

Letter to the Right Hon. the Lord Provost, in refutation of certain charges against Queen's College by Mr. Syme.

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LETTER
TO THE
RIGHT HON. THE LORD PROVOST,
IN REFUTATION OF CERTAIN CHARGES
AGAINST
QUEEN'S COLLEGE
BY
MR. SYME.

Hamlet. Good, my Lord, will you see the players well bestowed? Do you hear—let them be well used, for they are the abstract and brief chroniclers of the time. * * * *

Polonius. My Lord, I will use them according to their desert.

Hamlet. Odds bodikin, man, much better. Use every man after his desert, and who shall 'scape whipping? Use them after your own honour and dignity; the less they deserve, the more merit is in your bounty.

LETTER.

MY LORD PROVOST,

It is one of the many unpleasant circumstances which affect the honourable post which you occupy, that, on occasions of dissension among the citizens over whom you preside, the public expression of your opinions, and your public conduct, expose you to the enmity of the one party or the other. The commonness of such sources of annoyance to your Lordship does not lessen my regret, that an act of disinterested courtesy and manly liberality on your part, in honouring with your presence the late public meeting for the distribution of prizes to the students of Queen's College, should have exposed you to disrespectful animadversions, intended to dragoon you into the narrow and mistaken opinions of a few individuals. Time only can prove whether the purposes for which Queen's College was established shall be fully accomplished ; it may be within the bounds of possibility that this Institution shall lead to results the very opposite of those contemplated at its commencement ; yet, whatever may be the fate of its endeavours to benefit the public, it is clearly incumbent upon those connected with it, while they thank your Lordship for the encouragement you have afforded towards the attainment of its ostensible objects, to satisfy every one that this College has been founded without one sinister or dishonest purpose ; the more especially *now*, that the reverse has

been charged against its founders, in a very discourteous letter to your Lordship from Mr. Syme. I beg your Lordship not to suppose me capable of following the example which I condemn,—not to suppose me capable of ribaldry and rudeness,—in which the more the skill, the greater the disgrace; and not to fear that I shall shock you with recrimination and abuse. My objects are, in good faith and candour, to exonerate myself and my colleagues from charges of arrogance, deception, and secret hostility to the University,—to state, in plain terms, the real objects and advantages of our Institution, and to satisfy the public that your Lordship acted in perfect consistency with your duty, in co-operating with other distinguished gentlemen, in promoting our endeavours to benefit the Medical School of Edinburgh, and along with them, merit the cordial thanks of the community, which has so deep an interest in the permanence and popularity of every institution which may induce persons from a distance to resort hither for education.

It appears that Mr. Syme's fears and suspicions of Queen's College attained their height on a late occasion, when some "highly respectable and well-informed citizen" waggishly accused our venerable University of having changed her name into "Queen's College;" and he is forthwith tempted to discover in this new College, "a contrivance of some private teachers in this School of Medicine," calculated "to mislead a large portion of the public,"—to diminish the emoluments of the professorial chairs of the University,—to "annoy and disgust" those in possession of them, and to lower "in public estimation the place and title of Professor,"—the only "community of interest" among us being "hostility to the University." He tells your Lordship, that for these wicked purposes, "a few of the private lecturers met together and agreed to call themselves a College," which "they had the presumption to decorate with the honoured name of Her Majesty." "But this was not all;" they took yet more important steps,—they actually "advertised their lectures in a form

similar to that of the University ;” and, “lastly, my Lord, they held a meeting on the 22d of April, for the distribution of prizes among the students of their respective classes, and invited the presence of the public ;” nay, had even the incivility to address circulars “to *myself* and many of my acquaintances, not possessing the advantage of their intimacy.” But even this is not all ; you, my Lord, are in the plot, and so are the College Bailie, and a “city clergyman,” for you were all present on the 22d of April ; and to crown the whole, the press, the public press, has been deeply implicated in the conspiracy, for “the newspapers, with exemplary diligence, reported the speeches apparently at full length.”

