

**Address on the occasion of conferring medical degrees in the University of Glasgow, May, 1874 / by George H.B. Macleod.**

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# A D D R E S S

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ON THE OCCASION OF

## CONFERRING MEDICAL DEGREES

IN THE

UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW,

*MAY, 1874.*

BY

GEORGE H. B. MACLEOD, M.D., F.R.S.E.,

REGIUS PROFESSOR OF SURGERY IN THE UNIVERSITY.

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## A D D R E S S.

MR. PRINCIPAL, PROFESSORS, AND GENTLEMEN,

As Promoter for the year, I had the honour of giving the opening address at the beginning of the Session; and now it devolves upon me to bid farewell to those who, having completed their course of study, are about to leave the University, in order to begin the serious duties of life.

I very sincerely congratulate you on attaining that Degree which will enable you to practise your profession "ubique terrarum,"—to travel the world over as one of the initiated in an ancient and honourable Guild.

I am sure this day's proceedings will inspire you with very mingled feelings. The old College life with its hearty companionships, its freedom from care, its elasticity and buoyancy of spirit, and its unstinted opportunities of gaining knowledge "de omnibus rebus" will to-day close for ever. For the moment,



perhaps, this will inspire you with no regret; yet I doubt not that in after years, when immersed in the engrossing anxieties of professional life, you will think of these other days with melancholy pleasure.

We, your Teachers, while we truly rejoice at your prospects, yet lament that those bonds which have for some years so closely united us are about to be severed, and that we shall not again be surrounded, in Classroom and Hospital-ward, by your familiar faces. Our ardent desire is, that you may prove yourselves worthy of that distinction which is now to be bestowed upon you; and that the Medical Profession, to which you henceforth belong, will be ever dignified, and never degraded in your hands. You are now corporate members of this ancient seat of learning. The higher and more immaculate the reputation of your College, the greater honour will be reflected upon you; while any blot on your good name must, in some measure, detract from her renown. Let this reflection deter you, if at any time you should be tempted to depart from the strict line of duty; and be also convinced that there remain within these walls many who will glory in your success and prosperity, and who will say with pride, "He was one of us." We, your Teachers, have faithfully striven to prepare you for your duties. We have given you freely as we have in any measure ourselves received, and for this we claim a warm and abiding place in your memories. I rejoice to think that in the Graduates' Club, now being established, a rallying place will be found for those who have passed from our

Academic Halls, and that, by this means, greater cohesion will be given in future to so important and numerous a body.

To many of you the termination of your College career must bring such a feeling of rest as the sailor experiences when he reaches the quiet harbour after a hurricane; yet the very struggle in which you have been engaged must impart to you a discipline and a strength which will prove in life a real gain. Your diploma will be alone of value if it be a sign of honest work done, and of character and habits acquired.

This day's ceremony is not the end of your journey, nor does it mark any real place of rest. It is but the termination of the first stage—and that an easy and short one—of the long life-march before you. Hitherto you have had little responsibility. You have had the support and aid of your teachers and fellow-students; but for the future you must stand alone and rely upon yourselves. Now you must waken up, and pass from a condition of simple receptivity to that of being active members of an energetic profession; and your future success will mainly depend on how you are prepared when the opportunity comes. With your present imperfect knowledge, disease may appear to you an enemy easy to conquer, and your hands may confidently grasp your untried weapons. Be not dismayed if at first your anticipations are not realized, and that you discover a feebleness of effort and a difficulty of success you do not now anticipate. Most men have been painfully conscious of such failure. Trophilus, the Ephesian, being asked, "Who is the true physician?" replied

