

**HEAD-TO-HEAD:
GILBERT and GEORGE, THE PLASTER-CASTERS**

All we see are the heads and upper torsos of two men, in profile, facing each other across a table.

George Bailey is in his early 20s, with a slightly fleshy face, bags under his eyes, and red hair. He has traces of white plaster stuck to his hair and in front of his ear; his dark jacket is flecked with white. A white mask with strings protruding - clearly a mould of his own face - is on the table in front of him.

Gilbert Alexander's age and the details of his features cannot be determined: his face is entirely covered in a coating of stiff Plaster of Paris; his mouth is slightly open showing his teeth, and there are two straws stuck in the plaster by his nose through which he is apparently breathing -- just. His shoulders are covered by a white sheet.

GILBERT (*gesticulating and pointing at his face*): Mmm! Mmm-mm-mm

GEORGE: Just a few more minutes, it's nearly set. (*Touches the mask*). Are you getting warm in there, Gilbert? A wee bit sweaty? No, don't say a word - as if you could, heh heh! Don't want the mask to slip, do we?

He yawns and stretches and looks at his watch.

Right, time's up, we'll have it off you now. Gently does it ..

Between them Gilbert and George pull the strings and prise the mask off Gilbert's face which is red and glistening with oil. We see that Gilbert Alexander is in his 40s, fine-featured with a thin bony nose, prominent cheekbones and sandy hair; he wipes his face and eyebrows fastidiously with a cloth.

GILBERT: (*slightly shocked*) I truly thought I was going to die in there, the heat when it's curing is quite extraordinary. Indeed, for a few moments I had rather that I *had* been dead and you had been making my death-mask, then at least I wouldn't have had to worry about where my next breath was coming from. (*He discreetly spits into his handkerchief and wipes his mouth*)

GEORGE: (*Turning the plaster mould this way and that*). You really should've gone for the botox option. What colour are your eyes? Open wide, let's have a keek.

GILBERT: They're grey, and they are not blood-shot. (*He takes the mould and feels the inside*). Hmmm. I suggest we go for a wax cast instead of plaster, and try for a better flesh tone with those new pigments that arrived last week. I'm hopeful that they'll be more miscible with wax than the previous set.

GEORGE: If you could see the colour of your face! Crimson Lake's the only one we need. Still, better red than dead. And to think we do this to folk who are about to go under the knife! Talk about upping their stress levels. Aye, we'll give those new colours a go and if they work I'd like to make another wax cast of that Mrs Fraser, the first one I did looks a bit peely-wally. I've had an order for another plaster positive of her pre-op mould, by the way. She's one popular lady.

GILBERT: She had a popular tumour, I would say. But you made a good effort with her, George, and her post-op cas is very fine. She's got a lovely smile, she looks very serene.

GEORGE: Yeah. Despite the whacking great hole that Liston left in her cheek! But she looks even better now it's healed.

GILBERT: *Mister* Liston to you, lad. And how do you know she looks better now, anyway?

GEORGE: I'll update you on that in a minute. But that post-op cast - you'll have noticed I had to sculpt her face a bit, right? Then I stuck the face onto the pre-op sides of her head, you can see the bonnet's the same in both. But I had a pretty good look at her during the op and Perry let me see his pre-op drawing too. She was real quiet and dignified, that Mrs Fraser, not a peep out of her though she'd had some teeth pulled out and Liston was sawing away at her palate. I'm proud of the cast of the tumour, though - did you see the *size* of the thing?

GILBERT: Aye, it must be half the size of her head! When I saw it I could scarcely believe it. It's not a wonder that her cheek's so stretched and shiny - you captured the veins sticking out to perfection, lad, like worms crawling over the surface. That was a good mould you made.

GEORGE: Not like your cast of Robert Penman - his face looks like a pig's bladder, it's that smooth. That's not your best work, Gilbert.

GILBERT: No. But ... (*he pauses, shaking his head*) ... but .. well, that was the first time I've ever thought that I wouldn't be able to do my job, George. The poor young fellow. That tumour! It was all raw and wet and bursting out of his mouth, I don't know how he'd been able to eat all those months - and yet he seemed a strong well-made lad. It was just a great wet red mass, it made me want to retch just looking at it, let alone having to touch it. You can imagine what it was like, ladling the plaster over it and hope it wouldn't slip off. (*he shudders and shakes his head again.*) To tell you the truth, it's more of a sculpture than a mask.

