

**An address delivered at the fourth anniversary meeting of the Birmingham Medical Debating Society, and published at the request of its members / by Peyton Blakiston.**

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Blakiston, Peyton, 1801-1878.  
Birmingham Medical Debating Society.  
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### **Publication/Creation**

Birmingham : Printed and published by J. C. Barlow ; London : Longman and Co., 1837.

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# AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED AT

THE FOURTH ANNIVERSARY MEETING

OF THE

BIRMINGHAM

MEDICAL DEBATING SOCIETY,

AND

PUBLISHED AT THE REQUEST OF ITS MEMBERS.

BY

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BIRMINGHAM:

PRINTED AND PUBLISHED BY J. C. BARLOW, BENNETT'S HILL.  
LONGMAN AND CO., LONDON.

M.DCCC.XXXVII.

THE HISTORY OF THE  
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 THE MOVEMENT FOR BEAUTY

## AN ADDRESS.

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ONE of the most interesting and important inquiries which can engage the mind is that which relates to the means whereby we may discharge the duties of our respective positions in society with credit to ourselves and advantage to the community. We are about to enter upon a small branch of this inquiry, by considering how far Medical Debating Societies may be advantageous in assisting the student to acquire those habits of reasoning, and that scientific knowledge, which shall fit him to become an useful and intelligent practitioner.

As our object is the elucidation of truth, we must not confine ourselves to a consideration of one side of the question (as is too often done by the advocates of this or the other system), but with the advantages must also regard the disadvantages of Debating Societies, and then, if we carefully balance the one against the other, our conclusions will be sound, and will not merely satisfy the superficial observer who can only retain one opinion until it be replaced by another, but those also who, bringing a matured judgment to bear upon the subject, take cognizance of all its various bearings. Were a general to estimate his chance of success in an approaching conflict from the elements of his own force alone, without taking into consideration the numbers, discipline, and position of his opponents, his conduct would be considered as the result of a disordered mind.

Approaching the subject, then, in a spirit of investigation, we will

examine successively the advantages arising out of Medical Debating Societies, and the objections which may be raised against them. That done, we shall proceed to inquire what objections may arise against this particular Society, how they may be obviated, and by what means the utility of the Society may be increased.

One great advantage afforded by these societies consists in the stimulus which they offer to the industry and research of their members. In this country the state holds out no encouragements to the medical student in his search after knowledge ; nor does it take any steps for placing the best means of improvement within the reach of those who have evinced a more than ordinary capacity and desire to make a good use of them. These must be purchased by the money of himself or his friends. He is not led on gradually, by successive examinations, to devote himself in turn to the various subjects a knowledge of which is requisite for the successful practice of his profession, commencing with Natural Philosophy as a basis, and terminating in Clinical Medicine ; but he is subjected to one first and final examination, whose meshes are necessarily so large as to allow the passage of persons of moderate attainments and slender industry. This ordeal once passed, he can look forward to no further intellectual contest, the successful result of which would remove the fear of want from his eyes, and place him in a high and honourable position among his professional contemporaries. His motives for exertion are all supplied from *within* ; for we can hardly class in the list of encouragements those few small honours which the state confers upon some members of the medical profession, without being guided by any public and unerring proof of the superiority of their talents and attainments.

In this state of things, the lover of his profession hails with delight any means, however small, by which a stimulus is afforded to the industry and research of its youthful members. Such are the prizes

offered by the different Schools of Medicine, and such also (I think I shall be able to show) are Debating Societies similar to that on the anniversary of which we are assembled this evening. A paper is read, and a discussion arises upon some of its leading points. Now the writer of such paper must either be tolerably well prepared beforehand, or he must give himself up to accurate and diligent research. In the former case, should he be desirous of distinguishing himself, he will hardly rest satisfied with his knowledge of the subject, however extensive it may be, but will set himself down to refresh that knowledge, and to add to it from sources to which he had not hitherto applied. But should he, on the other hand, have little knowledge of the subject, he will strain every nerve to acquire such information as shall enable him to acquit himself with credit. In both cases the effect upon the mind must be good. It may be the first means of awakening him to the necessity of active research; and if he find not what he seeks for in books, he may be led to interrogate Nature herself. That would indeed be a bright moment in his intellectual existence! for who can measure or estimate the value of the observation of the phenomena of Nature? or who can undertake to define the limits of knowledge to which such observations shall one day lead? Have such effects taken place? Is it a fact that the direction given to the thoughts and researches of any by societies of this kind has been the means of leading them on to the discovery of new and important truths?—It is. While in France and in Scotland the study and research bestowed upon the thesis required to be sustained before the respective faculties of medicine have not unfrequently terminated in useful discoveries and standard publications, instances are not wanting in this country, and in this town even, in which the leading points of a valuable work first appeared as a prize essay, or in a paper read before a Medical Debating Society. These are facts no less striking than true.

