

In memoriam Alfred Willett / by H.M.

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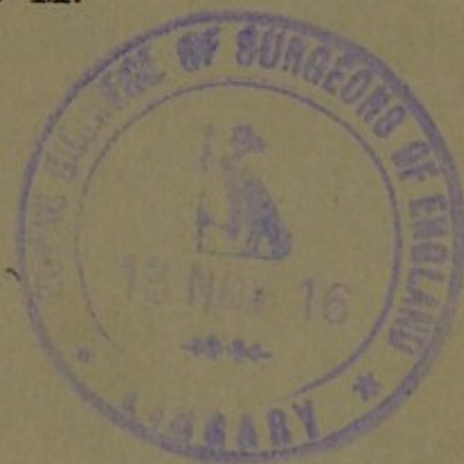
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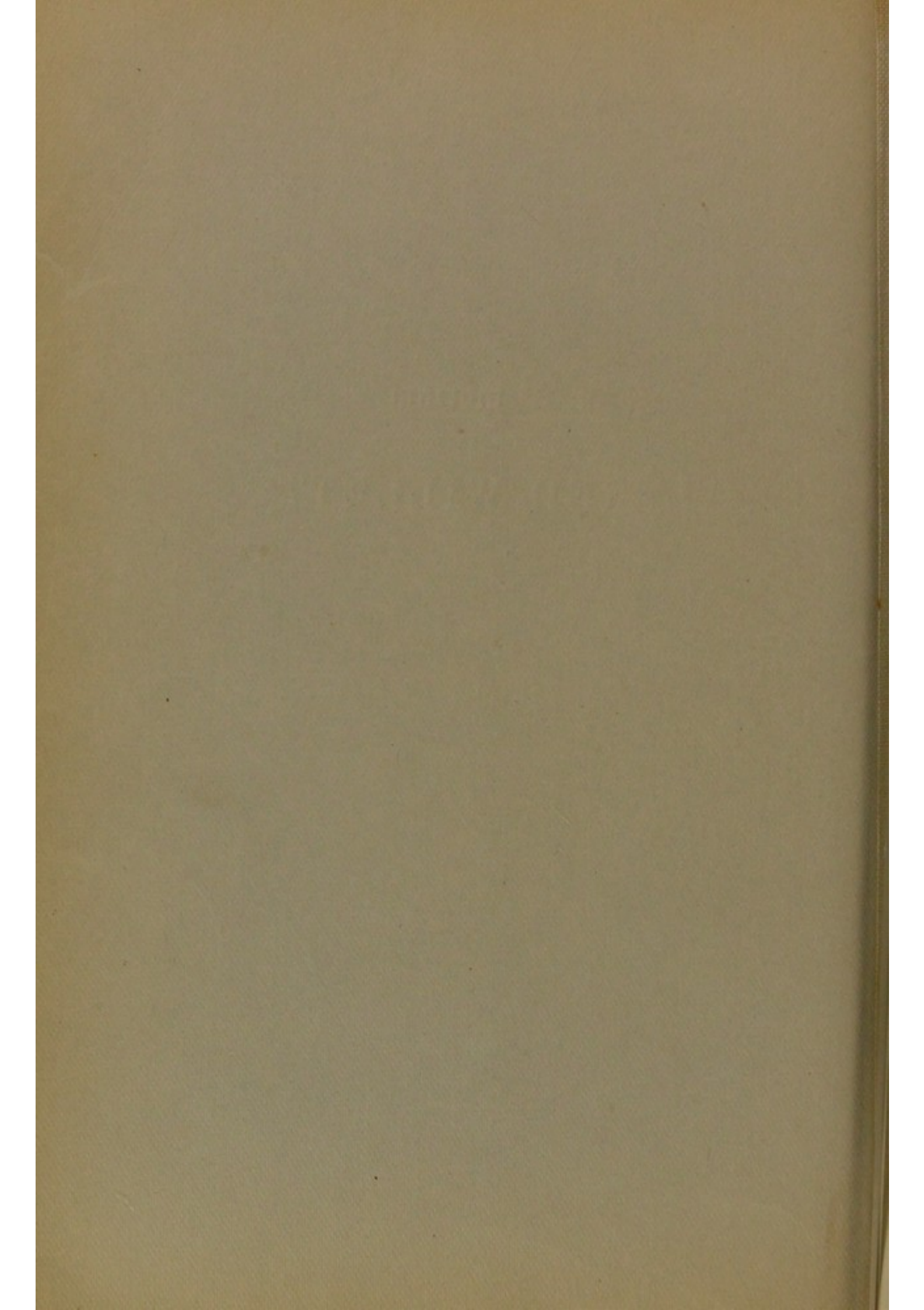
In Memoriam

