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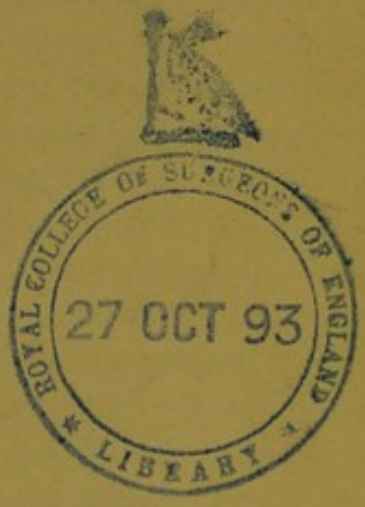
GEORGE JAMES GUTHRIE:

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.

BY

MR. P. MACLEOD YEARSLEY.



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GEORGE JAMES GUTHRIE,

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.

By Mr. P. MACLEOD YEARSLEY.

(The substance of this sketch was read before the Guthrie Society on June 9th, 1892).

The individual of whose life the following sketch is, I fear, only too inadequate, was one of the most illustrious surgeons ever attached to the Westminster Hospital, and the Institution should be ever proud of its connection with one who not only served his country with a devotion and activity difficult to surpass, but so changed the whole subject of military surgery as to cause foreign powers to adopt his principles. But however prominent the public services he rendered to the cause of humanity, it is his earnest endeavours for the good of our hospital and medical school that especially draw us towards him, and a few minutes given to the consideration of his career cannot be without advantage.

George James Guthrie was born on May 1st, 1785, at Wakefield. His grandfather, a Scotchman, fell fighting bravely for his King at the Battle of the Boyne, and his son, Guthrie's father, served as a surgeon in the Royal Navy. On his retirement he succeeded to the business of his maternal uncle, also a doctor, at the latter's death. It sounds strange to our ears that this business, by which a fortune was made, was established for the sale of an improved "*Emplastrum Lithargyri.*" Unfortunately for the subject of this sketch, old Mr. Guthrie lost heavily late in life by wild speculations, leaving the son with nothing to depend on but his own exertions, and it was mainly by these exertions that he attained that high proficiency in his profession which gained for him the position he held in after years. Early going to school Guthrie had for a master an Abbé who had taken refuge in England at the first dawning of the French Revolution, and from him he so mastered the French language that he was

frequently taken to be an *emigré*, even in France itself. Needless to say this proficiency was of great use to him while serving in the Peninsula.

When Guthrie reached the age of thirteen, Mr. Rush, the then Inspector-General of Army Hospitals, suggested that he should enter the Army Medical Service, and promised him an appointment as soon as he should be able to hold one. With this opening in view, he became articled to Mr. Phillips, a surgeon in Pall-Mall, and a pupil of Dr. Hooper at the Marylebone Infirmary. While with Phillips he attended the lectures held at the Windmill Street Medical School by Dr. Baillie and Messrs. Cruikshank, Wilson, and Thomas. After two years' hard work he went, in June, 1800, as "hospital mate" to the York Hospital, which was on the western side of the site of the present Euston Square. Many of the wounded from the Helder having come for treatment to this institution, there was plenty of work, and Guthrie dressed for Mr. Carpue and Surgeon-General Keate. A sudden change occurred in March, 1801, when Mr. Keate decided to refuse to employ any hospital-mates who had not passed an examination at the Royal College of Surgeons. There were at the time four of these dressers; three immediately resigned their posts. Not so Guthrie; the very next day after Mr. Keate's announcement he put his name down for the College ordeal, and two days after he was successfully examined by Keate and Howard, receiving his membership diploma at the age of sixteen. In those days there was no age limit for the candidates; but in the following year it was enacted that no one should receive his diploma unless he was of age. The fact of his early qualification enabled Guthrie later to enjoy the position of youngest member on the College Council. His well-deserved success was quickly rewarded, for Mr. Keate immediately promoted him to a regimental assistant-surgeoncy, and he entered the 29th Regiment, in which he soon gained the esteem and regard of his brother officers.