“He who distinguishes between what can and what cannot be done.” It is the same still. Many of the same difficulties, which have in former times attended the practice of our art, continue undiminished, and that simply because they are due to the nature of the subject with which we deal. The uncertainties of Medicine have long been a theme of satire to the inconsiderate, and men have not scrupled to allege that to us the experience of 3,000 years has brought no gain. Such persons speak as if death itself should be conquered by us, and disease wholly banished. They forget that the problems we have to solve are by far the most complicated which can be presented to the human mind : that we have to do with a living organism in a state of constant change, composed of the most delicate structures, and performing functions of the utmost nicety. This finely-balanced machine is ever affected by endless external and moral influences, which are again ever varying in their mode and degree of action. How different is this from the subject matter of the mechanical sciences! The best instructed physician has often to grope his way amidst a labyrinth of but dimly comprehended relations ; and though it is fortunately the case that his art is no longer shackled by a forced acquiescence in the crude dogmas and traditional doctrines of the past, yet he must be guided in no small measure by mere empirical rules. There is much which is yet obscure in the practice of Medicine, and which greatly extended and better systematized observations are required to clear up ; and

waiting such enlightenment, we must be content to act according to what experience we possess.

If during your pupilage you have been taught any principle more clearly than another, it has been to watch and follow the leadings of nature. You are well aware that we do not now look on disease as a foreign something to be cast out of the economy by remedies which are supposed to act directly upon it as a chemical re-agent would; but we estimate disease as a perverted life process, as a modified vital manifestation and its products (in so far as they differ from the normal structures) as subject to the great natural laws which preside over the economy. Doubtless diseases have laws of their own, but these are subordinated to those more widely active statutes which govern the general system. In dealing with disease we must, with open eye and unprejudiced mind, endeavour to recognize what nature does, and can do, to modify, remove, and correct, and not be misled by what *we* seem by our remedies to accomplish. If I were to mention any one feature in modern practice which is especially characteristic, it would be the vigilant care to husband the patient's strength. In the burning skin and excited brain, we now read the evidence of waste and lost nervous balance, and not a call for depletion and repression, as if dealing with that bugbear of our ancestors, the great and all pervading "Σθενός." It is well for mankind that the renovating and remedial power of nature is in general too powerful to be diverted or repressed; for many medical men, from ignorance or early prejudice, or mere conventionalism, or, it may be from thoughtlessness or carelessness, seem constantly to

try by their medicaments to disturb or destroy her beneficial actions. All "heroic remedies," *as a rule*, act thus destructively; while the therapeutics of the well-instructed Physician are at best auxiliaries, and have for their aim to help those vital actions or powers by which he knows full well a good result is alone to be brought about. In most cases the remedies used simply veil and conceal nature's workings.

No general rules for the treatment of disease can do more than give an outline of what is required in special cases. Each individual patient has so much that is peculiar to himself as to demand for his successful management in sickness some modification of the usually followed method.

No two cases of even what is evidently the same disease are exactly alike. There are ever varying shades of difference due to the individuality of the patient, the "constitution" of the year, and the intensity and variety of the affection.

It is by a due sense of this that you will be prevented from falling into that slough of despond—routine. The "plain practical man," as he terms himself with ill concealed satisfaction, is, in nine cases out of ten, a pure "routinier" like Sir Benjamin Brodie's master, who employed only three or four mixtures in all his business. Such men have a wholesome dislike at all speculation,—they are the modern "*οἱ ἐμπειρικοί*," who trust solely to what they call experience, which, alas! is too often blind pretentious egotism. Have no part with such ridiculous pretenders. The moment you sink the scientific aspirations of your profession you become mere

hucksters and petty traders; and the estimation and respect in which you and your profession will be held are diminished accordingly: for that estimation is regulated in a great measure by the value you put upon yourselves. From a consideration, then, of all this comes the fundamental lesson, to have faith in the curative powers of nature; to use art temperately, intelligently, sparingly, —always with due regard to the individual case in hand, and never in such a form as to disturb, or thwart, or weaken nature's restorative processes; and to try with all your might to discern how *she* works, and to learn how to imitate her ways. It is because men have not done this, but being wise in their own conceit, have tried to force nature by their coarse and cruel therapeutics, that so many false systems have sprung up, and so much charlatanism prevails. Many of these high-named "systems" owe what efficacy they possess to the liberty given to nature to set right the economy without interference.

