

A brief memoir of George Birkbeck, M.D. ... : read before the Medical Society of London, January 17, 1842 / by Henry Clutterbuck.

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3500
Mr. Luke.

With the Author's Regard

A

BRIEF MEMOIR

OF

GEORGE BIRKBECK, M.D.,

MEMBER OF THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS, LONDON; AND
FORMERLY FELLOW OF THE MEDICAL SOCIETY, &c. &c.

READ BEFORE

The Medical Society of London,

JANUARY 17, 1842:

BY

HENRY CLUTTERBUCK, M.D.,

THE PRESIDENT.

LONDON:

S. HIGHLEY, 32, FLEET STREET.

1842.

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TO THE
VICE-PRESIDENTS, TREASURER, AND OTHER OFFICERS
OF THE
MEDICAL SOCIETY OF LONDON,
AND TO
THE SOCIETY IN GENERAL,

THE FOLLOWING
BRIEF ACCOUNT OF ONE OF THEIR MOST DISTINGUISHED MEMBERS

Is Dedicated,

AS A
TOKEN OF RESPECT AND GRATEFUL RECOLLECTION,

BY
THE AUTHOR.

OF THE

THE MEDICAL SOCIETY OF LONDON

AND THE

THE MEDICAL SOCIETY OF LONDON

OF THE

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OF THE

A BRIEF MEMOIR.

IT is at all times a grateful, though a painful task, to commemorate departed worth. Such feelings are greatly enhanced where the object of them is rendered dear to us by long and familiar intercourse; and such was the case with regard to the highly distinguished individual, who is the subject of the following brief remarks: from his earliest appearance, as a public character in this metropolis, till almost the hour that the hand of death fell on him, I had the happiness—(as I cannot but deem it)—of possessing his uninterrupted friendship, and his fullest professional confidence. We were associated in office for a period of nearly thirty years, during which, not a single unkindly feeling, that I am aware of, existed between us. Indeed, his mild and amiable manners, not less than his upright and honorable principles, rendered it almost impossible that such should be the case.

Dr. Birkbeck was born at Settle, in Yorkshire, in the year 1776; and after the usual course of scholastic education, commenced his studies at the University of Edinburgh, where he took his doctor's degree in physic, in the year 1799; the title of his *Inaugural Dissertation* being *Tentamen physiologico-chemicum DE SANGUINE*.

Almost immediately after graduation, he was invited to offer himself as a candidate for the Professorship of *Natural Philosophy*, in the *Andersonian Institution* Glasgow, an office to which he succeeded on the resignation of his friend Dr. Garnett, and the duties of which he fulfilled to the entire satisfaction of the trustees, as well as of his numerous hearers.

The *Andersonian Institution* had been founded a few years previously, by Mr. Anderson, the distinguished *Professor of Natural Philosophy* in the *Glasgow University*; his object being, as stated in his will, to diffuse, by means of lectures among the educated members of the community, both male and female, a general knowledge of the principles of science.

Dr. Birkbeck's ardour in the cause was not to be restrained within such narrow limits. He at once determined to institute a gratuitous course of *philosophical lectures* for the especial use of the uneducated classes—

persons engaged in the actual exercise of the *mechanic arts*, and whose humble station in early life had precluded them from almost a possibility of acquiring scientific knowledge. These lectures abounded in simple but striking experiments, and were delivered in the most familiar language, so as to adapt them to the taste and capacity of such an audience. In this way, he hoped to rouse a taste in the uneducated classes, for rational amusement, as well as instruction; with the additional, and almost necessary effect, of weaning them from vicious habits, and frivolous pursuits. His success in this great undertaking was complete, and called forth the most grateful acknowledgments from the parties he thus designed to benefit.

Hence it appears, that Dr. Birkbeck was the first to establish a *Mechanics' Class*, to which the attendance of the *operatives*, as they are now termed, was especially invited, and a foundation thus laid for the various *Mechanics' Institutions*, which have since been formed in the metropolis, as well as most of the manufacturing districts of the kingdom.

Dr. Birkbeck quitted Glasgow in 1804, and after having delivered lectures to admiring audiences at *Birmingham*, *Liverpool*, and *Hull*, he removed finally to London, where he may be said to have commenced his professional career in 1805.

