

The official resignation of the Professorship of Surgery, in University College, London : with observations, addressed to the President and Council / by Samuel Cooper.

Contributors

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THE
from the Author -

OFFICIAL RESIGNATION

OF THE

PROFESSORSHIP OF SURGERY,

IN UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, LONDON,

WITH

OBSERVATIONS,

ADDRESSED TO

THE PRESIDENT AND COUNCIL.

BY

SAMUEL COOPER, F.R.S.,

LATE PRESIDENT OF THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF SURGEONS
OF ENGLAND, &c. &c.

LONDON :

PRINTED BY EDWARD AND WILLIAM MITCHENER,

116, GREAT RUSSELL STREET, BLOOMSBURY.

TO THE RIGHT HON. LORD BROUGHAM, THE
RIGHT HON. THE EARL OF AUCKLAND, AND
THE OTHER MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL OF
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, LONDON.

MY LORDS AND GENTLEMEN,

When Mr. Liston's health began to suffer in the Autumn of last year, he apprized me of his inability to continue the usual assistance in the Surgical Lectures, and I therefore requested you in a letter, dated the 4th of August, 1847, to appoint some other party to give the aid, since permanently lost by Mr. Liston's death. I simply asked for what had been already conceded, and acted upon, for several years. The Senate officially approved and recommended this arrangement at their meeting on the 14th of July, 1840, and it was formally sanctioned by yourselves on the 18th of the same month.

To my letter of the 4th of August, 1847, Mr. Atkinson was directed to return me, in a letter dated the 9th of that month, your thanks for that communication, and to acquaint me, "that the Council will take an early opportunity of ascertaining by what *individual* the most *fitting** assistance

* This use of the participle present for the adjective, occurs also in Dr. Sharpey's letter inserted in the *London Medical Gazette* of the 29th ultimo. Has Dr. Sharpey then been peeping into the archives of the Council, and extracted from them the expression? or is the coincidence purely accidental?

can be rendered to you.”* Here, then, was a distinct *promise*, made by yourselves, the highest authorities in the College, that the previous assistance should be continued; the only point, remaining to be settled, being the *individual* who should render it.

Numerous precedents might be cited from other great Medical Schools, in proof of there being nothing very irregular in my application. Sir Astley Cooper and Mr. Travers; Mr. Aston Key and Mr. Morgan; Professor Green and Mr. Solly; Mr. Babington and Mr. Cæsar Hawkins; as well as many others; all lectured jointly at each of their respective Schools, and with no more detriment to those Schools, than the association of another lecturer with me was to that of University College. In addition to these facts, I enjoyed the esteem of my Class; its strength and discipline were satisfactorily maintained; in proficiency it was equal to any other Surgical Class in the world; and I was continually receiving marks of its gratitude for the efficient instruction communicated to it. My first Class consisted of 100, which number gradually increased to 307; but, subsequently, fell to less than 200, in consequence of certain regulations, depressing all the Medical Schools of the metropolis. Though my health was sometimes disturbed, in no Session did I ever fail to deliver between sixty and seventy Lectures out of one hundred.

Under these circumstances, my Lords and Gentlemen, many of you will be at a loss to understand why the promise, deliberately made to me by the Council in the letter, dated the 9th of last August, as well as in another dated the 18th of

* See the letter at the end.

July, 1840, was gradually receded from; being first altered to a *limitation* of the service of the gentleman, named to give the assistance, expressly to one Session; and then virtually, so far as your Committee could have carried the day, to a complete refusal of it; and why I have been obliged to send in my resignation.

The only explanation, which can be given, is this: subsequently to the 9th of August, the date of the letter, conveying the last distinct assurance of the Council, that I should have the assistance solicited, the two Anatomical Professors, have not always found me subservient enough to their projects in the dominion, they are well-known to assume over the Medical department of the College; and, in particular, I was obliged, last October, publicly in the Medical Committee of the Hospital, to express my disapproval of the long delay that had taken place in filling up the Assistant Surgeony, vacant by the death of Mr. Potter; and also of the appropriation of a part of the Hospital, under the name of an Eye Infirmary, exclusively to Professor Quain. These gentlemen perceived in me, then, an independent Member of University College, determined to object to whatever he might conscientiously deem unfair, disadvantageous, or not creditable to the Institution. I was, as it were, in their sight, a rebel against their dictatorial sway, and they wished me out of office.* The opportunity for bringing about this object soon presented itself. Directly Mr. Liston died, one of these Professors, Dr. Sharpey, remarkably fond of the cry of favouritism against others, was anxious to secure the Surgeony of the Hospital