I do not, however, forget that in the terrible abuse of drugs which still exists, and in the prevalence of quackery, the profession is not alone to blame. Poor, ignorant human nature demands to be deceived, and cannot estimate the distinction between scientific and popular "experience." Men will insist on looking on disease as a mystery, and to be expelled by specifics and sovereign remedies. They do not want advice. They demand drugs. In London the Public Dispensary system has fomented this weakness into a perfect madness. Patients are found attending many institutions at the same time, and partaking of the

multifarious drugs prescribed. It was doubtless to such a patient that an ancient physician is said to have exclaimed, on viewing the long row of empty bottles and pill boxes on his table, "Ah, sir, it gives me pleasure to attend you; you deserve to be ill." It were better for these unfortunate beings if they could believe, like the poor Abyssinian, in the efficacy of a draught impregnated with the ink with which the Hadji had written a text from the Koran, or the bolus which contained a sacred sentence from the Prophet.

Let me not, however, in all this be misunderstood. I am not advocating a simple negation of all therapeutics, nor the adoption of the Celsian maxim, "*optima medicina est non uti medicinâ*," but rather that "*expectatio artificiosa*" which our best instructed men adopt. In the removal of all obstacles to the due performance of nature's restorative offices, and so allowing of their most efficacious development,—in curbing and regulating any aberration or over action by the least injurious means,—in checking complications,—in guiding and restraining structural changes,—in allaying pain,—in procuring sleep,—in warding off exhaustion, and in giving courage and hope, the physician has ample scope for all his energies; and if he wishes a wider field than individual or domestic hygiene affords, he has before him the instruction of communities and nations in those great lessons of health, the elaboration of which, in our time and country, has justly brought so much credit to our profession.

It is a painful reflection that few men live their full

time, and that, not because their lives are cut short by violence, but rather by their personal neglect of sanitary laws, or because their fellow-men have, by their ignorance or culpable carelessness, engendered sources of danger which have menaced their lives. From one cause or another, we are encompassed by innumerable subtle forms of disease. Bad air or water, or other defective hygienic conditions, fill our hospitals and graveyards. The exigencies of our social condition hardly allow of all those sources of danger being obviated; but many of them are preventible, and should be removed. For every one who dies, how many have their health hopelessly broken; and who can estimate the total loss to the community from these causes combined? Our profession has no more important duties to perform than those which relate to the public health. To subdue those hidden, and hence more to be apprehended, enemies of social welfare, the zymotic diseases, should bring more renown than the conquering of nations, as the victory is for all time. To enable us, however, to prevail, we must have a wide acquaintance with many collateral sciences. Nature does not reveal her secrets but to those who have forced her to discover them. The riddle which involves our lives has to be solved by study and sagacity. Such a lesson as that taught by the outbreak of typhoid last year in London should show us what subtle and powerful forces we deal with, and how pitiless nature proves to ignorant man; while, on the other hand, the extraordinary reduction of the death-rate in those towns where the guidance of experience has prevailed, demonstrates how readily we can bend her

agencies to our will. Since 1846 improved hygienic arrangements have saved nearly 1,000 lives yearly in the British army. The recent revelations at Freetown, on the West Coast of Africa, show how men will year after year compass their own death, and all the while complacently refer the dread mortality to mysterious climatic influences.

But to return. It must be to you a source of pleasant anticipation that the irksomeness of enforced study being passed, you can, for the future, pursue knowledge for its own sake, and in such a way as seems to you best to attain to the great end of doing good to your fellow-men. I would, however, entreat you not to abuse this liberty. Be careful in your choice of authors, and in the use you make of them. The works you consult will be, in no small measure, the stones with which you will have in future to build. So, too, as regards new views and remedies, keep ever a candid and open mind to receive suggestions; but do not fall into the prevailing absurdity of running after every novelty, and then as quickly casting it aside because it has not come up to your inordinate expectation. It is very much from the sobering influence it has on our anticipations of remedies and methods of treatment, that a knowledge of the past history of our art proves so useful.

