

An address delivered before the Surgical Society of Ireland, at the opening of its thirty-sixth session, on December 8th, 1866 / by Richard G. Butcher.

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AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

SURGICAL SOCIETY OF IRELAND,

AT THE

OPENING OF ITS THIRTY-SIXTH SESSION,

ON DECEMBER 8th, 1866.

BY

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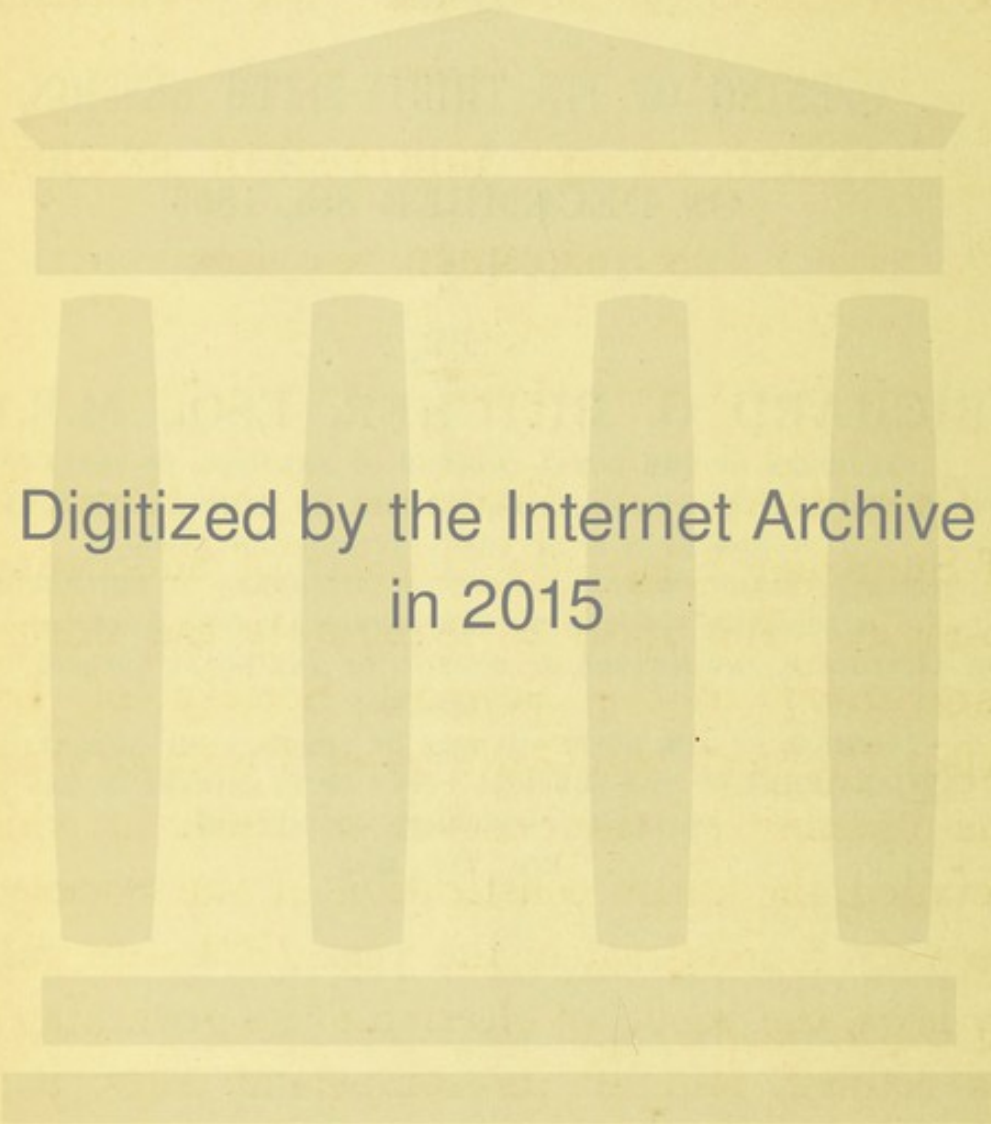
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GENTLEMEN,—As President of the Royal College of Surgeons, I have the honour of addressing you to-night. We meet to inaugurate the thirty-sixth anniversary of the Surgical Society of Ireland. After the very able Address of Professor Jacob, at the opening of the Session of 1864, in which he detailed the entire constitution of the Society from its very foundation, in the year 1831—its rules, its by-laws, the mode of election of its governing body, its council, and all its component parts, it would be superfluous to add one word on that subject. Again, the able and valuable Address of my distinguished predecessor, Dr. Wilmot, in which he eloquently spoke of the protective influence of the College of Surgeons, so freely and encouragingly

extended to this Society, for the advancement of medical and surgical truth, leaves me nothing to say on that head. Some present may not be aware that in the earlier years of this Society members subscribed to defray the expenses incurred by its meetings; but for years back the College of Surgeons has thrown its protective ægis over the Society, and admits all gentlemen elected to membership free. After the elaborate, comprehensive, and instructive addresses to which I have just referred, I have had some difficulty in finding matter for the Address which I have now the honour to deliver before you.

