

**The inaugural address to the College of Dentists of England / delivered by the President, James Robinson.**

**Contributors**

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*London*

# INAUGURAL

COLLEGE OF DENTISTS

DELIVERED BY

JAMES

Feb

[From The Quarterly Journal]

Gentlemen: In doing me the  
of England, you have conferred upon  
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talented vice-presidents, council, &  
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free and open discussion. In open  
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THE  
**INAUGURAL ADDRESS**

TO THE  
**COLLEGE OF DENTISTS OF ENGLAND,**

DELIVERED BY THE PRESIDENT,

JAMES ROBINSON.

February 14, 1857.

[From *The Quarterly Journal of Dental Science*, April, 1857.]

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GENTLEMEN: In electing me the first President of the College of Dentists of England, you have conferred upon me the highest and most distinguished honour it was in your power to bestow. The responsibility attached to the office is indeed great; but I cheerfully accept it, because, limited though my individual abilities are, I have the fullest confidence that, acting with your talented vice-presidents, council, and secretaries, I shall be able to do good service in the promotion of the all-important object which our profession has determined to achieve. Gentlemen, at this, the Inaugural Meeting of the members of the College of Dentists, permit me to congratulate you on the fact that all our proceedings have been *public*; that the movement in which we are engaged has at no period been sectional; that the entire profession was invited to join in it before your council was even formed, much less invested with power; and that, therefore, the gentlemen whom you have chosen to conduct the affairs of your college during the first year of its existence are, in their official capacity, the elected representatives of the dentists of England. From the moment of our starting up to the present we have had the advantage of free and open discussion. In open assembly, the general laws for the regulation of your body were passed, and your council, secretaries, and other officers



elected. Thus have you disarmed suspicion, and day by day gained fresh adherents to your intelligible, and let me add, incontrovertible principles. Some few of our brother practitioners may differ in opinion with the great body of the profession, but I have reason to believe that we have the goodwill even of those dissentients. At all events, we shall endeavour to deserve it.

No one has attempted to deny that the position of our profession, whether in its relation to the other branches of the healing art, or the public generally, or as affecting our own *status*, was anything but satisfactory. Were it necessary to adduce proof of this, we have it in the large number of practitioners who have sent in their adhesion to the laws which are to regulate our practice, and bind together the members of our college. Those adhesions show the anxiety of the dentists of this country to attach themselves to an institution based, as this is, upon sound and liberal principles, namely, "self-government and the education of our own members." We have the highest respect for the College of Physicians and an equal respect for the College of Surgeons, but we think that Dentists can best be educated and examined by a College of Dentists; at the same time that a prescribed course of independent instruction will be sure to elevate our profession intellectually and socially. A few months since, and we were not a recognised professional community. We cannot much wonder at this when we consider that we were without a head, without a governing body, without laws to guide our practice; but already things have so changed, that our claims to rank with the other branches of the medical profession are universally acknowledged. This, gentlemen, is to be ascribed to the movement on which we have entered, and to the publicity of all our preparatory proceedings. The press has put forward our claims to be recognised as zealous cultivators of our art, and, therefore, entitled to that rank which public opinion has conceded to us. Gentlemen, although requested by the council to prepare an address to the members of the college, it is not my intention to trespass on your patience by giving you an elaborate history of dental science; but I shall, with your kind permission, concisely sketch the progress of the dental art, with a view of placing before you our position as a co-ordinate branch of the healing craft. To do this, it is not necessary to determine the exact date in which the practice of medicine was first known. Like many other arts, its origin is involved in considerable



