The Poet Laureate of Dentistry

by Ray Cavanaugh

Ray Cavanaugh enjoys long walks, short novels and tracking down obscure characters from bygone eras—the more eccentric, the better. Cavanaugh feels comfortable in two places: Boston and New York. He relishes urban exploration, particularly in New York where, in the summertime, he can go off the grid for days on end. He is hopelessly addicted to sweet potatoes but avoids sugary drinks. His most recent dental appointment revealed that he has “very good oral hygiene.” When he was younger he was very bucktoothed, and his dear parents poured a lot of money into rectifying that. He is a member of the American Society of Journalists and Authors and has written for The Guardian, History Today and USA Today.

Though 19th-century dentist-turned-poet Solyman Brown was never an official poet laureate, the literary establishment took to calling him the “poet laureate of dentistry” because no one had striven to poeticize the subject—and surely no one else did to such an extent.

His magnum opus, Dentologia, published in the mid-1800s, was a five-part, 176-page poetic work on “the diseases of the teeth, and their proper remedies.”

Brown, who was born in Litchfield, Connecticut, on Nov. 17, 1790, was a product of Yale. After graduating, he preached as a congregational minister at several Connecticut churches, according to the Connecticut Biographical Dictionary. However, about four years into his tenure as a preacher, Brown found himself facing the vague but distressing charge of “levity of character.” Strongly denying the charge, he wrote pamphlets addressing his feeling of injustice. But it was to no avail, because his license to preach was cancelled anyway.

The ex-preacher moved to New York, where he taught at private schools, converted to Swedenborgianism, and became close friends with Eleazar Parmly, a prominent New York dentist, who inspired Brown to switch careers. It would prove a good choice; not only did Brown become a successful dentist, but he also aided in founding the American Society of Dental Surgeons.
Additionally, he established *The American Journal of Dental Science*, the world’s first known publication exclusive to dentistry.

This journal, groundbreaking as it was, did not fully encompass the scope of Brown’s literary interests; the man also had a sweet tooth for the rhymed lyric. This was not unusual, because poetry in the U.S. was far more popular in the 19th century than now. Where he differed from the masses, however, was that he decided to mix poetry with dentistry. The fruit of this strange combination appeared in 1833 with the publication of *Dentologia*.

Much of this work is didactic and promotional, urging readers to seek professional help for their dental maladies:

*Whene'er along the ivory disks are seen,*

*The filthy footsteps of the dark gangrene;*

*When [decay] comes, with stealthy pace to throw Corrosive ink spots on those banks of snow,*

*Brook no delay, ye trembling, suffering fair,*

*But fly for refuge to the dentist’s care.*

In this excerpt, he formidably illustrates the consequences of tooth loss:

*But when, from loss of teeth, the food must pass,*

*A crude, and rigid, and unbroken mass,*

*To the digestive organs; who can know,*

*What various forms of complicated woe May rise terrific from that single source!*

The first book-length edition of *Dentologia* also included an index of 300 recommended dentists across the country. As unconventional as this volume was, it had some degree of commercial viability. In fact, it was reprinted five times—more than most books, and certainly more than most books of poetry.

One year after the release of *Dentologia*, Brown married. It is unclear if his wife enjoyed his poetry, though she did bear eight of his children, one of whom would become a dentist. Brown would publish more poems, occasionally using the nom de plume Mynalos (an anagram for Solyman). Some of these poems were
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dental in theme, though none nearly as ambitious as his masterwork. He also wrote more practical works, such as *A Treatise on Mechanical Dentistry*.

Aside from occasional literary composition, Brown’s later years were spent practicing dentistry and preaching at Swedenborgian churches. He died at age 85 on Feb. 13, 1876.

Having helped pioneer a dental society and a dental publication, Brown was influential in American dentistry. There is, however, conflict surrounding his poetic legacy. Favorably reviewed in its day, his work has suffered from increased scrutiny in more recent times. *Dentologia* was included in the anthology *Very Bad Poetry*, and Brown was also profiled in the book *World’s Worst Writers*, which describes his verses as “the poetic equivalent of root canal work without anesthetic.”

Whatever people may feel about its aesthetic merits, *Dentologia* is a unique piece of literature. It is not, by any standard, mediocre. Nor, for that matter, was Brown.

At this point, he is quite an obscure character. Reportedly, a book was written about him in 1961, but this is an extremely rare piece of literature. At the time of this article’s composition, there is no Amazon.com review or sales rank. And no copies are even available for sale. Fortunately, though, *Dentologia* is available through multiple vendors.