

## **On the character and writings of Sydenham / by J. Brown, M.D.**

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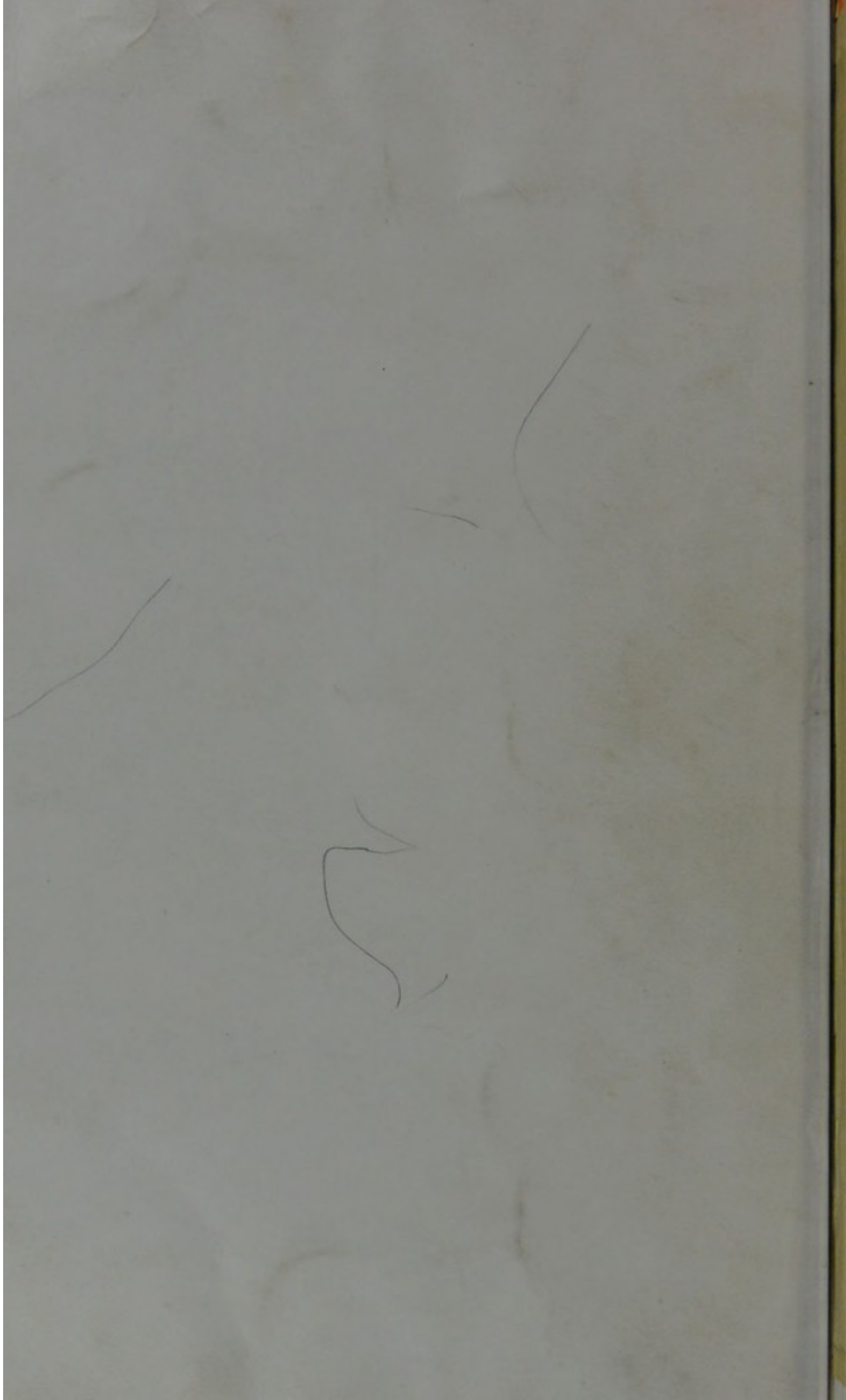
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# ON THE CHARACTER AND WRITINGS OF SYDENHAM.

BY J. BROWN, M.D.

FROM THE MONTHLY JOURNAL OF MEDICAL SCIENCE, FOR MAY 1848.

THE author remarked, that in a composite subject like medicine, comprehending, as it does, a science and an art, each distinct from but dependent upon the other, it was a most interesting and important, but, at the same time, a difficult inquiry, what has been the condition of the art of healing, as an art, at different periods of its history?—an inquiry quite separate from that which has reference to its progress towards a systematic science, strictly so called. This inquiry into practice rather than into principles, he observed, would be made to most purpose, by singling out the great practitioner and practical writer of his time; Hippocrates and his epoch; Sydenham and his; John Hunter, Lænnec, or Abercrombie, and theirs. These great men, though differing much in circumstances and internal character, all agreed in their possessing, in large measure, and in rare quality, that native vigour of mind, that practical sagacity, that gift of insight, that principle and habit, of serious, patient, continuous, honest observation, and that knack in the application of knowledge, so as to make it go forth at once, and safely, to the diagnosis and treatment of the disease before them,—a combination of gifts and acquirements, which, as long as human nature and its wants continue unchanged, must constitute the cardinal virtues of the good and great physician.