* Within ten days after this, reports were current in the Profession, that I was to resign, and the Medical School to be *re-modelled*; an ominous and significant word.

for a *particular friend of his own*, to whom I certainly entertained not the slightest *personal* objection. The other Professor, Mr. Quain, according to his own repeated declarations to me and others, had long been impatient to Lecture on Surgery himself, and to give up the Anatomical Chair. A still closer union for mutual purposes was therefore established between these two gentlemen, who succeeded in the first object by a kind of *coup-de-main*, inasmuch as they contrived, quite unknown to myself, and, I believe, to some other Professors, and without any authority from the Council, Senate, or Faculty of Medicine, to constitute themselves into a snug little party to decide what Surgeon should be recommended to the Senate and Council for the vacant appointment at the Hospital; or, rather, one of the vacant appointments; for, as I have already stated, the vacancy occasioned by Mr. Potter's death, about a year ago, still remains unfilled, in consequence of its not being the pleasure of these two Professors to allow your printed resolution, that the Hospital shall have two Assistant Surgeons, just at present, to be fulfilled.

Forgetful of the many highly qualified gentlemen, educated to Surgery at University College during the last twenty-three years, and careless also of the harsh injustice they were doing to the present Assistant Surgeon, who had served with distinction about seven years, and had often, in the absence of the Surgeons, been entrusted with the entire charge of the Surgical Patients, the two combined Professors very kindly, without any solicitation, undertook the difficult task of inquiring into the qualifications and comparative fitness, of all the most distinguished Surgeons in the United Kingdom for

the vacant office ; and, according to their written statement,* of the result of this impartial investigation, not one appeared so eligible as the *intimate friend of Dr. Sharpey* ! The gentleman selected was soon confirmed in his appointment, and thus the Profession at large had good reason for the remark, with which my ears were pestered in every medical circle, that although University College had been in operation nearly a quarter of a century, it seemed as if it could not find a man of its own competent to perform the duty of Hospital Surgeon, which the whole School, and the Profession well know, was entirely contrary to the fact.

My Lords and Gentlemen,—At the meeting of the Senate, held for the reception of the extraordinary kind of report, spontaneously concocted by the two Professors, you may be surprised to hear, there were only three *Medical* Professors present besides myself, two of whom were these self-appointed judges, bringing with them the very curious document, on which the proposition to recommend Dr. Sharpey's friend was founded. The rest consisted of ten or twelve Professors in the Faculty of Arts, gentlemen whom I highly and sincerely respect, but whose judgment, concerning the most fit person to be appointed Surgeon to the Hospital, or to any Hospital, may be fairly called in question, and this, with all proper deference to them, as men most deservedly eminent in their respective branches of learning and science. These gentlemen could not be expected to object to the proposition, and thus an affair was rapidly settled, which, had it been conducted as it ought to have been, should have been referred in the first instance, according to the original custom of the College in all

* Recorded in the Minutes of the Senate ; but, at the time of its being read, verbally illustrated with very ludicrous additions by Professor Quain, which I forbear to repeat.

matters, particularly concerning the Hospital, or Medical School, to the special and separate consideration either of the Faculty of Medicine, or of the Medical Committee of the Hospital, before being brought under the notice of the Senate. Then the merits and claims of University College men would certainly not have been *entirely* overlooked, and this by gentlemen qualified by the nature of their pursuits to be judges.

Almost immediately after the completion of this measure I determined to resign at the end of the Session.

My Lords and Gentlemen,—The most disagreeable part of my narrative is yet to follow; for, it seems, that if I had not come to the preceding decision, I was in danger of being *compelled* to do so by other manœuvres, and thus the road to the Surgical Chair might have been forcibly cleared for Professor Quain's triumphal installation in it,—an event, which, I am aware, he has long been earnestly looking for. After one or two meetings of the Senate, relating to the continuation of assistance to me in the Surgical Lectures, (a question, which one would imagine could not have been honourably and consistently raised again by any party, after your own positive decisions, officially communicated to me in July, 1840, and again in August last); you appointed a Committee of five Members of the Council to inquire into, and report upon the manner in which the duty of the Surgical Chair should in future be fulfilled. In what I am now about to observe, it is far from my intention to intimate the slightest doubt of the gentlemanly feeling and honour of the Council collectively, as a body governing one of the most noble and liberal Institutions in the world; and, even with respect to its five Members who composed the Committee, although I happened not to have the honour of a personal acquaintance with any one of them,