Such is one great advantage derived by the writer of the paper ; but there is another, which is equally divided between himself and those of his auditors who take a part in the discussion which arises out of it. It is the duty of the former to look at the subject in all its bearings, and to anticipate the objections which may be urged against his propositions or deductions ; while the latter are called upon to sift the matter thoroughly, and to endeavour to elucidate truth by a free discussion. “*Hæc est enim, ut scis, vetus et Socratica ratio contra alterius opinionem disserendi ; nam ita facillime quid verisimillimum esset, invenire posse Socrates arbitrabatur.*” The energies and reasoning powers of both parties are thus kept upon the stretch, and brought suddenly into action ; from which a readiness of apprehension, and celerity in the arrangement of facts and arguments, must result. This exercise of the mind leads in practice to quickness in the discovery of disease, and decision in its treatment ; qualities which tend in the highest degree to inspire the sick with confidence in the skill of their medical attendant, and thus to increase the effect of his remedies. The knowledge of medicine is not intuitive ; men are not born surgeons or physicians : but the superiority of the talented and well-educated practitioner is shown in the celerity and accuracy with which he collects and passes in review all the necessary data for the formation of a diagnosis, and then, relying with just confidence on the soundness of his conclusions, adopts a course of treatment at once rational and decided.

Many are apt to consider such a talent as the result of natural uncultivated genius and quickness of perception ; but nothing is, perhaps, farther from the truth. In listening to the performance of one who by constant exercise has obtained a complete command over his instrument, the ease and facility with which he executes the most brilliant passages conveys to us no idea of the difficulties which were overcome, and the course of training which was required for

their execution : we are rivetted by the beauty and grace of the harmony. But when we listen to the performance of others whose training has been defective, and witness their laboured exertions, we are at once reminded of the exercise required for overcoming the immense difficulties attending the acquirement of excellence. Just so the ease and facility with which the well-trained practitioner comes to his conclusions prevent our recurring to the difficulties he has overcome, which only seem recalled to our minds by the erroneous, though often clever, guesses of uncultivated genius, or the laboured throes of ignorant dullness. In fact, however, this excellence can only be attained by a long course of logical training and exercise of the mind, a process which would seem to be hastened and matured, in some degree, by the discussions carried on in Medical Debating Societies.

I shall not insist much upon the fluency of speech which these debates are calculated to foster, because it may be said that such an acquirement is less wanting in the medical profession than at the forum or in the senate ; but still a correct and elegant manner of expressing our ideas can never be ill-placed. “Hanc enim perfectam philosophiam semper judicavi, quæ de maximis quæstionibus copiose posset ornateque dicere.”

Such are some of the most obvious advantages attending these societies, as regards the *student* ; but there are others which have relation to the social qualities of the *man*. In a profession like ours, the members of which are often placed, either by the caprice or anxiety of others, in situations where the greatest kindness, tenderness and forbearance towards each other, are required—a profession, in short, in which the elements of discord are often so thickly sown—any bond which shall tend to draw us together in social union must be highly desirable. Such an one is this Society ; which unites the junior members of the profession, and brings them into social inter-



course, at the very time when their affections, yet green and tender, are capable of twining around each other, and their intellect is sufficiently expanded to enable them to form some estimate of the character and disposition of those with whom they may feel disposed to unite themselves in friendship. The friendship that springs up in youth is that which may be expected to take the deepest root, and to form, if kept up by continued intercourse, the most solid support and the safest shelter during the troubles of after-life.