GEORGE: Yeah. Tricky, right? I guessed you'd had to have him tip his head way back, because his eyes are looking upwards. Mrs Fraser was wet too, she was dribbling all the time because her mouth was so twisted. (*He pulls his cheek and mouth down with his hand to show.*) She had to hold a hankie against it all the time she was talking to Liston. She'd had the thing for years ...

GILBERT: It's not the same. Penman was *raw*. (*The memory worries him, he keeps shaking his head*). But it was not my best, you're right. I'd have had another go at him if I'd been allowed. But Mr Syme was getting impatient ... He's not at all bad at casting, by the way. He's done quite a few anatomical specimens himself. But I reckon no-one can beat William Hunter's gravid uterus series for beauty, they're -

GEORGE: So do you want to hear about Mrs Fraser or not, eh?

GILBERT: Well, you've seen her again, that's obvious. Go on then, what's she like?

GEORGE: (*sticks his head forward towards Gilbert, and points at his own chin*) Punch me in the mouth, then - go on! Break my teeth!

GILBERT: (*rears back*) What? What on earth has that to do with it?

GEORGE: Smash my teeth to bits and then I'll be rich because I'll get a gold palate. Custom-made. By my *friend* Mr Nasmyth. *(George smirks and taps his nose)*

GILBERT: Pah. You have lost your mind.

GEORGE: Mr Nasmyth admires my work, dontcher know. I'll be famous, you'll see. He'd seen my casts of Mrs Fraser and he said he wanted to make a cast of the inside of her mouth so he could fit her with a palate - and that he'd like my 'opinion on the feasibility'. That's what he said.

GILBERT: Well, aren't you the important one, then?

GEORGE: *(smirks)* But in the end he didn't require my expertise. He came by a couple of days ago to show me the wax impressions that he'd made - not bad for a beginner - and said that Mrs Fraser had come down from Banchory to be fitted, and she was in the Infirmary and I should go and see her. She'd been asking after me!

GILBERT: She'd been asking after *you*?

GEORGE: Aye, Gilbert - *me*. She'd been asking after 'Mr Baillie', so he could visit her to see how much she was improved, Mr Nasmyth said. She remembered me because I'd done two casts of her, and you don't get forgotten when you're up close and personal like that. Anyway, older women always fancy me, Gilbert, but you're too old to understand that.

GILBERT: Cheeky young bugger. So you obviously went to see her.

GEORGE: I did. Her own doctor was there, he'd come down from Banchory way to see how she was doing - Mr Adams, is he?

GILBERT: Adams of Lumphanan, that's him. Aye, he's the Greek scholar. But of course you're not educated enough to know that. He's got a good reputation as a surgeon, too - the story goes that he once set a femur with a spirtle!

GEORGE: *(dryly)* Well now, there's a thing. Anyway, as I was *saying* ... Mrs Fraser's face is really good now, you can even understand what she's on about, because of this new palate. Dr Adams said she was the happiest woman he knew - from the point of view of her appearance, anyway. *(whispers)* I heard she was having to stay in the Infirmary a bit longer because she'd had a miscarriage - at her age! She's *old*, man! She's at least 40. Guess her old man found he fancied her again after her face-lift, eh?

GILBERT: *(sits back, away from George)* You're disgusting, do you know that? There are times when I don't know why I bother with you.

GEORGE: You don't, mostly - bother, that is.

They are silent for a bit, each picking up their plaster casts and rubbing at bits, turning them this way and that. Eventually, Gilbert's curiosity is too much for him.

GILBERT: So, did your Mr Nasmyth say anything about Professor Liston - do you think Professor Liston knows what Nasmyth's done to his patient?

GEORGE: (*holding his mask against his face; his voice is muffled*) Bound to, they're friends aren't they? But if Liston doesn't it's his own fault, the great drama queen. Flouncing off to London in a huff just because Syme was given the Clinical Chair. What a pair of prima donnas!

