldest son's father-in-law, who was a solicitor with Derbyshire connections. In October, 1861, permission came through for him to divert a road for house building. The property consisted of five houses, two popular visitor attractions, 30 acres of garden and orchard, and 13 acres eligible for building. The sale price in 1863 was £7100, roughly a third more than Wakley had paid for it. Wakley also had a partnership in a local quarry that was amicably dissolved in 1859.

And, as if all this enterprise was not enough, he was on the council of a British medical association (a different body from the one we have today); he supported the British Swimming Society (founded in 1841); he was involved with the Royal Medical Benevolent Society; and he was a director of a private cemetery company.

Family

Of Mrs Wakley, we know hardly anything. She played no part in Thomas' public life but is unlikely to have approved—the radical reformer that her husband became was not the medical adviser to the upper classes she had married. She died in 1857. The Wakleys had three sons: Thomas Henry, surgeon and *Lancet* proprietor and coeditor; Henry Membury, who studied medicine for 2 years and then trained as a barrister; and James Goodchild, who qualified as a doctor but never practised, and who edited the journal. Their daughter Elizabeth Mary died aged 15 in 1838, after a long illness. Wakley thought of his journal as a family heirloom and was confident that the Wakley name would never die out. But it did; with the death of "Young Tom" in 1909, the third Thomas Wakley, the editorial dynasty ended.

Death

Thomas Wakley was not always in robust health, and several absences from duty in the 1840s are unexplained. A persistent cough, weight loss, and occasional haemoptysis in the winter of 1860 pointed to serious illness. When the physician Charles Williams saw Thomas Wakley in September, 1861, he diagnosed a disease "of inflammatory origin, rather than tuberculous consumption",[38] and recommended a period of relaxation in a mild climate. On October 4, Wakley signed his will, replacing one written only 9 months previously, and left Southampton for the Portuguese island of Madeira.

Two letters from Madeira survive (appendix). They make for sad reading. Via Liverpool to Lisbon mail steamers, the journal was sent to its editor's Atlantic retreat. An item on March 8, 1862, upset Wakley hugely and he drafted announcements for *The Times* and *The Lancet*, noting that he was abroad and should not be held responsible. The Lord Chancellor was trying to simplify declarations of insanity, but the exclusion of medical opinion did not go down well with *The Lancet*.[39] Why Wakley was so upset is a puzzle. He was also worried about inquest finances under his deputy, the surgeon George Brent, who died in poverty a few months later. In late 1861, Wakley seemed to be getting better and talked of returning to duty, but the improvement was not sustained. Despite very poor health in March, 1862, detailed in the correspondence, he was by April confident enough to book a return passage. But Williams had been right in his observation that his patient might be "impatient of the restrictions necessary for any chance of recovery".[38] After exploration of the transportation of fruit trees from Madeira and threats to inquire into malpractice in the local wine trade, Wakley took a boat out single handed but stumbled when beaching it. He then had a pulmonary haemorrhage and on May 16, 1862, he died. Wakley's embalmed body travelled back in the cabin reserved to bring the recovered editor home. It lies in the catacombs in Kensal Green, north London (appendix).[40]

Wakley remembered

A collection[41] of obituaries published in *The Times* during the Victorian era leaves out some tributes to "medical men who seem to posterity not to have made such a lasting contribution to the advancement of their profession". Thomas Wakley could not have been

included anyway because, surprisingly, the newspaper seems to have taken little notice of his death. Happily, a 2010 television programme on so-called Victorian do-gooders[42] has kept his name and reputation alive. For memorials we must settle for the two roads named after him, a local medical Wakley Society, four plaques, and, of course, a weekly journal, very different from Wakley's, but one that remains proud of its origins. Not all the public memorials to a life coloured by disagreement, have themselves been free from controversy (appendix). No public statue exists to this influential man who reshaped mid 19th century medicine and its institutions. Yet Thomas Wakley comfortably passes Alexander Pope's test for such recognition: "No man deserves a monument who could not be wrapped in a winding-sheet of papers written against him."

Conflicts of interest

I have had the privilege of being associated with Thomas Wakley's journal since March, 1965.

Acknowledgments

I thank Cheyenne Wakley, Clive Wakley, Charles Gillett, Helen Anderson, and Michael Gwilliam for material on Wakley's forebears and descendants; Ann Andrews and Doreen Buxton for information on Wakley's time in Matlock Bath; Claire Jackson and Ines Koegler for access to the papers of the late Charles W Brook, held at the Royal College of General Practitioners, London; David Evans for very generous and hospitable access to his material on Wakley; Suzette Sprague for permission to use Wakley family portraits hanging in the St Thomas' Court Health Centre, Axminster; Stephen and Margaret Waterton for showing me round Land Farm; Holly Baker for help with the illustrations and access to papers; and my wife Pixie for photographs and for her tolerance of the time I have spent digging into the life of Thomas Wakley. The Wellcome Library, London, proved an invaluable resource, as did the online availability of 19th century issues of *The Times* and other newspapers via Gloucestershire County Library, of House of Commons debates via Millbank Systems *Hansard*, and of out-of-print publications via Google Books and other free-access library projects.