There is a point in this particular Society which I cannot pass unnoticed: I allude to the incorporation of a certain number of the senior members of the profession in it. You, Gentlemen, who are the junior members, cannot estimate this privilege too highly, as you thus enjoy the advantages afforded by the judgment of your seniors, —a judgment ripened by time and corrected by experience. Their presence need not abash you, nor interfere with your freedom of debate. It is true the forward and giddy may find it necessary to repress their natural propensity, and to put on the garment of modesty; but be assured no more wholesome restraint could be imposed upon them. To the zealous and industrious the presence of their instructors must prove an additional stimulus, inasmuch as they will feel that their talents and industry will be fully appreciated. And to you, Gentlemen, who are engaged in the instruction of youth, it cannot prove an irksome task to mix in social intercourse with your pupils, and to unite the communication of knowledge with the interchange of friendly feeling. Engaged as we are in the practice of a profession often harassing and wearying to the mind, and in which so many causes concur to draw us off from the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, how refreshing is it to come in contact with the ardour of youth, and at its bright flame to re-ignite our own half-extinguished enthusiasm.

These would appear to be some of the advantages arising out of

Medical Debating Societies; the objections to them remain to be taken into consideration. It is urged that Debating Societies in general, although they may lead to fluency of speech and readiness of argument, yet are, on the whole, injurious to the student, as interfering with the regular course of his graver pursuits, and unsettling his mind. As regards Medical Debating Societies, however, it must be remembered that the subjects of the discussions carried on in them are, or ought to be, such as are of the utmost practical importance to their members. A Political or Historical Debating Society might possibly be worse than useless to the student in Natural Philosophy or Divinity; but it could not be so to the embryo statesman. Why, then, should a similar attention to medical subjects be otherwise than useful to the medical student? The question is one of comparative usefulness; whether it would not be better that the whole of his time should be bestowed on the study of the branch sciences and the practical part of his profession. But it must be remembered that some variety in the pursuit of knowledge is not only advantageous, but necessary to the health of the body and the vigour of the mind. Assuming, however, that the subjects discussed in these societies did not bear upon the immediate objects of the student's ultimate profession; even then we have the strong argument of experience to convince us that at least no harm would result from them.

A society existed among the students of the University of Cambridge, in which questions arising out of politics, history, and general literature, were discussed. It was suppressed by the Vice Chancellor, under the idea that it interfered with the mathematical and classical studies of some of its members. In the remonstrance offered by this society to the authorities who silenced its debates is the following passage:—"As a proof that The Union has by no means contributed to withdraw its members from more important studies, short as has

been the duration of the society, it has had on its lists of members three University scholars, seven Chancellor's medallists, twelve Brown's medallists, and many names which ranked high on the tripos." It is a curious circumstance, Gentlemen, that the offices of president, treasurer, and secretary of this society, should, at the time of its suppression, have been respectively filled by Mr. Whewell, Mr. H. J. Rose, and Mr. C. Thirwall, all of whom have risen to the highest eminence; the first as a natural philosopher, the second as a divine, and the third as a classical scholar. To these names I can add, from my own contemporaries, those of gentlemen highly distinguished in natural philosophy, in literature, in the pulpit, in medicine, at the forum, and in the senate: such are Holditch, Hare, Melvill, Chambers, Austin, Malkin, and Macaulay. A society which has enrolled amongst the most active of its members men such as these, and a host of others almost equally distinguished, cannot for a moment be supposed to have interfered with the graver studies of its members, or to have retarded them in their eager pursuit after knowledge. This truth was soon forced upon the minds of the authorities of Cambridge; and in rather less than four years from the time of its suppression the society was re-established, and flourishes to this day in full vigour. These facts are conclusive, and the objection must, I think, fall to the ground.

It is, also, said that these societies, while they feed the flame of vanity and inordinate love of applause in the clever, tend to mortify and depress those who, though well-disposed, are endowed with very limited powers of mind. As regards the former, it has already been shown that there is a circumstance in the constitution of this Society which must operate as a check; I mean the presence of some senior members of the profession. But, even were it not so, the objection could not be allowed; for the same might be urged against every incentive to competition. The love of applause is a necessary ingredi-

ent in the character of those who arrive at eminence ; and because some allow it to take a usurping hold upon them we are not hence to oppose ourselves to its development, but to direct it into a wholesome channel, and to keep it within moderate bounds. The dormant feelings of emulation called forth by meetings of this kind, which lead to industry and research, and the consequent acquirement of useful knowledge, might, and probably would, have been called into action upon more unworthy occasions ; and he who now takes the lead in the cultivation of his mind and the acquirement of knowledge might, but for this, have stood prominently forward in Bacchanalian orgies and lascivious revelries.