In the year 1823, he took a leading part in the formation of the *London Mechanics' Institution*, to the support of which he contributed most liberally, both by his purse and personal exertions. It is gratifying to be able to add, that the members of the *Institution*, individually and collectively, have done him, as well as themselves, honour, by a testimonial expressive of the highest possible respect and affection for the memory of their deceased patron and friend.

He was likewise connected with various other *literary* and *scientific* societies; in some cases, as their presiding officer, and affording to all his powerful aid and support.

That the *moral*, as well as the *intellectual* character of the industrious classes, and indeed of the whole community, has been greatly elevated by the establishments now mentioned, can admit of no doubt; while it is no less clear, that a very large share of the good thus effected, is to be ascribed to his individual exertions.

But it is not my purpose to descant at length upon Dr. Birkbeck's merits, as a patron of the useful and mechanical arts; this has been done by others more competent to the task. My more immediate object is, to speak of him in his *professional* capacity, and more especially in relation to this Society, of which he was for many years

an active member, taking a warm interest in most of its proceedings. He was one of those who opposed themselves to the attempt that was made to monopolize, and perpetuate in the person of a single individual, the chief honours of the Society. Their efforts were unavailing at the moment, though they afterwards proved successful. Their failure, however, was the immediate cause of the secession of a considerable number of the most able and influential members of the Society; and thus led to the first formation of the *Medico-Chirurgical Society*, that has since done so much honour to its founders. Dr. Birkbeck, as one of the opponents of the abuses in the old system, joined the new Institution; though he still maintained his connexion with the parent society, and that for several years; until, indeed, the declining state of his health and strength, compelled him to withdraw from many of his *literary* and *scientific* engagements.

Dr. Birkbeck was for many years one of the Physicians to the *General Dispensary*, in Aldersgate Street,—the earliest institution of the kind in London,—and which was set on foot principally by the late Dr. Hulme of the Charter-house, and Dr. Lettsom, to whose munificence the *Medical Society* is so greatly indebted. His connexion with the *Dispensary* continued for more than a quarter of a century, indeed till within the last three or four years, when, in consequence of the mercenary conduct of the

Treasurer and Committee, in determining to maintain the highly-objectionable practice of *virtually* putting up to sale, as it were, all the most efficient offices of the charity, the whole of the medical establishment,—including the patron and president, his Royal Highness the Duke of Sussex,—down to the apothecary's assistant, resigned their situations in disgust.

The last time of Dr. Birkbeck's appearance in this room, was on the memorable occasion of receiving, in common with the other officers of the *Dispensary*, (and of whom, I am proud to say, I was one,) the thanks of the *Society* for the stand they had recently made against the sordid conduct that led to the dissolution of their connexion with that Institution. The compliment thus paid them, was subsequently much enhanced, by similar votes of thanks from various other *medical associations*, as well as respectable individuals, both in the metropolis and different parts of the kingdom.

In his *professional* character, Dr. Birkbeck's claim to notice was of the highest stamp. Of this, I consider myself entitled to judge in some degree, from my almost daily communication with him for a long series of years. Acute in observation, discriminating in judgment, patient and cautious in prescribing and administering remedies, he was, as might be expected, eminently successful in

practice ; thereby, as well as by suavity of demeanour, ensuring the entire confidence of his patients. He was thoroughly imbued with a knowledge of the *principles* and *practice* of our art, as at present subsisting ; and, had his time and talents been directed *exclusively*, or even *principally*, to the study of medicine, he would unquestionably have enlarged the boundaries of the science ; and thus have contributed to its extrication from some part at least of the obscurity, in which it is at present but too deeply involved.

As a man, Dr. Birkbeck was simple, unassuming, and artless in his manners ; of unbounded benevolence, and inflexible integrity. He was beloved, as well as esteemed, by a large circle of private friends—admired, respected, and lamented, by multitudes of all ranks, who had profited by his instruction, or by his benevolence ;—and, I may add, he was almost adored in his domestic circle.

Such was our lamented friend, whose memory will live in the grateful recollection of future ages.