GILBERT: (*laughs*) Edinburgh just isn't large enough for those two big egos to co-exist. You'd never guess they'd been friends and colleagues when they were younger. I can remember when James Syme was Mr Liston's assistant. Mr Syme's the better surgeon, mind you, probably the best. Mr Liston - Professor Liston now, of course - he's all flourish and flashing knives, just as likely to slash the leg of his assistant if he's standing too close. Can you remember how long Mrs Fraser's op took?

GEORGE: Blimey, it was a year or so ago, Gilbert, so I'm not too sure now - but it wasn't that long. Maybe an hour?

GILBERT: Mr Syme took 24 minutes with Robert Penman! He called out for us to check our watches. And he hardly spilt any blood, even though there was a great mass of bone and teeth and tissue to come out - he weighed it afterwards, 4 ½ pounds! It was a wonder to watch. He says he operates as fast as possible so the patient hardly has time to feel the pain, but he was very careful of Penman, you know - he stopped several times to give him some respite. I thought he was quite respectful of the young man, even though the room was full of medics - Professor Ballingall was there, and Professor Russell, and Dr Abercrombie ... They stuffed the hole with lint, stitched up his cheek and wrapped his face in bandages, and fed him whey and beef tea down a tube -- and a few days later, would you believe it, they took off the dressing and Penman was saying he felt better than before the op!

GEORGE: (*his expression is one of exaggerated boredom, and he picks up Gilbert's mask as well, making the two masks 'talk' to each other*) Oh dear me, you're a real Syme groupie, aren't you? Bet you've got the T-shirt.

GILBERT: Here, give that to me! (*he grabs George's mask and jabs his finger at the inside of the mould*) See that lump there, on your forehead? *That* is indicative of a highly-developed sense of arrogance and self-importance. If you don't watch out, Mr Baillie, you will find yourself as one of the exhibits at the Phrenological Society. (*He stops, a thought has struck him*) Phrenology. Have you come across Dr Sibbald, by the way? He's a phrenologist, and if it hadn't been for him, Penman would surely have died.

GEORGE: Man, it really hit a nerve with you when I mentioned Penman, didn't I? You can't stop talking about him.

GILBERT: The point I was going to make, George, if you would stop being so *clever* and would listen for a minute, is that I wouldn't be surprised if some of the aggravation between our two Professors doesn't stem from Penman's case. Penman's tumour had been growing for years and he came to Edinburgh and saw Mr Liston, but Mr Liston refused to operate. Can you believe that? And then more than three years after *that*, when the tumour was apparently *three times bigger*, Dr Sibbald sees him again, and tells Professor Ballingall about him, and then he tells our Mr Syme - who decides to operate. With great success, as we know. Penman went back to Coldstream and resumed his occupation, as a bootmaker I believe.

GEORGE: Ah, so you think Syme's success rankled with Liston, and so Liston wanted to prove that he's better? He waited a long time...

GILBERT: Aye, to get one that looked the same, six, seven years maybe. Though Mrs Fraser's tumour wasn't bony like Penman's. Did you see Penman's? It cleaned up really well after macerating - the bone's like lace ...

They're both silent again.

GEORGE: *(looks around, then speaks very softly, confidentially, beckoning Gilbert to come closer)* Did you ever hear the stories about Liston when he was a student - that he was one of the resurrectionists? The one about him and his mate dressing up as sailors and taking a boat up the Forth to collect a body from a village graveyard? It seems they stuffed it in a sack and hid it behind a hedge when they went into an inn, then an old drunk went out for a pee and found it and brought the sack in over his shoulder ... *(he laughs)* and they had such a fright that they had to scarp without it, in the dark!

GILBERT: *(sits back and looks over his shoulder nervously)* Whisht, man! You keep quiet about that, now. That sort of thing makes Mr Syme very agitated, he's completely against it. But there's another side to Professor Liston that people forget, that he could be very charitable. You know he's even gone to the tenements to operate on poor folks who've been discharged as incurables.

GEORGE: Aye well. He's 'good in parts', as the clergyman said. All good practice, it keeps his hand in - and the spin-off is plenty of specs for the anatomy collections, I'll bet you. I'm glad that Sibbald or whatever you call him saved your Robert Penman, though, or the poor guy's head and its tumour might have ended up like that head in the Bell Collection. You know the one?