In 1802 he accompanied his regiment to North America, and became full surgeon in 1806. The time for Guthrie to commence that work which led to so great a triumph was now at hand. On July 10th, 1808, Sir Arthur Wellesley sailed from Cork for the Peninsula with 10,000 men, and with him went Guthrie, then only twenty-three years of age. To give a

full and detailed account of his exploits throughout the campaign would be to narrate a surgical history of the war. It must therefore suffice to enumerate the chief events of his work, and to relate one or two anecdotes of his courage.

He was twice wounded: once in both legs by a musket-ball at the battle of Vimiera, and he nearly died of fever in the plains of Guardiana. He was present at Roliça, Vimiera, Oporto, Talavera, Albuhera, Ciudad Rodrigo, Elboden, Sucaparte, Sabujal, Salamanca, and Toulouse, and from the last-named battlefield he made that collection of gunshot injuries of bone which we possess in our Museum. He was also at the two sieges of Badajos and that of Olivença. At one of these sieges he was riding past the city walls on a white horse; the French marshals being always similarly mounted, the garrison thought he was some person of distinction, and straightway fired a cannon at him. The ball passed close behind his back, just above the horse's tail. Most men would have precipitately retired; Guthrie drew rein, and taking off his cocked hat made an elaborate bow in the direction of the gunners, after which he quietly cantered away. On another occasion he was proceeding with a Portuguese escort in charge of some wounded, when his party was mistaken by Sir J. Sherbrook for the enemy; Sir John halted his regiment, and was about to open fire, when Guthrie, perceiving the error, dashed to the front, and being beyond shouting distance, tore open his blue great-coat and displayed the red uniform beneath. His coolness and presence of mind in danger was only equalled by the care and attention he bestowed on the wounded under his charge.

In January, 1810, Guthrie was promoted to be Surgeon to the Forces, and in 1811 was attached to the fourth division, and found himself the chief medical officer at Albuhera of nearly three divisions of cavalry and infantry, and, after the engagement, in charge of 3,000 wounded. In 1812 he was appointed Deputy-Inspector of Hospitals, with charge of seven divisions of cavalry and infantry and a large hospital at Madrid. Here he was allowed to use his own discretion, and no one better deserved the honour. In the retreat from Salamanca it was entirely owing to his activity and promptitude that the sick were not lost. After his arduous services (and few officers, combatant or non-combatant, surpassed him in zeal) Guthrie began to

experience the usual gratitude of a British Government. The medical authorities at home refused to gazette his appointment as Deputy-Inspector on the score of youth, and promoted many men over his head. This roused the wrath of Wellington, who in his despatches made some very caustic remarks anent this manifest injustice.

In 1814 Guthrie returned to England, and was placed on half-pay. Released from the anxieties of a campaign, he attended the anatomical and surgical lectures in Windmill Street in 1814-15, as well as those by Abernethy and the practice at the Lock and Westminster Hospitals and the City Infirmary for Diseases of the Eye. Starting in civil practice, he found it, as many have done since, a struggle of no little severity, and in spite of his brilliant surgical successes in Spain, he seems to have been but little recognised. A study of his published works, to be referred to presently, will show how he had revolutionised military surgery, especially as regards amputation after gunshot wounds of the extremities. Limbs that had been condemned by others were frequently saved by his skill, and his results triumphantly proved the correctness of his practice.

In 1815 he did not rejoin the army, although his friends earnestly besought him to do so; but after Waterloo, yielding to their solicitations, he set out for Brussels. There he performed but two operations, both of which were successful. One, an amputation at the hip, was done on a Frenchman. The second case was that of a private in the German legion, whose right leg was pierced by a musket-ball which wounded the peroneal artery. Guthrie cut down and ligatured the ends of the vessel, and the man made a perfect recovery, his leg having been originally condemned to amputation. This operation was considered to be no small triumph for English surgery, as Dupuytren had been unsuccessful in a similar case, and had declared Guthrie's procedure to be impracticable.