Although I have endeavoured to lend weight to each successive charge, your Lordship will perceive that the train of machines at work to overthrow the University, as specified by Mr. Syme, assumes irresistibly a very ludicrous appearance ; yet, in these meagre and silly charges, is summed up the whole amount of our overt acts of hostility,—on these grounds are some of the most popular and efficient lecturers on medicine in Edinburgh, held up to the public scorn as guilty of “paltry deception,” and of “usurping the credit of a station” to which they are not entitled ! Indignant as every honourable mind must feel when charged with dishonesty, that feeling, on the present occasion, soon yields to a very different one at the sight of so much irritation and ill-will thus easily stirred into a flame. It is curious that Mr. Syme ascribes to us, the lecturers in Queen’s College, nothing but hostility to the University as our ruling motive. Can he see no passion sufficiently powerful to guide men but malevolence ? Can he not allow us even the humble, yet less reprehensible motive, of pecuniary advantage, which he asserts to be so strong an attraction between “good men” and a “chair in the University,” instead of hinting to your Lordship, that we are associated for the malicious purpose of transferring to St. Andrew’s all the prosperity and honour which we detract from the University of Edinburgh ? By this accusation Mr. Syme

places himself in a most unenviable position. I offer no opinion on the system to which he so intemperately alludes, but I cannot avoid charging him with the utmost disingenuousness in connecting Queen's College with that system, in a manner calculated, if not designed, to excite the strongest prejudices against us in the minds of our fellow citizens. That your Lordship will not think this language too strong, I am confident, when you learn that the Medical Examiners in connection with St. Andrews, existed for many years before Queen's College was founded, as Mr. Syme well knows; that, as he also knows, only one of the Examiners resident in Edinburgh belongs to this College; and that he has not a vestige of foundation for believing that even in that one the object is to injure the University of Edinburgh.

The Extra-Academical, or, as Mr. Syme calls it, the *Private* School of Medicine in Edinburgh, is infinitely more important than he would have your Lordship believe. If antiquity be an honour, that school may claim the distinction of having existed, not only "ever since the University of Edinburgh became a flourishing seat of medical instruction," but even before the latter was known as a medical school at all; and the very first Professor of Medicine within her walls, was chosen from the Extra-Academic Lecturers. "It must be confessed that the mere circumstance of being a private lecturer, is in itself no claim to respect or credit whatever," any more than the mere circumstance of being a professor; and it is equally true, that any Fellow of *The Royal College of Physicians*, or of *The Royal College of Surgeons*, may advertise a course of lectures, which, from the want of a peremptory monopoly, may, as well as his title, prove "empty and valueless" to him,—but I cannot acknowledge this as a proof that extra-academical lecturers endowed with attainments in their science, even though possessed of the unenviable "advantage of addressing smaller numbers" can, whether combined or singly, by claiming their just rank in public estimation, and by asserting their real importance, contaminate the place and

title of Professor, even although their position as efficient teachers should place them, as some have had the "hardihood" to assert, in the situation of rivals to the lecturers within the academic walls. The mere fact of being an extra-academic lecturer, is no proof of merit; but shall it be maintained by any rational being, that those who prove useful and acceptable teachers without the walls of the University, are to be forced by civic authority to occupy a lower rank in the public esteem, than those who *may* be safe from all endeavours to test their real value, behind intrenchments of privilege, and who *may* have attained their position by influences apart from personal merit,—by such means as political connexions, or mercantile speculation.