I feel convinced that every thoughtful man among you will be ready to admit, notwithstanding all your study and your examinations, and with the glitter of your parchment diplomas before you, that you know

very little indeed of medicine. By and by you will be conscious that you know even less than you think you do at this moment. To gain practical knowledge and confidence in the recognition and treatment of disease should be your first aim after leaving this school. If men really knew their interests, and were not so bit with a desire to begin their professional life, they would quickly settle down—undistracted by classes and examinations—for a year or two's clinical work in a large hospital. If you can get as resident into any public institution devoted to the care of the sick, make any sacrifice to obtain it. It will repay you a hundred-fold. If you fail in this, then go and live close by an hospital,—pinch, starve if necessary, to get time and opportunity to exercise your own senses, and your own brains, so as to make the great facts and landmarks of medicine your own assimilated property. This cannot be done so well in private practice in half a lifetime as it can in an hospital within a year; and it is not secured in the latter, as it is too often in the former case, by doing harm to others.

It will be essential to progress that you habituate yourselves from an early period of your career to keep an accurate record of your cases. In this way only can precision and substantial experience be gained. The best memory is unable to supply the want of such a record. You will also be more induced to study your cases when you record them, and thus a double advantage will accrue. A little practice too will enable you to do much thinking as you go your daily rounds; and

if you carry a small note-book wherein to mark any fugitive suggestion or line of investigation which occurs to you, much advantage will be secured. It is quite a mistake to suppose that it is only those who are connected with the schools who contribute valuable observations to the common stock of medical science. Some of the most important discoveries have been made by general practitioners; and it should always be remembered that, in the words of Professor Stokes, "the man who, by his unselfish labour, adds one useful fact to the store-house of medical knowledge, does more to advance material interests than if he had spent a life in the pursuit of medical politics."

Gentlemen, in warning you of the difficulties which you will have to contend with before your position is assured, I fear I may seem to detract from the satisfaction of this day's attainment. This country of ours is so crowded by professional aspirants that it is far from easy to secure a foothold. In every tiny village several medical men air their disputes and estrangements. You must, I fear, bide your time. A practice that is secure and valuable is slow of growth. Those mushroom-like "clientèle," which occasionally cause a talk, generally perish, like the gourd of Jonah, from innate rottenness. Every year the race for success gets faster, the prizes fewer, and the failures more numerous. We live in an age of painful activity, and the struggle to live is more and more exhaustive. To those, however, who are of the

right fibre this contest brings strength and toughness, as the hurricane did to those trees that Homer tells us his heroes chose for their spear shafts. It was a saying of Bruyère, "C'est des difficultés qui naissent les miracles."

It is during the few initial years of your professional life that you must be most watchful. It is then that your professional morality is most sorely beset. The need of pelf may make you lax in your notions of right; and little disingenuous acts—petty thefts, as it were, on society—are apt to be committed which will be deeply regretted if you afterwards become clothed in your right mind. Unfortunately the oftener such slips are made the less their turpitude is felt, and finally the spirit is degraded and ruined. There is no denying, and certainly no extenuating, the prevalence of that horrid vice of intemperance which so widely affects the ranks of our profession. In no class of society is such a vice more unpardonable, as it may lead (and I fear often does lead) to the most tragic results. The anxieties and labours of professional life, the long fasts and the exhaustion which follows, though alleged as reasons, do not palliate the offence. Be, I beseech you, on your guard against its early inroads. There is no better safeguard against such degrading vices than an honest ambition to excel, and the occupation of the mind by some pursuit which will relieve the tension and worry of practice. It is just when remunerative work is most scanty, and anxiety greatest, that these habits are apt to be acquired; and it is during these early years that the most valuable stores of professional knowledge

should be laid up. Your career and success will be in no small measure determined by the use you make of the few years which intervene between leaving college and attaining practice. During your undergraduate career your vision has been necessarily circumscribed, and your energies cramped; and when the full flood of practice sets in, systematic study becomes very difficult; but it is during the interval, when with the buoyant energy of the schools yet surging in your veins, and the hopeful future spurring you on, that you can lay broad and deep foundations whereon to build a stable and durable reputation. Work will then give a zest to relaxation, and a seasoning to life.