while the Professor, eager for the Surgical Chair, had an advantage over me in this respect, I should have been perfectly content with their decision, had they condescended to hear both sides, and to make themselves fully informed, not only of the unconditional promises of assistance made to me in July, 1840, and again in August, 1847, but, of all the other facts and transactions adverted to in this address. But with a very imperfect knowledge of the subject, therefore, and merely *because I solicited the ordinary aid*, which had been already twice unequivocally promised and granted by the Council, this Committee (which should not be mistaken for the Council itself), in a letter, remarkable for its strange medley of compliment and threat, informed me, that unless I did resign, they should advise the Council to request me to do so.* Had I not been already disgusted with the intrigues in the Hospital transactions, I certainly should have refused to comply with the ungracious suggestion of this Committee; for I much doubt, whether, if the case had been considered by *the whole Council*, I should, after all, have been compelled to resign, since the Committee happened not to have the principle of honour on their side, not from any intention to act unjustly, but from their not having looked to all the facts and circumstantial evidence in my favour.

* "The Committee regret that they feel it will be their imperative duty to recommend to the Council, that you should be requested to relinquish the Chair of Surgery. Previous, however, to their taking such a step, their feelings of respectful attention to your character, and long professional services, induce them to intimate the unanimous opinion they have formed, hoping they may thus be relieved from the performance of a very painful duty." Whether this communication was made to me, "without the knowledge of the Professors, or any one of them," as Dr. Sharpey affirms, is not material; but by what influence the Committee were led to take this step, is the question.

My Lords and Gentlemen,—It makes no difference in the merits of the case, that I had positively determined to resign *on another account*,* three months before I knew what the decision of the Committee happened to be, or even that such Committee had been appointed at all. Neither will the truth and force of my observations be affected, were a suspicion, prevalent in the profession to be realised; namely, that in the face of the strongly expressed and indignant feelings of the Surgical Class of University College, at the treatment which I have experienced, the Professor of Practical Anatomy will not now venture to offer himself for the Surgical Chair.

I know from several sources that some members of the Council have been secretly told, that Mr. Morton, the Assistant Surgeon to the Hospital, being related to me, I am, on that account, disposed “to thrust him forward;” and one of the two combined Professors, Dr. Sharpey, calculating, no doubt, upon good grounds, that he could directly or indirectly, rule the Council and Senate as he pleased, even presumed to tell me, “that the more I endeavoured to bring Mr. Morton forward, the worse it should be for him, and the more he should be kept back.” To the foregoing insinuation of favouritism by a gentleman, not perfectly exempt from that accusation himself, I answer, that Mr. Morton was no relation of mine, when he obtained exceedingly high honours in the School; and that he was no relation of mine, when the merit, which he had displayed as a student, house surgeon, and demonstrator of anatomy, led you, without one dissentient voice in the profession, to confer upon him the Assistant Surgeoncy of the

* Not as Dr. Sharpey intimates in his letter (full of mistakes, exposed elsewhere), in consequence of my inability to secure the Surgical Chair for Mr. Morton.

Hospital. If, then, Mr. Morton's merit was decidedly recognised before any family connexion existed between him and me, surely, the accidental subsequent relationship cannot justify the inferences, that he has not that merit now; that I am actuated by favouritism, notwithstanding such merit; or, that only because he is my relative, though he may possess such merit, and have the additional claim of long and skilful service, as Assistant Surgeon to the Hospital, he ought, (to use the words of Dr. Sharpey) "to be kept back."*

Neither is another insinuation correct, that I wished to put Mr. Morton over the head of Professor Quain; for, in fact, I offered to receive either of them as my Assistant in the Surgical Chair. The "*amor nummi*," I infer, prevented the latter from relinquishing his anatomical appointment, unless he could get the whole of the emoluments of this Chair, and his jealousy of my relation would not permit him to suffer another to have what he would not take himself, and could not take, so long as he was a lecturer on Anatomy.