Now, my Lord, as to the origin of Queen's College. It was not the "contrivance" of "a few of the private lecturers," but sprung from an association of the whole. And as to the real purposes of the Institution, it should surely be a sufficient evidence that we had no desire to confound ourselves in the estimation of the public with the University, that we have advertised ourselves,—to use the words of Mr. Syme, contradicting, as these do, the absurd train of his reflections on the remark by the wag in the stage coach, "as constituting a *new* and important establishment in the Edinburgh Medical School,"—that we announced ourselves as simply Fellows of the Royal Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons, as issuing tickets qualifying for examination only at the Edinburgh College of Surgeons, the Universities of London, Oxford, Cambridge, St. Andrew's, and Aberdeen, the Royal Colleges of Surgeons of London and Dublin, the Apothecaries' Hall, the Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow, and the boards of the public services. So that even those who are "not conversant with *scholastic* designations and distinctions," if they could read, as I presume Mr. Syme's well-informed travelling companion could do, had no excuse for confounding Queen's College with the University. We have been at some expense, also, in printing and issuing

an explanation of our intentions, in thus uniting, of providing the extra-academical students with a museum, library, incentives to honourable competition, and to assiduous study. If we had any secret or malignant views, they must have been known to our late colleague, Dr. Simpson, now the Professor of Midwifery in the University; yet he honoured our late meeting with his presence, which surely he would not have done had the accusations against us been just.

I am utterly at a loss to conceive how Queen's College can be esteemed "one of the many adverse influences at present co-operating against the prosperity of the University." Queen's College does not aspire to conferring degrees in any department of science,—the Lecturers of that Institution are in no respect in a different position, as regards the examining boards, than each was previous to our union, or than those are who have preferred lecturing separately. We do not even aspire to be considered more "efficient teachers—more eminent in the profession—or on any account more entitled to respect," than our neighbours, as proved by our original and continued desire to associate them with us. We have, then, no exclusive system,—admission into our body is open to every respectable Lecturer on Medicine in the city,—we have not, in our titles, assumed any superiority over our brethren of the extra-academical school; but contenting ourselves with the humble appellation of Lecturers, we do not even affect the petty distinction of being "professors," so that this attractive title remains, as far as we are implicated, undimmed of any of that outward glitter on which Professor Syme confesses so much of his fortunes to depend. I entirely agree with Mr. Syme in thinking, that it is "the duty of the patrons to maintain, in public estimation, the place and title of Professor;" but I would ask him, if the patrons alone are to be guardians of his respectability? I would ask him, if nothing be required on his own part to prevent a further declension in those emoluments of wealth and fame, the diminution of which he laments? I ask him, if he has used well and wisely, the

dignity and influence conferred on him by those who raised him to the chair he occupies? I ask him, if his predecessor, who spent a long life in the respect of his fellow-men, ever impaired the dignity of his chair, or of himself, by indulging in harsh and injurious accusations? If he ever did anything having the tendency to raise his own character on the ruin of another's? For your Lordship would commit a great mistake if you supposed, that the only tendency of Mr. Syme's Letter is insultingly to dictate to you. It is calculated for another end, whether designedly or not, which cannot be overlooked. I shall leave your Lordship to guess the result to which I refer—a task which you will have no difficulty in accomplishing, when you learn that the letter addressed to you has been assiduously circulated among the students, on the very eve of an individual, connected with Queen's College, being about to enter on the same department of surgical instruction as that which Mr. Syme professes to teach,—an individual, whose popularity among the students in the Edinburgh School of Medicine, great as it is, is scarcely yet equal to his deserts as a scientific and honourable man, and whose opposition would assuredly be felt as formidable by any man. If a doubt of the injurious tendency to which I allude exist on your Lordship's mind, I refer you to that monstrous passage on the last page of Mr. Syme's Letter, which points at the individual in question. That Mr. Syme can do great injury to any Lecturer in the estimation of the students of this School, I do not believe. The spirit which animates his Letter to your Lordship has been too much the subject of amusement among them—(for the young too often laugh at what they should commiserate or condemn)—to be a formidable weapon against the humblest opponent.