obscurity; but this we know, that, at a very early age indeed, the power to heal the sick, mitigate the pangs of suffering humanity, and stand between disease and death, was esteemed to be a god-like attribute. Much has been said, and probably more written, respecting the antiquity of medicine. Now, gentlemen, I claim precisely the same antiquity for dental art. The ancients, who inclined to mythological rather than to natural causes, affirmed the science of medicine to be a divine emanation, and impersonated it, first in Apollo, and next to *Æsculapius*. Thus its early history is mixed up with mythology and poetry. Although it is impossible to imagine a state of primitive society so happy as to be free from pain and disease, yet we find that in proportion as people advanced towards civilisation, and abandoned their more simple habits of living for idleness and luxury, so did disease in its various forms call into requisition the skill of the physician. Those same habits of refinement and luxury, and the consequent attention to personal appearance, must have rendered the practice of the dental art one of considerable importance even at a very early period of the world's history. According to Herodotus, there was a subdivision of medical science, and no practitioner was allowed to practise any but his own peculiar branch. Thus, some were oculists; others attended solely to diseases of the head; and, others again, to those of the teeth. It is not, however, till the time of Hippocrates that we meet with any distinct notice of diseases of the teeth. This appears the more extraordinary, as the significance of these organs—to say nothing of their useful or ornamental functions—was regarded by the ancient Egyptians in a very remarkable manner. One of their most severe and degrading punishments consisted in the abstraction of a front tooth. There can, therefore, be, I think, little doubt that the manufacture of artificial teeth and other branches of the dental art were practised at a much earlier date than that of which we have the first mention in history. The loss of a front tooth, whether by disease or otherwise, would, during the existence of that Egyptian punishment, have given rise to unpleasant suspicions; and it may be presumed that every exertion would have been made to supply the deficiency. Belzoni and others discovered rudely manufactured teeth in the sarcophagi of the Egyptians. Again, as regards the use of gold leaf, Sir Gardiner Wilkinson observes as a singular fact, that the Egyptians stopped teeth with gold—a method of stopping no



very long practised in Europe. Proof of this has been obtained by the examination of some mummies from Thebes. We have historical evidence that the general appearance of the teeth, and their diseases, attracted considerable attention amongst the Greeks and the Romans. The wearing of artificial teeth formed the subject of satire for some of the poets. I could even, if necessary, enumerate many other circumstances to show that dentistry engaged as large a share of the attention of the ancients as did any other branch of the healing art—a circumstance to be attributed to that subdivision of medical practice to which I have before referred. Hippocrates and Galen mention sundry electuaries for beautifying the teeth, but describe nothing that may be called the proper art and science of dentistry. Albucases, an Arabian physician, who lived in the early part of the eleventh century, wrote on diseases of the teeth, and gave drawings of a number of instruments then in use for extracting, scraping, and other dental operations. He, moreover, gives instructions as to how teeth should be extracted, and directs that, if hollow, they be stopped with cotton—refers to filing teeth, and to fastening loose ones with *gold thread*. *Ætius* details a variety of applications for removing teeth without an operation; and it is worthy of observation that one of those applications actually contains red arsenic. This substance, as you are all aware, was introduced into our practice only a few years ago as an escharotic for destroying the dental pulp previously to stopping!

“ We think our fathers fools, so wise we grow,  
Our wiser sons, no doubt, will think us so.”

The red arsenic was supposed, gentlemen, to be a modern discovery; but it appears to have been very well known to some of those old gentlemen whom we, in our wisdom, are sometimes disposed to think very lightly of. However, giving the ancients all the credit to which they are entitled, it is not at all extraordinary that some of their opinions should be useless for our purposes. They had not the advantage of that mighty power—the microscope. At least no mention is made of microscopic investigations in those times to which I have been alluding. It is somewhat difficult to appreciate the observations of Hippocrates, who describes the teeth as glutinous extracts, from which the fatty matter has been burnt up by heat, and affirms that they are harder than the other bones, because they have no heat in them. Aristotle, who has some



excellent observations respecting the teeth of men and animals, declares them to be the only bones which grow through the whole of life, observing that if they did not, they would soon be worn away by attrition. He adds, that the growth is manifest in those teeth that have lost their corresponding opposites in the other jaw—referring, of course, to the elongation of teeth arising from a want of an opposing force. By these few observations from ancient authors, I think I have clearly shown the antiquity of our calling; the value and importance of the teeth, as adjuncts to health and appearance, and the attention bestowed upon them at the earliest periods of medical history. I shall, however, proceed, and bring my observations somewhat nearer to our own time.

