

Remarks relative to the proposed transfer and rebuilding of the Royal Infirmary on the site of the Charity Workhouse : in a letter to the Right Hon. the Lord Provost, from Sir George Ballingall ... January 24, 1843.

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REMARKS

RELATIVE TO THE

PROPOSED TRANSFER AND REBUILDING

OF THE

ROYAL INFIRMARY

ON THE SITE OF THE

CHARITY WORKHOUSE;

IN A LETTER TO THE

RIGHT HON. THE LORD PROVOST

FROM

SIR GEORGE BALLINGALL,

PROFESSOR OF MILITARY SURGERY IN THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH.

JANUARY 24. 1843.

EDINBURGH:

PRINTED BY NEILL & COMPANY.

MDCCCXLIII.

EDINBURGH, 31st January 1843.

The Magistrates and Council remitted the following Letter to the Treasurer's Committee, and, in the mean time, ordered it to be printed for their use.

SIMON CAMPBELL, *Preses*.

R35240

REMARKS, &c.

HERIOT ROW, 24th January 1843.

MY LORD,

My name having been incidentally introduced into one of the letters of "An Observer," relative to the proposed transfer and rebuilding of the Royal Infirmary on the site of the Charity Workhouse, I feel myself called on to come forward in explanation of my views of this matter, which, I am sorry to find, differ so much from those of some of my respected townsmen. I observe that a Committee has been appointed, on your Lordship's motion, to report on the subject; and my object in addressing your Lordship, is to deprecate any report being made in opposition to this proposal, without maturely considering the whole matter in all its bearings—as it affects the inmates of the Charity Workhouse—the patients in the Royal Infirmary—the Medical School and University—the community of Edinburgh—and the public at large.

I set out with the assumption that the Infirmary and the Charity Workhouse are both defective in construction for their respective purposes; the one not less so than the other. The Royal Infirmary, though a good one in its day, has fallen behind the progress of improvement in hospital-building which has taken place within the last fifty years, and will now stand but an unfavourable comparison with some of the county hospitals in England, or even in our own country. The Charity Workhouse, like the Royal Infirmary and other buildings of a similar date, is essentially defective in the lowness of its ceilings; the due elevation of which is the only means of giving

sufficient breathing space to individuals accumulated in crowded apartments. I was astonished, a few days ago, on visiting this Institution in company with my colleague Dr Watson, to find that it contained no less than *four hundred* inmates ; being more crowded than any barrack-room I have almost ever entered, and nearly as much so as the most miserable transport I have ever been on board of. This building will, I apprehend, stand but an unfavourable comparison even with the Union Workhouses recently erected in England and Ireland ; of which, indeed, I have but a limited knowledge, but of which I have not been led to form a favourable opinion.

Now, my Lord, as respects the first interest concerned, that of the inmates of the Poor House, I would observe, that, on looking to the comfort and wellbeing of this class of people, you have a right to compare the accommodation which you can afford them with that to which they have been accustomed in their own homes ; and is there one in twenty of them who would not be benefited by a transfer from his own residence in the Cowgate or the adjoining closes, to a moderately filled ward in the Royal Infirmary ? In most instances, it would be like going from a hovel to a palace. I do not mean to allege that in point of *site* the Charity Workhouse is not superior to the Royal Infirmary ; but I mean to say distinctly and advisedly, that, taking the *site* and the *accommodation* together, the poor people would be infinitely better accommodated in the Royal Infirmary than in their present quarters. On this, however, and other points connected with the present question, it will be for your Lordship to consider whether the opinions of the Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons ought not to be sought.

As respects the patients in the Royal Infirmary, again, here the most important, and indeed the only consideration, is the *site* and *construction* of a building most conducive to the cure of disease. I am not so sanguine as to expect that, by *any* change of site or construction, you can altogether ward off the evils incident to large hospitals. I am too well acquainted with the sentiments of Pouteau, of Pringle, of Jackson, and of John Bell, to suppose that we can ever obviate entirely the

consequences of the “mauvais air qu'on respire dans les grands hospitaux,” or that we can prevent the occasional occurrence of hospital gangrene. I know, in the words of Mr Bell, that “this infection of the hospital is the most irresistible of all.” “There is no hospital,” says he, “however small, airy, or well regulated, where this epidemic ulcer is not to be found at times; and then no operation dare be performed!—every cure stands still!—every wound becomes a sore!—and every sore is apt to run into gangrene.” I entertain no such utopian notion, as to suppose that the evils here portrayed are to be altogether obviated; but I hold that, in so far as they are to be *lessened* in their disastrous consequences, or in the frequency of their recurrence, by the reconstruction and improvement of our hospital buildings, it is our duty to do so. I ask, in short, in the most enlarged spirit of philanthropy, whether it is our duty (if a choice must be made) to give the superior site and accommodation to those overtaken by poverty and advanced life, however hard their ills may be, or to those who are struggling with both poverty and disease—who are pining under a wasting hectic, and sinking under the oppressive and noxious atmosphere engendered by their own sores—an atmosphere reacting injuriously both on their own constitutions and the constitutions of those lying contiguous to them.