In defending Queen's College, I have not conceived it requisite to dwell *seriatim* on the smaller matters laid to our charge,—such as the name of our College, and so forth.—I have been contented with showing, in all plainness, what means we have taken to let our real position be known, and how

inadequate are any means we possess to affect a single power or privilege of the University, even had we the inclination to do so. That such a feeling exists, that any hostility to the University is the animating principle of Queen's College, is as untrue as it would be ridiculous. For my own part, I declare it to be my belief, that, if Queen's College can ever affect the University in any way, it will be in the way of benefit. If Queen's College hold out any attraction to students at a distance, who might otherwise prefer the formidable opponents of the Edinburgh School in other parts of the United Kingdom, it can hardly be that some of these will not select one or more of the lecturers in the University—where eminent men are always to be found—in preference to those who may enjoy a less reputation beyond her walls. And here I cannot but advert to a statement made by Mr. Syme, calculated to give us the appearance of having arrayed against us his colleagues as well as himself. Of them he feels assured that they entertain no less than he does the deepest regret that the Patrons should have honoured our late meeting with their presence. Does Mr. Syme think the public as blinded by prejudice as he himself is,—that they should not have noticed that two of the *Professors* of the University were present at that meeting? Or, does Mr. Syme mean to convey to your Lordship the impression, that Sir George Ballingall and Dr. Simpson went to that meeting to keep the Patrons in check, or for the purpose of proving to the public how strongly they suspected that the whole affair was “eminently calculated to lower the respectability of the professorial character!” I am very sure that their sentiments differ widely from those of Mr. Syme, and that they discover in Queen's College nothing other than a meritorious and successful endeavour to raise the respectability, and to increase the usefulness, of the extra-academical school of Edinburgh. And I venture to assure your Lordship, that there are those in Queen's College, who,—though they cannot stoop that the University may seem all the loftier,—if they

conceived that body in any degree qualified to impair the reputation, or any one interest of the University, would at once abandon their present position. I cannot answer for all, because I do not know the sentiments of all, but I can answer for myself, and those among my colleagues with whom I am most intimate, that we regard the University as one of the greatest ornaments of our city and of our country,—that we have a just pride in contemplating the lustre of some names belonging to her,—that we lament to learn that her prosperity is not now so great as it once was,—and that we ascribe this decline to no deficiency of talent within her walls, but principally to the operation of evils which time must necessarily produce while her economy remains unchanged, but which a wise liberality might obviate,—and partly to the operation of causes which no legislative wisdom can prevent—the growth of *rival* institutions elsewhere, and the lessening number of students who devote themselves to medicine. It is obvious, that Mr. Syme thinks much less of his colleagues than we do. He has so poor an estimate of their powers and their popularity, that, in his opinion, a few of the private lecturers have only to call themselves a College,—and publish a particular form of programme,—and give a public meeting for the distribution of prizes, and such like,—when, lo! the University shakes to her centre,—and his legitimate honours topple from his brows.

I shall leave my respected friend the College Bailie, and the diligent newspapers, to submit to their miserable fate with what philosophy they may; but I cannot close this letter without expressing my deep concern, that, by the remotest hint, any man should have the audacity to charge on that eminent and excellent person who so admirably conducted the business of our meeting, unbecoming conduct in occupying the prominent place which he took. I know that he will feel very little concern, on his own account, at much graver imputations, couched in the terms and spirit of Mr. Syme's Letter. He knows enough of the human mind

to feel assured, that bitterness and passion are not the companions of truth and charity, nor the best auxiliaries to reflection; and he has doubtless rated the attack upon us and our doings at its small intrinsic value. But he may lament to observe, that, with their earliest knowledge of those sciences which he so nobly characterised, those who attend some classes in our University are in danger of drinking in lessons of dissingenuousness and jealousy, calculated to poison their peace, and to lower the tone of their characters.

But I have done, my Lord, earnestly trusting that Mr. Syme will commence a more favourable disposition towards Queen's College, by forgiving me what of stern expostulation I have been forced to address to him,—and will begin a new career of usefulness, by endeavouring to believe, that there are men who can be actuated in their conduct, both public and private, by other motives than “hostility” to what is good.

I have the honour to be,

My LORD PROVOST,

Your obedient servant,

WILLIAM HENDERSON,

Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians,
Lecturer on Pathology and Practice of
Medicine, &c. &c.

Edinburgh, 6th May 1840.