There are, however, two very prevalent notions regarding the acquisition of practice, which I will take the liberty of referring to. One is that it is necessary to go much into society in order to be known and to make friends, and the other is that you must be married before you can pretend to family practice. Now, as regards the first point, I would only say that a rational participation in social intercourse is very desirable, for many reasons; yet it is not, as a rule, conducive to practice. The anxious valetudinarian does not seek the advice of the agreeable boon-companion, but rather of him who, surrounded with the mystery of non-acquaintance (which, like distance, often enhances magnitude and attractiveness), is known to have prepared himself by careful study for his work. And as regards early marriage, I have no hesitation in saying that no more absurd or erroneous idea can exist

than that practice depends on your abjuring celibacy. I refrain from alluding to many living examples of men obtaining leading practices, even in the Obstetric department (where the circumstance would naturally act with greatest disadvantage), who are unmarried; but content myself by declaring, as the result of my own observation, that during the early years of one's professional life there are more people who seek your advice because you are single, than there are who would employ you if you were married. Some luke-warm friend may now and again excuse himself, on the ground of your being unmarried, from supporting you when he had no intention whatever of doing so; but no one who wishes to employ you will be deterred by such considerations. To marry early generally implies marrying hastily; and you know the proverb which embodies the experience of mankind on such unions. An early marriage is generally an imprudent and a disadvantageous one. The girl who marries an unsettled man may appear for the moment a heroine; but she has shown little of that prudence which we want in a wife. Many entangle themselves, even when students, in engagements which will hang round their necks like a millstone. They are compelled to settle in the first opening which offers, and can seldom again move so as to improve their field of practice. Every bit of romance, and all professional fire are extinguished by the demands of the larder, and they enter prematurely into all the corroding cares of mature years. Well will it be for them if the necessities of the "pot-à-feu" do not

swamp their professional morality and honour! Love in a cottage, like many other interesting but now obsolete methods of practice, has gone for ever. The butchers and bakers have effectually dissolved such romantic visions.

Gentlemen, happiness has in all times been the chief end of man's strivings. To define it has tried the skill of philosophers. Between the sensuous enjoyment of the Epicurean and the abnegation of the Stoic, every variety of doctrine has had its disciples; but I would humbly subscribe to the sentiment of Fontenelle, that the true secret of happiness consists in being well with one's own mind—*i.e.*, being right within, and so independent of the petty vexations of life. Horace expresses the same thing when he says, "You traverse the world in search of happiness, which is within the reach of every man: a contented mind confers it on all." In the due performance of duty, combined with a well balanced mind and contentment, there is the truest satisfaction. This happiness we can all attain to if we try. It will not, however, be enjoyed by the envious or jealous man, nor by him who in any way weakens his self-respect. Avoid all professional squabbles. They only give occasion to the public to mock, deride, and despise us and our profession. Never take any mean advantage of an opponent, or secretly disparage him, or employ doubtful methods of gaining notoriety or popularity. "Better to suffer evil," said the Athenian sage, "than do evil." No success is worth having

which is not honestly secured. You may not succeed; the fault may not be yours: the race is not always to the swift. In every fight many a good soldier dies for every one who is crowned.

“’Tis not in mortals to command success ;  
But we ’ll do more, Sempronius—we ’ll deserve it.”

It is by prudence, patience, and perseverance that it is to be snatched. “Genius means,” says Haydon, “transcendant capacity of taking trouble.” Buffon expresses the same idea—“Genius is patience.” “To know how to wait,” said De Maistre, “is the great secret of success;” and another author puts it, “All things come round to him who waits.” This—*patience*, with that capacity for taking advantage with energy of the lucky moment when it presents itself—is Genius. You have perhaps heard of the old Norman pickaxe on which was inscribed the motto, “Either I will find my way or make one.” That, too, should be your maxim when the time comes for action.