But is it true that these societies encourage the love of applause in its worst form, that of a pitiful vanity ? This may fairly be doubted ; for if applause follow the union of talent and industry it will act as a stimulus to further exertion rather than to personal display, and will lead to that self-respect and self-confidence which is absolutely necessary to greatness of character. This is by no means inconsistent with true modesty, which must be possessed by all who know enough to enable them to estimate the smallness of the field to which the expansion of the human intellect is limited.

Again : the clever youth, who, resting on his natural gifts, neglects to improve them by industry, will not find his vanity fed here ; for he will occasionally meet with one who, though far his inferior in mental capacity, shall yet, by his superior knowledge, the result of industry, completely defeat him by facts, and disperse his flimsy theories into air. Such an one may thus be taught a practical lesson on the value of industry, and may be induced to adopt its habits, in order to avoid a repetition of the mortification and disgrace to which he has been subjected.

On the other hand, those of slow apprehension need not be mortified, at least not more so than is for their good. The attainment of

knowledge cannot be accomplished without many crosses and annoyances ; and among these may be reckoned a sense of inferiority, which is the result of association with others of more brilliant parts. But it is absolutely necessary that we should be made to feel this ; for nothing is more lamentable or more hopeless than that dulness which is not aware of its own existence. A knowledge, however, of this fact will often have the effect of driving young men to increasing industry, in order that by such means they may, in some degree, make up for their natural deficiencies. If any one person shall have been made aware of his own want of quickness, and shall have been induced to apply himself with vigour to improve his mind and store it with knowledge, by any thing that has taken place in this Society, it will not have been established in vain. He may not have shone in its debates, but the advantages, happily, are extended to the auditors as well as to those who take part in the discussion ; enough if a stimulus shall have been afforded to industry, whether directly or indirectly.

But it may be said that the preparation required for a weekly debate must lead to a desultory mode of study, the subjects being new every week. There might be some force in this objection if the Society were so small that all its members were required to keep up the spirit of each debate ; but in most societies of this kind the numbers are sufficiently large to dispense with this, and its members are only required occasionally so to prepare themselves as to take a leading part in the discussion.

There may be some minor disadvantages arising out of Medical Debating Societies, but they are not so obvious as to require any lengthened notice. Now, in striking the balance between the good and the evil, the former will, I think, be found greatly to predominate. We have seen that, so far from interfering with the regular studies of the student, they have a tendency to improve the powers of

his mind and to excite his industry ; that the clever are stimulated by the fear of being surpassed by the diligence of the dull, who in their turn, feeling that little has been bestowed upon them by nature, endeavour to supply the deficiency by patient and continued exertion ; and, further, that social intercourse of a beneficial kind is at the same time promoted, and the foundations laid of future and lasting friendships.

Our attention has hitherto been directed to Medical Debating Societies in general ; much, however, must depend upon the spirit which pervades particular societies, as the elements of disorganization may be planted and take root in the soundest bodies. Does a spirit of forbearance and gentlemanly courtesy prevail ? or is the spirit of healthy emulation blighted and marred by corroding envy or ungovernable passion ? No society can be exempt from occasional out-breakings ; but what is the general temper and tenor of the debates ? I am happy in being able to express my belief that the best feeling and the utmost courtesy has existed among the members of this Society. I would say, then, "Go on and prosper."