At the end of the 16th century, the dental art began to receive that peculiar attention to which, from its importance, difficulty, and general usefulness, it is eminently entitled. About that time there were no less than thirty-eight treatises published on the subject; and although their usefulness has been greatly diminished by discoveries since made, still they are highly interesting as evidence that dental surgery was in the 16th century considered of very great importance, and that time and experience only were required to raise it to its proper station in medical art. The first attempt to classify diseases of the teeth was, in the 18th century, made by M. Fouchard, who has justly been denominated the father of dental science. Previously to his time, the practitioners appear to have merely considered the teeth in their mechanical arrangement, taking little or no account of them as complex organic structures, entering by their own vitality into the formation of the living body. M. Fouchard had not only the merit of directing attention to the construction and separate treatment of the teeth, but he also pointed out the indications which, in common with the adjacent parts, they furnish of the general state of health. It was, unquestionably, a most important advancement in dental science to demonstrate that the teeth afford an indication, not merely of the apparent, but also of the innate and fundamental constitution of individuals. It was, however, only after 36 years, of close study that Haller published, in 1747, his remarkable work on *Physiological and Pathological Science*, the results of actual observation of the laws that govern the growth and decay of living bodies. In the meantime, rapid and valuable improvements were being made in the mechanical department of our profession. So



much had the subject grown in consideration, that by the end of the 18th century, no less than 158 works had been published on the subject, including those of Malpighi, Purkenji, Retyius, Muller, &c. The first work that appeared in England, in a popular form, was by Berdmore, and was published in 1770. In 1772, the great John Hunter did not consider it *derogatory* to his position and reputation to give the profession the result of his dental investigations, in his celebrated work on the *Natural History of the Teeth*. This was followed by the *Inaugural Dissertation on the Structure of the Teeth of Men and Animals*, by Robert Blake, in 1798. Time will not permit me, on this occasion, to enumerate the various valuable contributions to dental science that have since been published; but I may, without wishing to lessen the merits of other gentlemen, mention the names of Fox, Bell, Goodsir, Nasmyth, Tomes, and Professor Owen, as those of men who have become prominently identified with our profession, and who stand pre-eminent as physiologists and pathologists. I must also direct your attention to some of our Transatlantic brethren, who have likewise done much in the walks of dental physiology and pathology, and dental mechanism.

And here I would ask you to bear in mind that the dentists of the United States have, for some years, held, as a body, a very different *status* to that occupied by the dentists of this country; but what is still more worthy of your remembrance is this—for us, hopeful fact—that those who first attempted to found a College of Dentists in America, had to encounter precisely the same amount of difficulty as that which presented itself to the gentlemen who commenced our present undertaking; yet, in spite of all obstacles, educational colleges for teaching the dental science, both surgical and mechanical, have been firmly established in America—established, be it understood, in entire independence of any college of physicians or surgeons. These dental colleges not only have an independent curriculum of special study, but, connected with them, are dental hospitals and dispensaries, which are generally attached to the colleges. The pupils are systematically taught every branch of the dental art, by a course of study that embraces dental anatomy, physiology, special pathology and therapeutics; chemistry and metallurgy, the principles and practice of dental surgery, operative dentistry, and dental mechanism. Having gone through the