These two patients were conveyed to England and placed in the York Hospital, and with them came a third, also of the German legion. This soldier had been struck at Waterloo by a bullet, which entered just above the pubes and lodged in the bladder, forming the nucleus of a calculus. At the York Hospital Guthrie removed the foreign body, and the case is

remarkable for being the first in which lithotrity was tried in England. The late Mr. Weiss specially constructed a three-pronged instrument which Guthrie introduced. He caught the stone, but lost it. He then attempted to close the lithotrite, but failed to do so. The spectators, it is said, held up their hands in consternation, and Mr. Weiss, who was present, dropped into a chair, white with fear lest the instrument should prove to have been badly constructed. In fact, all seem to have lost their heads but the operator; he opened the lithotrite to its widest extent, and then easily closed and withdrew it, the obstruction having been caused by a fold of the bladder catching in the joint. This occurred before the days of anæsthetics, and the patient had the pleasure of observing the incident, and remarked to Guthrie, "You may cut me about as much as you like, sir, but you shan't put that three-pronged thing into me a second time." The ball was removed fourteen days after by lithotomy, and the man recovered.

By his trip to Brussels Guthrie lost the only two private patients he had, who showed their disapprobation of his desertion by never speaking to him again. Since he was still only on half-pay his prospects seemed none of the brightest; but his friend, Sir James McGrigor, gave him two large wards in the York Hospital, and promised him all the worst cases. Here he did duty for two years, at the end of which time the hospital was broken up. In 1816 he commenced a gratuitous course of lectures to the Army and Navy Medical departments, and these were continued for no less than twenty years. At the end of the first course his hearers presented him with a silver cup, valued at twenty guineas.

It was during the same year that Guthrie proposed to Sir James McGrigor that they should found an infirmary for diseases of the eye. The scheme was warmly supported by the Dukes of York and Wellington, and soon bore fruit, Guthrie being appointed surgeon, and Dr. Forbes physician. In 1827 a site was found for it close to Charing Cross, and the Royal Westminster Ophthalmic Hospital still flourishes.

Not many months had elapsed, however, before a split occurred, which resulted in Dr. Forbes' resignation. The *Lancet* published some strictures upon the management of the hospital, and Guthrie brought an action against the editor.

Dr. Forbes wrote to Guthrie, saying that he could not conscientiously withhold certain unfavourable evidence should the nature of his examination in court tend to extract it, whereupon Guthrie abandoned the proceedings, assigning as a cause Dr. Forbes' letter and conduct, and saying that the latter was the secret enemy who had originated the remarks in the *Lancet*. No little abuse passed between all parties, and Dr. Forbes resigned his post of physician. He further challenged Mr. Thompson, the house pupil, for insulting language, and a meeting took place on Clapham Common on December 29th, 1827, when three shots were exchanged without effect, the antagonists being, probably, more skilful with the scalpel than with the pistol. Dr. Forbes subsequently published two pamphlets, containing all the correspondence, in his own defence.

By this resignation Guthrie took the sole charge of the institution, until in 1838 his son Charles was appointed assistant surgeon.

In 1823 Guthrie's connection with the staff of the Westminster Hospital commenced with his appointment as assistant surgeon in that year, and in 1827 he was made fourth surgeon as a special mark of the esteem in which he was held, there being no vacancy. The hospital was then in James Street, not being removed to its present site until 1834. In the same year that he was made full surgeon, Guthrie became a Fellow of the Royal Society.

In 1834 Guthrie was elected a member of the council of the College of Surgeons, thus starting another branch of usefulness in his career. His activity upon the council was great. Previously the members were very badly treated; among other things, they were only allowed to enter the college by the back door. Guthrie advanced their claims, hunted among the college archives on their behalf, and gained them several advantages, bringing them round from the back to the front entrance. When the matter came before the College Council for consideration, Guthrie appeared with his arms full of papers taken from the records of the institution, and these he deposited before the President as solid arguments in the cause of the members.