My Lords and Gentlemen,—It is scarcely necessary for me to remind such of you, as are not prevented from attending closely to the business of this College, that, when any appointment, admitting of subsequent promotion, is made in the College, or Hospital, it is usual for you to stipulate, that the party so appointed, is not, as a matter of course, to have such promotion, on the opportunity for it presenting itself. This may be very prudent, but it can hardly be said to be right to take advantage of the condition, "to keep back," any gentleman, who, in the office to which he was first nominated,

* The word *back* reminds me, that I would have backed Mr. Morton against the favourite in any kind of competition whatsoever, in relation to practical and scientific Surgery.

has discharged his duty well, effectively, and to the perfect satisfaction of the School. An endeavour has, however, been made by Dr. Sharpey to deduce from this stipulation some palliation of the gross injustice done to the Assistant Surgeon. Mr. Liston, on being appointed in 1840, to assist in the Surgical Lectures, remonstrated against this very condition, and the Council immediately informed him by letter, that if he gave satisfaction to the Class, he might regard the condition as a nullity. Why is not the same liberality extended to every Officer of the College, or Hospital, who acquits himself well?

In troubling the Council with the foregoing statements, I feel that I am advocating the cause and interests of the whole of University College Medical School, present, past, and future, and not simply the cause of the Assistant Surgeon; for, if the plan of promoting strangers, in preference to all the numerous distinguished individuals brought up to Medicine, or Surgery, in that Institution, be continued, the greatest prizes for the encouragement of industry and talent in the Medical School will be withdrawn; and the competitors for Honours in the Sessional Examinations will annually diminish, until, at length, a number, scarcely equal to that of the Medals themselves, will compete for these Honours. At the same time, I heartily approve, with yourselves, of the principle of no exclusion, and even of "keeping back" the meritorious individuals of University College Medical School, were a John Hunter, a Sir Astley Cooper, or a Liston, to be a Candidate against them.

I have taken no notice of Dr. Sharpey's conclusion, that to have allowed Mr. Morton to continue the assistance in the Surgical Lectures "would have been the same thing as allowing me to appoint my successor in the Chair of Surgery." Surely, if the Council, or rather a Committee of it, could take

upon themselves to oblige the Professor himself to resign after seventeen years' service, very little difficulty would have been experienced with respect to an Assistant of any standing whatever. Nor have I adverted to an incredible rumour, that on this point you are jealous, and wish to assert your authority. The facts in this address prove you to be by no means a jealous body, for had you been so, the influence of the two meddling Professors would long ago have been crushed; but, though in this affair you have not been swayed by any jealousy of your own, it is very intelligible how the jealousy entertained by another party, against Mr. Morton, may have influenced you. Dr. Sharpey's own words, above quoted, amply justify this inference.

My Lords and Gentlemen,—It only remains for me now to tender to you the resignation of the offices which I yet hold of Professor of Surgery in University College, and of Consulting Surgeon to the Hospital. I thank you for every kindness conferred upon me during the seventeen years of my service, and I sincerely hope, that the Medical Department of the College will not long continue to be in the hands of the two combined Professors, who, by their unauthorized proceedings, have had the power of making even you depart from, or hesitate to perform, your written and deliberate promise to your Professor of Surgery; and who, except in matters of the most common routine, in point of fact, annihilate all the very important functions, designed by the constitution of the College, to be exercised by an independent Faculty of Medicine.

I am, with the highest respect,

MY LORDS AND GENTLEMEN,

Your obedient humble Servant,

Woburn Place.

SAMUEL COOPER.

April, 28th, 1848.

Answer to such parts of Dr. Sharpey's Letter, in the Medical Gazette, of April 29th, 1847, as are not specially noticed in the preceding statement.

Passing over the exaggeration in the number of lectures delivered by Mr. Liston,* I come to the assertion, that I expressed in my letter to the Council, dated the 4th of last August, a disinclination "to receive the assistance required except from one (or the other †) of two gentlemen named." Neither in this, nor in any other letter, written by me to the Council, in the course of last Autumn, did I express any disinclination to receive assistance, except from Mr. Quain, or Mr. Morton. I merely recommended them, as then forming with Mr. Liston, the Surgical Staff of the Hospital. It was several months after this, when Dr. Sharpey called on me, and informed me of the scheme of bringing up his friend from Scotland to succeed Mr. Liston at the Hospital. In this interview, which was two or three days after the funeral of that distinguished Surgeon, I observed that the plan did not appear to me just, or necessary, and I gave Dr. Sharpey to understand that, rather than have any stranger forced upon me in the Surgical Chair, I would relinquish it, but that I had *at this period* no objection to receive either Mr. Quain, or Mr. Morton, as my assistant in the duty. The latter not being desirous of lecturing, though highly qualified for it, and being myself not certain that he would consent to undertake the task, I was, in fact, rather anxious for Professor Quain to come forward.