GILBERT: *(his face crumples in disgust)*. Aye, I know it. You would think Bell or whoever it was in London would have had a cast made instead. *(Slyly, he touches George's arm)*. It is like a mask, though, isn't it, the way it's been prepared? And he's got red hair!

GEORGE: *(lifts Gilbert's hand off his arm, expressionlessly, then picks up his own plaster mask and turns it towards him, face to face.)* I think I'll paint the teeth gold.

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Further information:

Mrs Fraser

See also drawings in: James Liston, 1836, [Some observations on the tumours of the mouth and jaw.](#)

Robert Penman

See also drawings and information in: MH Kaufman and MT Royds, [The Penman case, a re-evaluation](#), J.R.Coll.Surg.Edinb., 45, 2000, 51-5;

[Plaster-casts Collection at the Surgeons' Hall Museum](#)



Plaster-cast of Mrs Fraser with facial tumour
(with thanks to Andrew Connell for this photo)



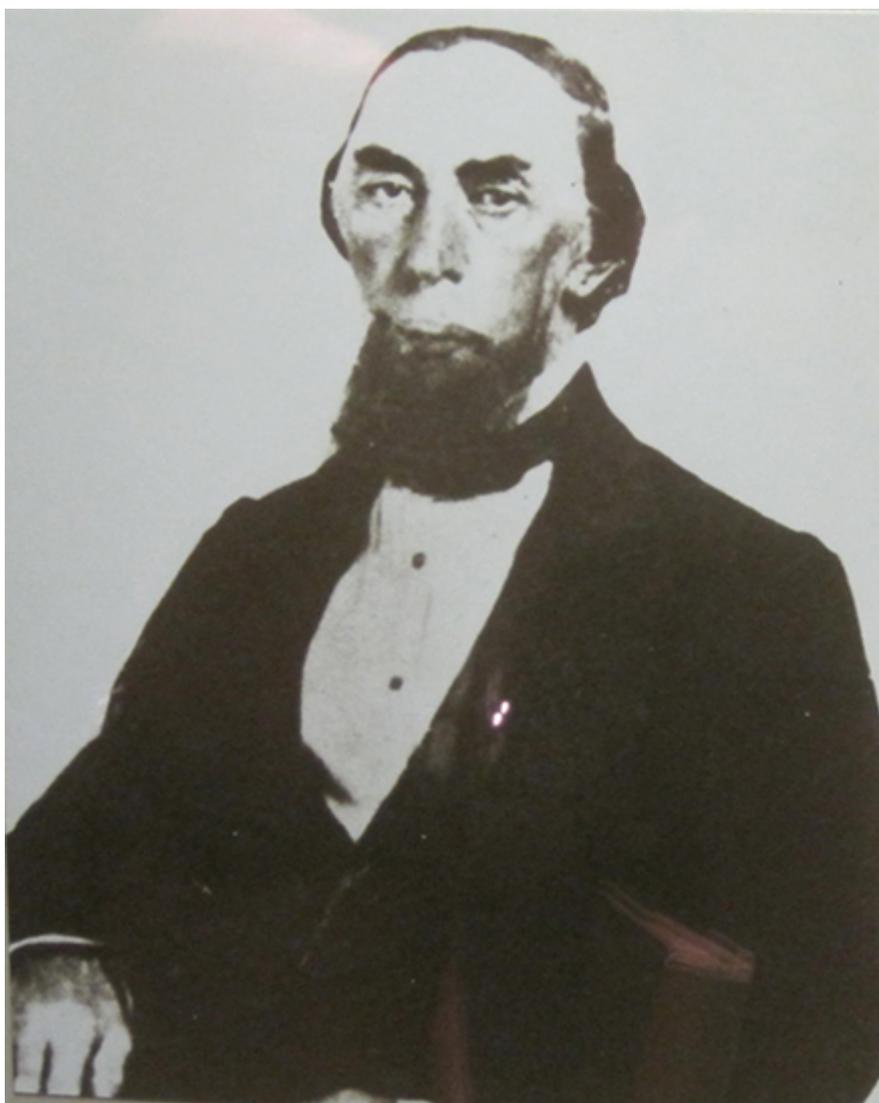
Plaster-cast of Mrs Fraser post-operation, plus cast of tumour (photo: Ann Lingard)