After adverting to the many reasons why the writings of Sydenham had fallen into comparative disregard, and, in particular, to their being in many respects scientifically obsolete, and buried in a language now all but dead, he observed that it was the lot of all the most successful practitioners of the art of healing, to be invaluable while alive, and to be soon forgotten after they were dead, much of what was best in their practice, and its reasons, being, by the very nature of things, incommunicable, and dying with them. He contrasted the fate, in this respect, of Sydenham, with that of the great Harvey, whose fame every day brightened, and the value of whose discovery every other discovery in physiology enhanced the more. He instanced as examples of the same thing, in our own day, Sir Charles Bell and Dr Abercrombie. The one, inventive, speculative, originaive, scientific; the other, sagacious, observant, practical. He then took occasion to call attention to a very remarkable passage by Plato, in his *Theætetus*,—"Particulars (or, as we call them, instances or facts) are infinite (and therefore, in their unreduced condition, useless and unmanageable), and the higher generalities (scientific truths demonstrable and referrible to exact rules) give no sufficient direction in medicine; but the pith of all sciences or knowledge, that which makes the artisan differ from the inexpert, is in the middle propositions, which in every particular knowledge are to be taken from tradition and experience." He illustrated this at some length, and said it contained the essence of all that was true as to the distinction between philosophy and common sense—speculation and practice—science and art—remarking that Sydenham was eminently an "artisan," and great in the "middle propositions;" at the same time stating, that all great practical men, as Franklin, Watt, John Hunter, &c., while they preferred working among practicals, among the middle propositions, were far from destitute of the speculative faculty, though they used it rather actually, than formally, and indeed that they could not have been what they were, or done what they did, without possessing the capacity of philosophizing. He directed attention to the higher qualities of Sydenham's character, as exhibited in that regard for the welfare of his fellow-men and the glory of his Maker, which distinguished him in his life, and in his writings, and he quoted a passage from the preface to the first edition of his *Observationes Medicæ*, in which he says,—All men giving themselves to medicine should lay to heart these four things; 1st, That they must one day render an account to the supreme

Judge of the manner in which they have dealt with the lives of those committed to their care ; 2d, That they should disdain to make their high and honourable calling subserve the mean uses of avarice and ambition ; 3dly, that they should realize the dignity of human nature, that material in which their work lay, by remembering that the only begotten Son of God, in becoming man, ennobled by his own majesty the nature he assumed ; and finally, that the sense of their own frailty and mortality should prevail with them to use all diligence and the most tender affection towards their fellow-sufferers.

He then read various extracts from Sydenham's treatises illustrative of his enlightened, manly, and thoroughly English understanding—of his sagacity, and of the value he put upon, and the rich reward he got from, studying the external phenomena of disease, what he called its natural history, apart entirely from all hypothetical notions ; and reminded them that, though in many most important respects, these works are now of little immediate value, as being imperfect and erroneous, they still remained a monument of the genius, and good principle, and sense of their great author, and a most valuable study for all practical and reflecting men, who regarded professional knowledge as a means rather than an end, and who desired chiefly to know a thing in order by its means to do some other thing. He then concluded by quoting and illustrating the following remark of Hartley Coleridge in his life of Dr Fothergill : " There are certain inward gifts, more akin to genius than talent, which make the physician prosper, and deserve to prosper ; for medicine is not, like practical geometry or the doctrine of projectiles, an application of an abstract, demonstrable science, in which a certain result may be drawn from certain data, or in which the disturbing forces may be calculated with an approximation to exactness. It is a *tentative art*, to succeed in which demands a quickness of eye, thought, tact, and invention, which are not to be learned by study, nor, unless by connatural aptitude, to be acquired by experience : and it is the possession of this *sense*, exercised by patient observation, and fortified by a just reliance on the *vis medicatrix*, the self-adjusting tendency of nature, that constitutes the physician, as imagination constitutes the poet, and brings it to pass that sometimes an old apothecary, not far removed from an old woman, and whose ordinary conversation savours, it may be, largely of twaddle, who can seldom give a rational account of a case or its treatment, acquires, and justly, a reputation for infallibility, while men of talent and erudition are admired and neglected—the truth being, that there is a great deal that is *mysterious* in whatever is *practical*."

In conclusion, while he hoped he was not unobservant of, or ungrateful for the many new methods of investigating disease, and while he admitted the prodigious improvement in the art, as well as in the science of medicine in later years, he hoped he might be permitted to say, that all new good things were apt to bring with them some new evil things, or at least to displace or disparage some ancient good ; and that thus the danger now-a-days lay in our forgetting, that, with the wonderful access of purely scientific truths which has signalized our age, and with all the advantages we enjoy of being taught *ab extra*—this would be of little avail in practice, unless we met it by a hearty *vis ab intra*, and exercised on every occasion that nicety and keenness of observation, that independence and honesty of judgment, and that intelligent self-reliance, which made Sydenham the able and useful member of his profession and of society which we know he was. That while information was good, was essential, *formation*, internal assimilation, appropriation, and application of outward knowledge, was not less so—and that we must never forget that our chief duty is with a craft rather than a philosophy, with knowing what to do rather than being able to discourse learnedly about final causes, or to remember every thing every one else has known or said. And that in the words of Sydenham—" *Cognitio nostra in rerum cortice omnis ferme versatur, ac ad το 'οτι (sive quod res hoc modo se habeat) fere tantum assurgit, το διοτι (sive rerum causas) nullatenus attingit.*"