References

1 Sprigge SS. The life and times of Thomas Wakley (facsimile of 1899 edition). New York: Robert E Krieger, 1974.
2 The Lancet. The centenary of *The Lancet*: October 5th, 1823–October 5th, 1923. *Lancet* 1923; **2:** 687–723.
3 Brook C. Battling surgeon. Glasgow: Strickland Press, 1945.
4 Hostettler J. Thomas Wakley: an improbable radical. Chichester: Barry Rose, 1993.
5 Richardson R. Vintage papers from *The Lancet*. London and New York: Elsevier, 2006.
6 Schwartz EW. Thomas Wakley and *The Lancet*. MPhil thesis, University of Cambridge, 1985.
7 Clarke JF. Autobiographical recollections of the medical profession. London: J & A Churchill, 1874.
8 Francis GH. Mr Wakley. In: Orators of the age: comprising portraits, critical, biographical, and descriptive. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1847: 229–44.
9 Rowe DJ, ed. London radicalism 1830–1843: a selection of the papers of Francis Place, 1970: 48-64. http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=39485 (accessed March 21, 2012).
10 Saunders J. Saunders' portraits and memoirs of eminent living political reformers: Thomas Wakley, Esq., M.P. London: J Dowding, 1840.
11 Porter R. The rise of medical journalism in Britain to 1800. In: Bynum WF, Lock S, Porter R, eds. Medical journals and medical knowledge. London: Routledge, 1992: 8.
12 Garland J. A voice in the wilderness; the "New England Journal of Medicine" since 1812. *BMJ* 1962; **1:** 105–08.
13 Bostetter M. The journalism of Thomas Wakley. In: Wiener J, ed. Innovators and preachers: the role of the editor in Victorian England. London and Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985: 275–92.
14 Channing W. A physician's vacation; or, a summer in Europe. Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1856.
15 Pladek B. "A variety of tastes": *The Lancet* in the early nineteenth-century periodical press. *Bull Hist Med* 2011; **85:** 560–86.
16 Jones R. Thomas Wakley, Astley Cooper and the death of George IV. *J Roy Soc Med* 2007; **100**: 314–20.
17 Epps J. The rejected cases; with a letter to Thomas Wakley on the scientific character of homoeopathy. London: Sherwood, 1845.
18 Cooke W. Evil tendency of *The Lancet*. *Med Gaz* 1827/28; **1:** 596–97.
19 Burney IA. Medicine in the age of reform. In: Burns RA, Innes J, eds. Rethinking the age of reform: Britain 1780–1850. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003: 163–73.
20 Hassall AH. Food and its adulterations: comprising the reports of the Analytical Sanitary Commission of "*The Lancet*" for the years 1851 to 1854 inclusive. London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1855.
21 Mayo H, Wakley T. Mr. Mayo and Mr. Wakley. *Lancet* 1840; **33:** 672–73.
22 Eliot G. Middlemarch, a study of provincial life. Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood, 1871/72.
23 Harrison D. All *The Lancet*'s men: reactionary gentleman physicians *vs* radical general practitioners in *The Lancet*, 1823–1832. *Nineteenth Century Gender Studies* 2009; issue 5.2 (summer).
24 Griffiths LM. The Medical Reading Society of Bristol. *Bristol Med-Chir J* 1907; **25:** 222–35.
25 Anon. Hansard 1803–2005. http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/people/mr-thomas-wakley (accessed Jan 23, 2012).
26 Kent CBR. The English radicals: an historical sketch. London: Longmans, Green, 1899.
27 Hopkins H. The strange death of Private White: a Victorian scandal that made history. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1977.
28 Thurston G. A queer sort of thing. *Med Leg J* 1969; **37:** 165–71.
29 Tomalin C. Charles Dickens: a life. London: Viking, 2011.
30 Richardson R. Coroner Wakley: two remarkable eyewitness accounts. *Lancet* 2001; **358:** 2150–54.
31 Wakey T. A letter to the people of England, on the new project for gagging the press. London: G Churchill, 1836.
32 Wakley T. The mother's medical adviser: on the diseases and management of children, with recipes. London: Cradock, 1846.
33 Wakley T. The cries of the condemned; or proofs of the unfair trial and (if executed) the legal murder of William Palmer. London: C Elliot, 1856.
34 PS. The wooing of Wakley to become a poet. *The Times* (London), April 11, 1842: 5D.
35 Faber M. The crimson petal and the white. London: Canongate, 2002.
36 Wakley T, Buckenham J, Witt J. The St. Pancras Workhouse. *The Times* (London), Sept 29, 1846: 7A.
37 Richardson R. Charles Dickens, *The Lancet*, and *Oliver Twist*. *Lancet* 2012; **379:** 404–05.
38 Williams CJB. Memoirs of life and work. London: Smith, Elder & Co, 1884.
39 The Lancet. The Lord Chancellor's new lunacy law. *Lancet* 1862; **1:** 255–56.
40 Evans DN. A visit to Thomas Wakley. *Lancet* 1993; **342:** 1535–36.
41 Sanders A, ed. Great Victorian lives: an era in obituaries. London: Times Books, 2007.
42 Hislop, I. Ian Hislop's age of the do-gooders: episode 1. www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00wkmh4 (accessed March 21, 2012).