Plaster-cast of Robert Penman with tumour *in situ* (Photo: Ann Lingard)



The bony tumour removed from Robert Penman's jaw (photo: Ann Lingard)



Photograph of Robert Penman 27 years after the operation (photo in the Museum Collection)

NOTES

MRS FRASER GC1706

Lived in Banchory Ternant

b.~1794

~ 1828 'blow to the cheek'

~1832 mass rapidly increased in size, became pregnant

~ 1833 pregnant again - then ceased menstruating

~1834, October 13th. Referred by Mr Adams to the ERI, to be operated on by Liston

~ **1835**, summer - Nasmyth's plate is fitted; she miscarries and stays in ERI for a short while

~**1835** Dr Francis Adams sees Mrs Fraser's mother in Banchory and reports Mrs F is '*perfectly well ... One of the most happy women I am acquainted with.*'

Bibliography:

MH Kaufman & MT Royds, *Excision of a remarkable tumour of the upper jaw in 1834 by Robert Liston.*

MH Kaufman, *Further observations on the removal of an enormous facial tumour by Robert Liston in 1834.*

R Liston, 1837. *Observations on some tumours of the mouth and jaw.* Med. Chirurg. Trans. 20, 165-199

R Liston, 1837. *Practical Surgery.* John Churchill, London

G MacGregor 1884, *A History of Burke & Hare and the resurrectionist times,*

Robert Nasmyth, 1792-1870 Obituary in the Edin Med J 1970, 1149-50

Francis Adams (1796-1861)

HB Porteous, 1969. '*A most learned country doctor.*' J Roy Coll Gen Practit., 17, 277-281

ROBERT PENMAN. GC1185

1804 --?

Lived at Coldstream.

1820 (6 yrs old) had swelling. Surgeon 'of the neighbourhood' extracted 3 'grinders'

1822 ERI. Tumour cut off from the bone; failed to heal, spent 8 months in hospital

~1825 (early in the year) saw Liston, who wouldn't operate

1828 (aged 24) referred by Dr John Sibbald (member of the Phrenological Society March 1821) of 'this town' to Prof Ballingall (Military Medicine), who asked Syme to help

July 7th 1828 Tumour excised by Syme

1835 - emigrated to USA, New York

~1846 (aged 42) Syme sees him 'in the street' in Edinburgh (see Syme's paper)

~1855 (aged 51) Lord Lister sees him and receives photo 'taken at that time' (and on display in SHM along with the tumour and portrait in oils)

Bibliography:

GC 1185: Note from the catalogue, on a ' *Plaster cast of a large fibro-osseous tumour of the maxilla*'; by Professor Syme

J Syme, 1828, *Case of osteo-sarcoma of the lower jaw, removed by James Syme, Esq. F.R.C. Surgeons, Lecturer on Anatomy and Surgery, &c.* Edin Med Surg J **30**: 286-90

J Syme, 1848, *Contributions to the Pathology and Practice of Surgery.* Edinburgh: Sutherland & Knox; London: Simpkin, Marshall & Co.: 13-21

M.H. Kaufman and M.T. Royds, 2000, *The Penman case: a re-evaluation* J.R.Coll.Surg.Edinb., 45, 51-5

JH Kretzmar 1957. *Tumours of the mandible.* S African Med J, 31, 730-32 (a full copy of James Syme's article plus a copy of a letter by Lord Joseph Lister in 1905, with reference to the Penman casts and a photograph that Penman gave him in ~1855.

M Kaufman & R McNeil, 1989 *Death masks and life masks at Edinburgh University,* BMJ, 298, 506-7

James Syme (1799-1870)

1818-19 - assistant to Liston

1823 took over Liston's anatomy classes

1833 Clinical Chair of Surgery

1835 leading Consultant Surgeon in Scotland

1848 February, to London and UCL

1848 July - back to Edinburgh because of arguments

Robert Liston (1794-1847)

1810 pupil of John Barclay

1815 house surgeon for George Bell

1818 Fellow of RCS Ed

1827 Surgeon ERI and Clinical Surgery lecturer

1833 quarrelled with Syme, failed to get the Chair

1834 University College Hospital London Chair of Clinical Surgery