I cannot close this sketch without adverting to his bodily sufferings, which were severe and protracted, though his habits and modes of life were simple, and even *abstemious*,—almost, I might say, to an *extreme*. Yet this

was not sufficient to exempt him from the inroads of disease, and that, sometimes, of an active and even highly inflammatory character. At an early period of our acquaintance, I found him suffering greatly from *dyspepsia*, as it is termed, with a jaundiced state of the skin. These, as was then the fashion, were referred, by his professional advisers, to a *torpid* state of the *liver*. For this, *calomel* and the *blue pill* had been freely administered, on account of their supposed *specific* powers in such affections. To these were added, *stimulant* and *tonic* remedies. The result, however, was not such as to justify the practice; the disease altogether was rather aggravated, than relieved. A more minute examination of the different symptoms, led us to suspect, that the *liver*, instead of being in a *torpid* state, as had been imagined, was, in reality, suffering from *slow* or *chronic* inflammation. This seemed probable, from the dull pain produced by pressure over the region of the *liver*; and, still more, by the dry and coated state of the tongue; with other febrile symptoms. Acting upon this presumption, a simple *antiphlogistic* plan of treatment was resorted to, including a few small bleedings from the arm. The blood taken exhibited the strongest characters of inflammation. By perseverance in this course, health was gradually restored. He was ever afterwards an advocate for the lancet, in *this*, as well as many other diseases, where he had not previously been favorable to its use.

From this time he continued to enjoy good general health, till about four years ago, when he suffered severely from catarrh of a highly inflammatory description, and which confined him to the house for several months. It yielded, however, at length, to bloodletting, and the ordinary antiphlogistic treatment.

About a year and a half ago, he first complained of an irritable state of the bladder, with enlargement of the *prostate gland*, attended with the usual distressing symptoms, and from which he continued to suffer most acutely till the powers of life were gradually exhausted. He died on the 1st of December, 1841, retaining the perfect possession of his mental faculties to almost the last moment of his existence.

THE Society will, perhaps, indulge me with their attention for a few minutes longer, while I revert to the abstemious habits of our departed friend. This I am induced to do, for the purpose of remarking, that a *rigid abstinence*, in regard to either food or drink, is not, *generally speaking*, advisable. It is no argument to say, that *intoxicating drinks* are unnatural, and therefore injurious to the human frame. It should be borne in mind, that ours is, in a great degree, a state of *artificial* existence; and that *Nature* supplies us with hardly anything perfect, or that may not be, and is not, in fact, improved by the art of man. We inhabit a climate by no means the best accommodated to our wants; exposed to various powerful causes of disease; and without natural means of defence against the inclemencies of season and weather. *Nature* does not even supply us with adequate or proper food, unless herself stimulated by artificial means. There seems, therefore, to be no reason (*à priori* at least) for abstaining altogether from artificial excitement. *Experience*, indeed, would seem to prove the contrary, and ought to be our chief or only guide in these matters. *Experience* has sufficiently shown, I think, that the diseases peculiarly incident to cold and variable climates, like ours,—such, for instance, as *pulmonary affections*, and *scrofula*, in all its variety of forms,—(which, together, constitute the

great mass of our prevailing diseases)—are most effectually prevented by what is termed a *generous diet*, both in respect to *food* and *drinks*, with the addition of artificial clothing; while, in the treatment of such diseases, when they actually take place, the same general principles require to be kept in view.

The value of *temperance*—another word for *moderation*—cannot, certainly, be too highly estimated; yet it does not follow, that an entire abstinence, either from *animal* food, or *intoxicating* liquors, is, generally speaking, desirable or useful in such a climate as the one we live in. On the contrary, observation would lead me to believe, that what is usually termed *good living*—(by which I would be understood to mean a *moderate* indulgence in the pleasures of the table) conduces both to the attainment of vigorous health, and to the prevention of disease. The body, when in health and strength, appears to be more steady in its movements, and less readily disturbed by external causes, than when debilitated by privation, or other means. We may the more readily admit this, when we advert to the numerous instances that fall under almost daily observation, of individuals who live to a great age, with an extraordinary exemption from disease, whose habits of life are nevertheless far from temperate.

This *comfortable* doctrine, as it must be allowed to be, is

not (merely on that account) to be condemned; nor will it, I trust, be repudiated by my present hearers. For myself at least, I confess I am not of the *ascetic* tribe of philosophers, who denounce, as sinful, everything in the shape of *enjoyment*; and who inculcate the notion, that the only path to Heaven is thickly strewn with thorns and briers.

FINIS.