In July, 1828, he became an examiner, in which capacity he was greatly disliked and feared by students for his severity and brusque manner. In spite of this he was very fair, and often said that when it came to his single vote he never in his life had

the heart to pluck a candidate. In the same year he became Professor of Anatomy and Surgery to the college, a post which he held for four years, delivering lectures on the following subjects:—"The Anatomy and Physiology of the Arterial System, and Injuries and Diseases of the Arteries"; "The Anatomy and Injuries of the Urinary Organs"; "The Anatomy and Surgery of Hernia"; and "The Anatomy, human and comparative, of the Eye, and its Diseases."

In 1831–32 he was vice-president of the college, and in 1833 he became president, a post he also filled in 1841 and 1854. In 1834 he delivered the introductory lecture and opened the Westminster Hospital Medical School in Dean Street, which he was mainly instrumental in founding, Mr. Hale Thompson and Dr. Robert Bentley being his warmest supporters. Unfortunately the institution of the medical school gave rise to much bitterness between him and the other officers of the hospital. For four years he was lecturer on surgery, and to the time of his death was one of the school's most ardent well-wishers.

On the death of Mr. White, in 1848, Guthrie became consulting surgeon to the hospital, an appointment he had before declined.

He was now approaching the close of his eventful, long, and useful life, saddened by the premature death of his eldest son, the Rev. Lowry Guthrie, a loss which decided him against accepting a baronetcy. He took a lively interest in the surgical work of the Crimean War, and in 1856 published several cases in the *Lancet* which occurred during that campaign. For twenty years he had suffered from winter cough, which gradually increased in severity until the winter of 1856. Although much weakened by suffering, he still kept himself as actively employed as the state of his health would permit, until, on Thursday, May 1st, 1856, his 71st birthday, he died at 5 p.m. from syncope following a severe fit of coughing. With characteristic good-heartedness, the night before he died he wrote a letter to the authorities strongly urging the claims of a soldier, crippled in the service of his country, for admission into Chelsea Hospital, a request which was granted, although he did not live to see it.

In private life he was genial and kindly, towards students he behaved with especial courtesy, extending to them no little hospitality. The *Lancet* of 1856 remarked that, whereas other members of the profession looked upon the medical student as

an uncultivated and bear-like animal, only asking him to dinner when the female part of the family was excluded, Guthrie ever treated him as a gentleman and a future equal.

Of Guthrie's literary labours I have yet said nothing. His first published work was "Observations on and Cases of Gunshot Wounds," which appeared in 1811 in the *New Medical and Physical Journal*. In this he pointed out the inapplicability of the theory of aneurism to the treatment of wounded arteries and the necessity of tying both ends of a cut vessel. In 1830 he published his first work on "The Diseases and Injuries of Arteries," the substance of his lectures at the college, which ran through three editions. He further wrote a treatise on the operations for the formation of an artificial pupil (1819), "Lectures on the Operative Surgery of the Eye" (1823), "The Anatomy and Surgery of Inguinal and Femoral Herniæ" (1833), "The Anatomy and Diseases of the Urinary and Sexual Organs" (1836), "Clinical Lectures on Compound Fractures of the Extremities" (1838), and in 1834 he delivered the Hunterian Oration. Some of his works were translated into other languages, and the Czar of Russia ordered the two relating to military surgery to be translated for the use of the Russian Army, sending Guthrie two diamond rings in token of his esteem.

Guthrie was twice married, first to Margaret Paterson, daughter of the Lieutenant-Governor of Prince Edward's Island. He left behind him a son, Charles Guthrie, who became Assistant-Surgeon to the Westminster Hospital in 1843.

The brilliancy of Guthrie's achievements during the long and bloody war in the Peninsula made him known throughout the civilised world, for he revolutionised military surgery and smoothed the way for the more rational surgical treatment of to-day. But this must not be allowed to eclipse his acts of almost equal value done in times of peace. It was Guthrie who, by his constant activity and zeal, helped to raise the profession and who gained for the members of the college many privileges they enjoy to-day.

We who are so intimately connected with the Westminster Hospital especially owe to him a debt of gratitude, for, if he did not actually found the medical school, he was one of its greatest benefactors and the prime mover of its establishment on its present basis.