The advantages arising from such societies as ours it is not easy to over-estimate; indeed, these advantages are so generally recognized that we find similar associations widely established both at home and abroad. They furnish the readiest means by which anything new, or otherwise interesting, in medicine or surgery, may be communicated to the profession, and be submitted at once to that thorough ventilation and searching scrutiny whereby its real value may be tested and ascertained.

In all subjects nearly affecting man's material well-being and happiness, it is of great importance that whatever professes to be a new discovery, or a new application of a truth or principle already known, or an improvement upon some method or

practice hitherto received, should be carefully examined, and its claims upon the attention of the public scrupulously investigated. This applies with especial force to subjects such as those with which we deal, directly affecting, as they do, man's health, his happiness, and his life itself.

In medicine and surgery much is known and much has been done. But they who have studied these most profoundly, and practised them most successfully are best aware how much still remains to be known and done in both. Many questions which baffled the powers of the great fathers of our profession centuries ago still await their solution, and every day new questions are starting up, some of which wholly elude our grasp, while to others we are able to furnish only a partial answer. There is, then, a wide and an ever-expanding field, in which the most refined observation, the keenest sagacity, the maturest judgment, and the subtlest analysis of the physician and surgeon have ample room to exercise themselves. With what success that field has been cultivated in recent times, and by our own schools in this city, it is almost unnecessary to state before this audience. Yet, a few examples may not be uninteresting to elucidate this position ; and there are two names which come prominently to my recollection as deserving of the honour. These men passed away too soon from amongst us ; we can now

recall their great merits without any disparagement to the living.

You all remember the arduous, indefatigable labours of Houston, the able anatomist, the profound physiologist, the great surgeon. In the early years of this Society we find him ever foremost in the path of investigation, discovery, and truth; at the same time a large contributor to other societies and to the journals of the day. It is now twenty-six years ago since he laid before this Society a full analysis of Müller's great work on malignant diseases, and unravelled its difficulties for the benefit and attraction of others. I shall quote his own words, as he modestly speaks of himself in the introduction to this communication:—

“Müller led the way in these researches. Many other able investigators are also in the field, and astonishing results are daily being brought to light. Being myself possessed of an achromatic microscope of high magnifying power, I have been endeavouring to follow in the wake of these pathologists, and to inform myself as to the accuracy and value of their statements. I have taken every opportunity to make myself acquainted with the microscopic characters of morbid growths; and the object of my present communication is to introduce the subject to this Society, and to exhibit some preparations from the Museum, which I regard as illustrative of the several varieties of cancer.”

I need scarcely say how many able labourers,

members of this Society, have since then worked and are still working in the same field of microscopic investigation, with credit to themselves and great benefit to science. We have in the records of this Society, and from the same hand, most valuable papers on anatomy, physiology, pathology, and practical surgery; but these would be too numerous to dwell upon. His name is indissolubly connected with what may be looked upon, I would say, as one of the glories of this College—its Museum. Here we have a perfect monument of his ability, his judgment, and his power. A glance at the hundreds of preparations stamped with his initials proves his indefatigable industry, while a more close investigation of them shows his truthfulness in delineating nature's laws, and his perfect acquaintance with all the types of life. The catalogues containing a description of this storehouse of knowledge, arranged by him, bear the strong impress of a master hand; and, I trust the College will, before long, place a bust of Houston in that Museum where he so sedulously worked.

Another member, more recently removed by death, Bellingham, has left his name amongst us likewise imperishably recorded. The records of this Society bear ample testimony to his protecting guardianship. For years he was one of its Honorary Secretaries, and for years he was a large contributor

of knowledge to its members. Numerous, indeed, were the communications which he brought forward both in medicine and surgery. I am certain that every member here will recollect his various interesting, able, and instructive papers on diseases of the heart, which ultimately were presented to the profession in the shape of a large volume. Accuracy of observation, tact in diagnosis, acumen in judgment, steadiness in practice are all strongly stamped upon the pages of this book. It is, however, with the subject of the treatment of aneurism by compression that this Society and the Surgical School of Ireland will most gratefully remember his name with great honour. His views, his reasonings, and his practice upon this problem were conclusive as to its solution and adoption. Worthily has his bust been placed in the hall of this College. And I fully subscribe to the opinion of Professor Jacob, as expressed a short time ago in his Address from this Chair:—

“I can safely say, his labours in this Society were the principal cause of his having that testimonial to his abilities, his industry, and his zealous labours, in this College.”