As this question affects the University and the Medical School of Edinburgh, I have only to observe, that it appears to me one of the most important which has been agitated in my time; for while no one can estimate more highly than I do the advantages which are here afforded to young men in prosecuting their Medical studies—in our Museums, our Botanic Garden, our Libraries, and our various professional Societies—I hold that one of the most essential requisites for them is a pattern Hospital; and I would not, if I could help it, have any young man to go from this School with the expectation that he is to see a better Hospital in Great Britain, or in Europe.

Upon the bearing of this subject, as it concerns the community of Edinburgh, it would be superfluous to dwell. Your Lordship and the Council have never been insensible to the

importance of your University, and your Medical School, as they affect this community.

In looking to the interests of the public at large as involved in this matter, this will be best estimated by reference to the number of patients treated in the Royal Infirmary (no fewer than 3530 during the bygone year), and to the number of Medical gentlemen educated here, either for the public service or for private practice at home and abroad. This is a point of view, in which the rebuilding of the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh has ever appeared to me an object not undeserving of the attention and patronage of the Government of the country ; and were our Scotch Members of Parliament to see it in this light, I have no doubt that the same public spirit, and enlarged views, which have procured grants for our University, and for our College of Surgeons, would also obtain for us assistance in this great national object.

This leads me to say a word, in conclusion, on the *financial* part of the question.—I purposely avoid, at present, entering into *details* upon this, and many other points ; but your Lordship is aware that, by the bequest of the late Mr Chalmers, a sum of L.30,000 is at the disposal of the Faculty of Advocates, for erecting an Hospital for the *sick* and *hurt*,—and I have strong reason to believe that there is no serious—no legal obstacle, to this sum being appropriated to rebuilding a part of the Royal Infirmary, under Chalmers's name, provided the Trustees shall be convinced that this is for the public good. It cannot, however, be applied to the rebuilding of the Charity Workhouse, or any part thereof ; nor is it improbable, that if not secured to the Royal Infirmary, it will be appropriated to the erection of a building at a distance from the city, beyond the precincts of the Medical School, and consequently injurious to it, by withdrawing a certain number of patients from our field of observation. With the assistance of Chalmers's bequest, I firmly believe that the rebuilding of the Royal Infirmary is practicable ; while the rebuilding of the Charity Workhouse (however desirable that may now be considered, or may hereafter become) will not probably be listened to, so long as the superior accommodation of the Royal Infirmary can be obtained

for its inmates. The building of a Children's Hospital or School adjoining the present Workhouse, is a measure of which I cannot see the good policy, so long as there is no prospect of being able to renovate the main building; and the necessary assessment for this *minor* object, will perhaps be less readily submitted to than that for transferring the Workhouse to the Royal Infirmary,—where we have, in the old High School, a building already existing, admirably adapted to the accommodation of the children.

The question, in short, seems to be,—will the Managers of the Charity Workhouse, by a limited and exclusive view of the matter, stand in the way of obtaining Chalmers's bequest for the Royal Infirmary, and doing a great public good? Or will they, in a more liberal and enlightened spirit, become parties to an arrangement by which the Poor, the objects of their especial care—the Sick resorting to the Royal Infirmary—and the Medical School of Edinburgh, will be at once benefited? With what good grace will they come upon the inhabitants (it may not be many years hence) for an assessment to rebuild the Charity Workhouse, if, from an overstrained or mistaken sense of duty, they fastidiously reject the superior accommodation now proposed for the poor?

Your Lordship, while stating, very properly, that you will be no party to any plan detrimental to the interests of the Poor, has refrained from pledging yourself to any particular view of this important question, and I could wish that others had been equally cautious. I have reason to suspect, however, that some of the parties concerned have hastily wedded themselves to a particular view of the subject, without considering it in all its bearings. In conversing accidentally this forenoon with one of the Poorhouse authorities, I asked him what space he thought a man should have to breathe in, in a Poorhouse or Hospital? The answer I received was one which I can scarcely look upon as a bad joke, one which I have no right to consider as a sneer at my question; but one which afforded me a convincing proof that the gentleman alluded to (a most benevolent person) had never considered the subject in this important point of view. Let it be shewn that the poor will be injured by the proposed

change, or that it is impracticable from want of funds, and then those who think as I do on the subject will be satisfied, and will be compelled, however reluctantly, to abandon the proposal; but from the occurrence above mentioned, and from many other accidental conversations with different individuals, I am led to fear that the project will be thrown overboard, without receiving that deliberate consideration which its important bearings so pre-eminently demand. It is with a view, if possible, to prevent this, that I have been tempted to intrude upon your Lordship with this long letter,—a letter written hastily, at some personal inconvenience, under the pressure of family affliction, and therefore I hope, entitled to your Lordship's indulgent allowance for its imperfections.

I have the honour to be,

My LORD,

Your Lordship's very obedient humble Servant,

GEO. BALLINGALL.

The Right Honourable }
The LORD PROVOST of Edinburgh. }