Our profession has never wanted, thank God, brilliant examples of self-devotion and perseverance, even unto death, when the calls of humanity have demanded it. It would be culpable in me at this time to forget that, in the career and the fate of that old Glasgow student, Dr. David Livingstone, whose remains were the other day placed by a mourning people in our national mausoleum, we have displayed the best type of those qualities which all men admire. It was but the higher duty to his father’s memory which prevented the son being among you to-day. A constancy and

fortitude which never faltered, and a courage which never quailed; a strength of will and power of endurance, which no obstacle raised by man or nature could subdue, have in him shed a lustre no less on our common humanity than on our common country. He laboured and died for the good of his fellow-men, and to advance religion and science. Could any nobler aim or more heroic end be reserved for man? It is well with a nation when her kings and nobles mourn for such a man! Little did Livingstone suppose, when, in such touching solitude, amidst the savage tribes of the mysterious continent he sought to benefit, his clouded senses heard faintly that hushed "Good morning," that his stricken and worn-out body would be placed amidst the innumerable company of our most illustrious dead; and that for all time and people, his devotion to a great purpose, and his unswerving constancy, will be held up as a burning example. *We* may not thus be called upon to serve; but in lesser ways and minor degrees we, too, may find work worthy of our self-devotion. The image of his life should, and doubtless will, be reflected in others; and the brightness of his example must encourage and support many. It was in no small degree directly due to his professional knowledge that Dr. Livingstone was able to achieve what he did, and to open up for others that vast unknown land—

"For he was the first that ever burst  
Into that silent sea."

Whatever may be said of the uncertainties of

medicine, no one can deny that it has proved one of the greatest boons to humanity, and that from the ranks of its votaries have sprung many of the most ardent cultivators of every branch of science. In its exercise there are many rewards. The tender sympathies it awakens educates our own hearts, and keeps green our purest affections. It secures us the respect and regard of society, if we make ourselves deserving of it. Perhaps no profession, day by day, does so much to serve mankind, or has contributed more, during the long ages since Æsculapius, "the gentle artificer of freedom from pain," exercised the craft, to "lessen the stripes wherewith humanity is stricken." This great inheritance, with time and opportunity, is now yours. Before you doubtless lie an eventful and pregnant future. In all pursuits the times seem full of portents, and ripe for great results. By you, perhaps, some of the great social issues, which cannot fail to arise within the near future, may be influenced. If your training here has been what it ought, then you must needs have acquired those wide sympathies and generous refined tastes which tend to raise the aims and purify the purposes of society, as well as that mental discipline and balance of judgment which will help you to decide on those momentous questions affecting our future history as a nation which will press for solution.

Before closing, I would make one other remark. In these times, the old controversy between revealed religion and science seems to have taken a renewed lease of life. Formerly it was supposed to be religion

which was inimical and opposed to science; now science almost refuses to give any place to religion. The persecution of Galileo was made to do yeoman's service for science; but, in our time, some noted men of science seem bent on explaining all things on the principle of evolution or development, which is the modern form of materialism. The soul of man is, according to them, a mere bodily function, and thought and moral sentiment but the highest and latest form of created existence—"An emanation from the brain, as bile is of the liver." If science is to assume such a garb, religion will have more to complain of than ever science had in the days of theological dogmatism and power. The body has now absorbed the soul, and is being freed from all the restraints which its subordination to the immortal element imposes. Be not thus deceived. That "kingly part" within us cannot be degraded by such vain babblings. Fortunately, the best and most learned men on both sides of the question are least divided and opposed. Be careful and cautious in your dealing with those questions in which religion and science seem to clash. They are—trust it—both emanations from the one great Centre of Knowledge, and when fully comprehended must coincide. Remember, that with all our assumed light and understanding, we are yet but children on the margin of the illimitable ocean, and that great is our responsibility when we enter upon such investigations.

"God fulfils Himself in many ways."

When apparent discrepancies exist, study them with

a sincere and reverent desire to discover the truth, and not alone to note divergence. Wait patiently for more light. That religion, which, for nearly 2,000 years, has gladdened the hearts of millions of the most learned and most renowned men, cannot be a mere fancy or a dream, and with it doubtless, in good time, science will be indissolubly bound, as they are truly but twin streams flowing from the great Fountain of life and knowledge.

“ Falling with my weight of cares,  
Upon the Great World's altar stairs,  
That slope through darkness up to God.

“ I stretch lame hands of faith, and grope,  
And gather dust and chaff, and call  
To what I feel is Lord of all,  
And faintly trust the larger hope.”