prescribed course of study, the pupils are examined by the professors in each department, and if the examinations be passed in a satisfactory manner, a college diploma is granted, which authorises the holder to assume the title of "Doctor of Dental Surgery." A vast deal has been said about our wishing to adopt the *modus operandi* of the dentists of the United States—that which I have just briefly described. Now, gentlemen, I confess my inability to perceive how we lower our dignity, either individually or collectively, by endeavouring to form an institution similar to those which have not only fulfilled the object for which they were more immediately designed, but have raised the position of the dental profession generally. It appears to me that ours is not so different from every other profession, as that we do not possess within our own body sufficient knowledge of the theory and practice of our art, to enable us to educate and examine our own pupils, as dentists, without having a recourse to a college whose province it is to grant diplomas to *pure* surgeons only. In my opinion, *we, the dentists of England*, can ourselves best carry out the great objects which all legitimate members of the profession have in view; and these I may in a very few words sum up. They are, to raise our *status*—to give professional skill its rightful pre-eminence, and to crush that *charlatanism* which has, in too many instances, succeeded in preying upon the public health and purse, under cover of a pretended knowledge of the theory and practice of dentistry. Unquestionably, the dental art has progressed in the United States. This may, in no small degree, be attributed to the energy of character for which Brother Jonathan is so renowned; but it must principally be attributed to that absence of small jealousies and invidious distinctions in reference to less fortunate brother practitioners, which allows of a free communication of ideas amongst all members of the profession, and which has brought to a successful accomplishment, the work of establishing associations for the protection and furtherance of the common interests.

The present movement arose from a conviction on the minds of many dental practitioners, that the time had arrived when the study of our science should be put upon the footing which ought to be occupied by a study which had engaged the attention of Hippocrates, five hundred years before the Christian era, and has ever since found numerous advocates, including the modern Hippocrates, the renowned John Hunter. When the movement was originated, we really



had not the *locus standi* of a recognised profession. Neither had we any common bond to link us together for the advancement of the dental art. Each member did the best he could to further his own ends, and viewed the exertions of his brotherhood through a contracted medium, if not with the jealous feelings of envious rivalry. But what a change has already been effected! What a noble spirit of liberality towards each other now characterises our meetings! We no longer fear the wholesome competition that is sure to arise from the elevation of our profession. Liberal fundamental laws have been laid down, and a liberal interpretation has been given to these laws, in order that no dentist really qualified and willing to uphold the respectability and dignity of his profession may be excluded. There have been no nice lines of demarcation—no paltry distinction; and hence it is that our advance has been rapid, and that we have obtained the support of the great body of the profession.

I feel that it would be unseemly in me to conclude my inaugural address without, in your name and my own, paying the slight tribute of acknowledgment to the gentlemen who were the promoters of this great undertaking, Messrs. Rymer, Hill, Mackenzie, Perkins, and the provisional committee generally. I offer them my own and, I think I may add, your sincere thanks for their indefatigable exertions, and for the zealous and judicious manner in which they brought together so large a number of our hitherto divided profession, and thus form the nucleus of the present society. To members and associates I would express a hope that they will, one and all, prepare interesting papers on professional matters, so that we may all be benefitted, enlightened, and improved by associating together. The gentlemen who have so kindly consented to deliver before us the preliminary course of lectures for the present session, I thank most sincerely; and I earnestly commend those lectures to the members, associates and pupils, as being in every way worthy of their attentive study. If diligently attended to from the commencement, they will be found to form a very solid foundation for those studies which are to follow, and which are intended to give such an elevation to our professional character as shall command, for the diploma of the College of the Dentists of England, the respect of this, and every other country wherein dental science is practised.

Dr. ROBERTS, of Edinburgh, then rose and said: Gentlemen, allow me to propose, which I do with very great pleasure, a cordial vote of thanks to our President, for the valuable, the interesting, and the eloquent address which he has just delivered [hear, hear, and loud cheers]. To that able address we have all listened with the greatest pleasure; and I am sure you will agree with me, that it deserves our warm acknowledgments [renewed cheers]. You will also feel that Mr. Robinson merits our best thanks for the great energy he has displayed, and the influence he has brought to bear on the establishment of the College of Dentists of England [hear, hear, and applause].

Mr. BATE, of Brighton, seconded the motion, which passed with acclamation.

The PRESIDENT returned thanks; and read a list of the different introductory lectures to be delivered in the ensuing session. The announcement of these lectures was received with loud cheers.

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