Again : are the subjects for discussion usually selected with judgment ? do they refer to points of practical importance rather than to those of theory and speculation ? and are the arguments of the writer and the speakers backed by original cases which they themselves have observed ? To be really useful and instructive, the debates should be thus conducted ; by which means the members of the Society would not merely be stimulated to research among the records of medicine, but to the daily observation of the phenomena of disease. "*Nulla alia est pro certo noscendi via, nisi quam plurimas et morborum et dissectionum historias, tum aliorum, tum proprias, collectas habere, et inter se comparare.*" How immensely has the knowledge of disease been increased since this truth has been acknowledged and acted upon ! It was deeply impressed

upon the mind of Andral in an early period of his pupillage. Having adopted the passage I have read to you as his motto, and having for some years steadily and uniformly followed out its spirit, he at length placed it on the title-page of his *Clinical Medicine*, the result of his youthful labours; a work which has immeasurably enriched the stores of philosophical medicine, and which will long remain a model to the student, and a manual to the experienced practitioner. Could a more encouraging instance than this be placed before the mind of the medical student? It teaches him that the studies and researches of his youth may, if properly directed, not merely have the effect of preparing him for the discharge of his duties in after-life, but may also conduce to the increase of medical knowledge, and to the acquirement of high professional reputation.

To the senior members of this Society I may perhaps be allowed to hold up the example of one whom I am proud to call my master. At the age of thirty-two Monsieur Louis devoted himself to the observation of disease, to the philosophical arrangement of his observations, and to the deduction of sound conclusions from them; and although but now in the prime of life, he has done more towards the advancement of medical science than any physician of this or other ages, and is entitled to the admiration and respect of every lover of his profession who desires to see its principles established on a sound basis, and its means of usefulness enlarged and extended.

This town contains the data necessary for the solution of some of the most interesting and important questions in medical statistics. Containing a vast population engaged in different trades and occupations, perhaps more varied than in any other town in the universe, it affords the greatest facilities for conducting an inquiry into the connection which may exist between the state of the health and the mode of employment; a question of the greatest interest, as it regards the happiness of a large portion of the population of this manufacturing

country. At the same time a vast field is open for the study of disease in all its forms, whether in public institutions or in the private abodes of the inhabitants. And while it must ever be a matter of deep regret that so few facts have been collected from such ample sources, yet it may be hoped that future exertions will supply the place of past inertness, and that Birmingham will ere long be found supplying to the philosopher abundant materials for working valuable, but as yet undiscovered, mines of knowledge and truth. As one step towards the improvement for which we thus look, let me once more earnestly impress upon the members of this Society the advantage of introducing as much as possible the observation of facts into their debates, and of choosing for the subjects of their papers such matters as are of practical importance.

There is yet one question which presents itself—Is it advisable for students, in an early period of their pupillage, to take an active part in the debates of this Society? The answer would seem obvious, that, as the subjects would, in most cases, relate to matters of which they cannot have obtained much knowledge, their most prudent course would be to reserve themselves for the time when, having made some progress in the study of the branch sciences, their attention shall be turned to the observation of disease. Nothing is ever lost by the actors in a drama having previously played the part of spectators.

In conclusion, Gentlemen, let me observe that if thus far I have not referred to higher motives than those suggested by considerations affecting your future advancement in life, it is not because I have forgotten that such may and ought to animate you primarily and above all others. You will bear with me, I am sure, when I remind you that to aim at the acquisition of both professional and general knowledge is no less your *duty* than your interest. You owe it to your Maker and to your fellow-creatures, even more than to yourselves, that no effort shall be wanting on your part to improve



your talents to the utmost, and to direct all their energies towards the profession you have adopted. Should it be that success is denied you, and your hopes of rising to eminence are disappointed, still on the testimony of a good conscience you will repose yourselves with unalloyed satisfaction, and find peace *within*, whatever may be your discouragements from *without*. The very course, also, on which you have entered, has rewards peculiarly its own: it may, or may not, lead to profit and renown; but it must lead the diligent student (if he be not wholly deficient in the abilities necessary for its pursuit), to a considerable acquaintance with the means of alleviating the pains to which humanity is subject. And even its highest honours—the exalted station, distinguished respect, or ample wealth, which all aspire to and some attain—will yet be esteemed, by every well-regulated mind, as secondary to the opportunities afforded him for the exercise of benevolence in relieving the miseries and augmenting the happiness of mankind. Cherish, Gentlemen, these higher motives, and let them rouse you to active exertion: then it will indeed be a pleasure to those of us who have already entered on the practice of our profession to meet and welcome you on its threshold, and to unite with you in upholding its character and extending its utility.