My immediate object now, in connexion with the utility of such societies as this, is to insist on the importance of having each alleged discovery in the theory or practice of medicine, each new operation or mode of treatment in surgery, or proposed modification of the received methods, submitted to

the calm judgment of those who may be presumed to be best qualified to decide upon their real value, and who will freely and honestly pronounce their opinion about them. The objections which they urge, the difficulties which they raise, the suggestions which they offer, will all tend to the further development and more complete elaboration of the discovery or invention, if it be really valuable. We all know how liable a man is, especially if he be of an enthusiastic temperament, to be biased in favour of any theory which he has himself constructed, any conclusion which he has adopted after a long and laborious course of investigation. The theory may be purely fanciful, or rest on insufficient induction; the conclusion may be derived from false premises, or vitiated by illogical reasoning; still, the man himself, prejudiced in favour of what has cost him much thought and time, shuts his eyes against all but what he desires to see, and flatters himself that he has done some great thing. Men of our profession are, of course, not exempt from this common weakness of which I speak. And therefore it is well that our supposed discoveries, reasonings, inferences, and methods of procedure should be minutely criticised, thoroughly sifted, and carefully tested. A fair, manly, straightforward discussion, conducted in the spirit of philosophical inquiry, and animated by the sincere love

of truth, will act like the refiner's fire. If there be genuine ore, it will come out the more pure when separated from the dross with which it was mingled ; if there be none, the process will show that there *is* none ; and, however the individual may be mortified, the interests of truth will be served.

These are the principles on which this Society was originally founded, by which it has hitherto been guided, and which will, I trust, continue ever to prevail in its deliberations and debates. Charged with the high and responsible functions that we are, we will never, I am sure, suffer a mean rivalry or paltry jealousy to prevent us from cordially recognizing and approving anything, whether in the way of theory or practice, which really tends to enlarge the boundary of our knowledge, to systematize what we already know, or to improve our received methods of procedure. There are difficulties and discouragements enough to be encountered by any one who earnestly devotes himself to such a task, without the paralysing influences arising from envious disparagement and ungenerous detraction. May the animating spirit of this and similar associations ever be to cheer and aid the labourer in his work, and ungrudgingly to award that meed of praise which his services in the cause of truth seem fairly to deserve ! We must be contented often to

labour long and patiently before achieving any great or striking result. The phenomena with which we have to deal—involving all the mysterious agencies of that subtle principle of *life*, whose nature eludes our keenest scrutiny—are infinitely diversified, and, for the most part, so complicated as to resist the efforts of the most searching analysis to reduce them to their simple elements. General laws, the applicability of which to particular cases may safely be relied on, are with us but few ; and in many departments of our science, there are as yet, none worth the name. What, for example, do we know of the laws by which epidemics are propagated ? Shall we ever be enabled to predict the occurrence of a pestilence with that certainty with which astronomy foretold the reappearance of those meteors whose brilliancy, a few nights since, lighted up our skies ? The conditions of the problem, in the one case, are all definite and known, in the other, the conditions are unknown, and, moreover, are perpetually changing. But however this may be, we have still a boundless field before us. Each of us individually may do something towards the cultivation of it, by patient labour and careful observation ; but infinitely more may be done by combined effort and mutual co-operation. This is the fundamental principle of all associations, as it is of ours. No man is able to bestow minute

attention on every department of medical and surgical science, so as to be an equally great authority, an equally eminent writer, on all alike. The range of subjects is too vast for this. Profound knowledge requires concentrated attention and long study. Nor can the same individual strike out and tread many paths of original discovery. Hence the necessity on the one hand of division of labour, so as to get each portion of the entire work more perfectly done, and, on the other hand, of bringing together the various constituent parts, so as to combine them all into one grand harmonious whole. This synthetic process it is the main business of such societies as this to accomplish. To be a great physician or a great surgeon falls to the lot of but few. It requires a number of qualities, rare in themselves, and still more rare in combination with each other. Keen observation, fine tact, intuitive sagacity, readiness in resources, boldness in conception, skilfulness in execution, a clear and cool head, a firm and delicate hand—these, and other qualifications which mark the foremost men in medicine and surgery, are natural gifts, and cannot be acquired. But while it is not given to all to be great, there is none who cannot by earnest patient work contribute something to the general stock of our knowledge. Let us, then, labour energetically, each in his own particular

sphere ; but let us also remember that we are members of a body banded together for the attainment of a common end ; and that the best means of attaining it is by united effort, and cordial co-operation. It was thus that this Society has already done so much for the advancement of medicine and surgery, and that it now enjoys the prestige of a high name among the scientific Associations of our country.

Be it ours to emulate the labours of those who have gone before us. And, when we commit this Society to our successors, may we have the satisfaction of knowing that its reputation is at least as high, and its usefulness at least as great, as when it came into our hands.