The preceding facts must be joined with another, viz. : that in one of my letters, addressed to the Council, I strongly enjoined them completely to disregard any *supposed* wish of my own, with respect to the appointment of a particular individual to assist in the Surgical Lectures, urging them to

* The greatest number he ever delivered in one Session is 39.

† An important omission, as conveying a different meaning from what, I presume, was really intended.

do whatever they might judge most advantageous to the College. Had they nominated a stranger I certainly had my choice of accepting him, or of resigning without delay; but the Council, so far as my correspondence with them proceeded, had received no notice from me of my determination not to lecture with a stranger, and they were left in this matter as free and unfettered as myself. Neither did I state, that "in my opinion," Mr. Quain was precluded from lecturing on Surgery; but, that he absolutely was so, unless he resigned the Chair of Practical Anatomy, which it was in his power to have done.

Another statement made by Dr. Sharpey, is in one respect inaccurate; he observes, that the Council so far *indulged* Mr. Cooper's predilection as to authorize him to employ Mr. Morton as his Assistant for that Session" (viz. of 1847-48). I had already particularly desired them not to *indulge* me, but to be guided by the consideration of the good of the College. In truth, the Council here rather *indulged*, or accommodated themselves; for Mr. Quain, not being at that period able to get the whole of my Chair, and having, therefore, adhered to the profits of his Anatomical appointment, the Council had at that moment no fit person to give the required assistance, excepting Mr. Morton; Mr. Liston's death not having yet afforded the opportunity for inviting Dr. Sharpey's friend up from the North to London. Besides, as already explained, I had distinctly expressed to the Council my sincerest wish, that they would disregard any fancied wish of my own upon the subject.

So far is Dr. Sharpey's information from being correct, that I opposed inviting Mr. Liston to join the School, that I heartily concurred in the proposal. The moment his name was mentioned to me by the late Professor Turner, I expressed my immediate approval of the suggestion, and, had I not done so, probably Mr. Liston would not have been recommended to the Council at all; for there was some difference of opinion in the Faculty of Medicine, as to whether Mr. Liston, or the late Mr. Baird, of Newcastle, should be preferred. The appointment of a stranger, was at that period justified, not

merely by the inimitable skill and unequalled reputation of Mr. Liston as an operator, but by the infant state of the School, which was then only of six years standing, and until that date without an Hospital. It had not had sufficient time to launch into the Profession the numerous meritorious individuals who now adorn it, and who must be regarded quite as fit "*by nature*," (one of Dr. Sharpey's phrases) if not *by country*, and other considerations, as this gentleman's intimate acquaintance.

The reason why Mr. Morton was not suggested by any of my colleagues (not exactly as "the successor of Mr. Liston," as the expression is, but as the second Surgeon), was, as my statement proves, because Dr. Sharpey's favourite must then have remained in the North, and the sway of the two irresistible Professors been interfered with. On the other hand, I know that two out of the four Medical Professors present at the Senate, held for the invitation of Professor Sharpey's friend, were in favour of appointing Mr. Morton as third Surgeon; and as Professor Sharpey himself declared at my house in December last, on my remonstrating against the harsh treatment of Mr. Morton, that he saw no objection himself to a third Surgeon being made, as some mitigation of the unpleasant position in which that gentleman was about to be placed, I presume, that it is correct to say, that three out of the four *Medical* Professors were truly in favour of, or certainly not against, the measure. Mr. Liston offered to recommend Mr. Morton to be made third Surgeon more than a year ago, entirely from a sense of his merit, and without any solicitation.

University College, 9th August, 1847.

Dear Sir,—I beg to inform you that I submitted your letter of the 4th of August to the Council at their Session on Saturday last, and that I was directed to return you their thanks for the communication, and to acquaint you, that the Council will take an early opportunity of ascertaining by what individual the most fitting assistance can be rendered to you.

The Council also referred the matter to the Committee of Management to make enquiries, and to take such steps as may appear necessary.

I am, &c. &c.,

CHAS. C. ATKINSON.

To Professor Cooper.