ALFRED WILLETT

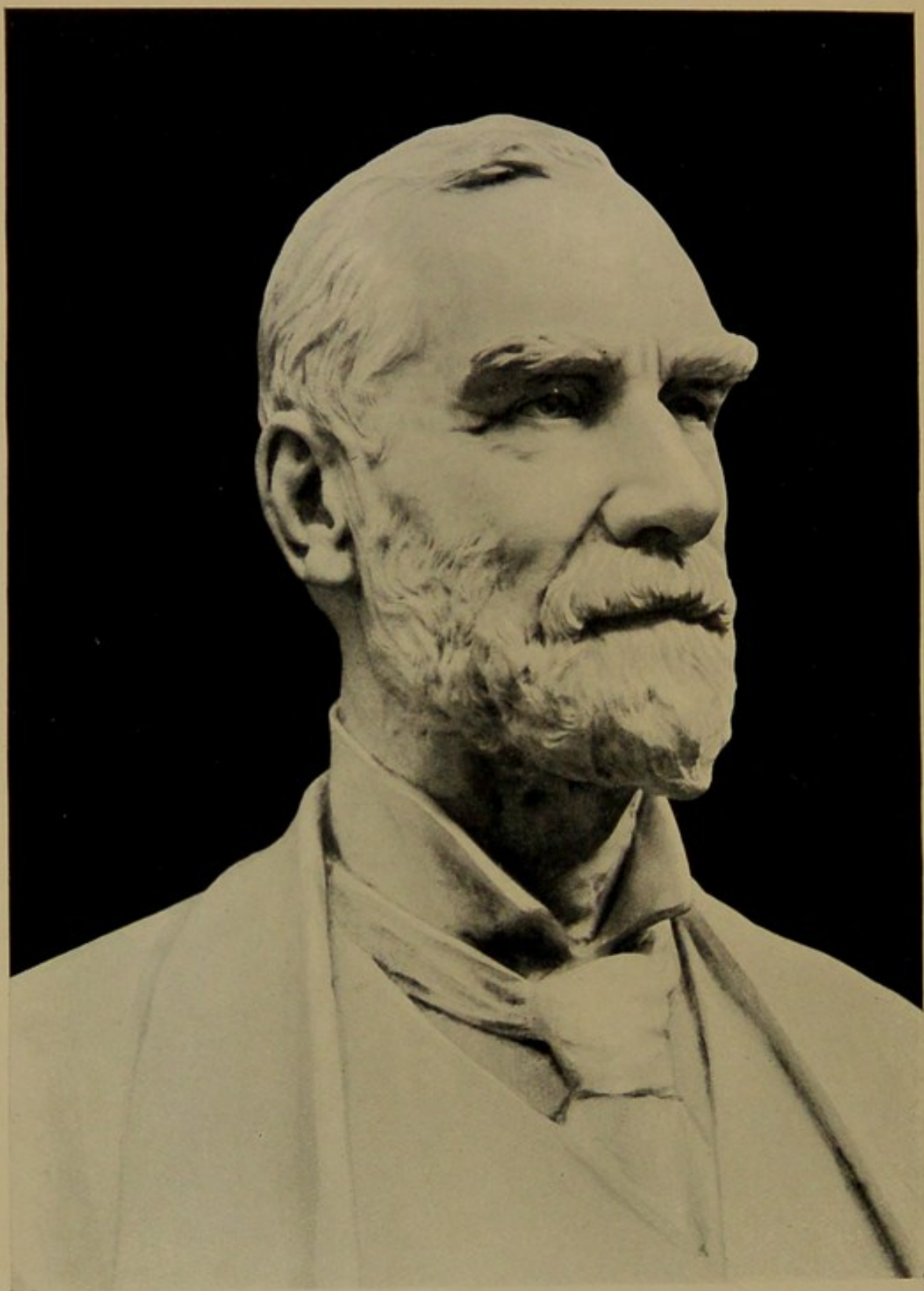
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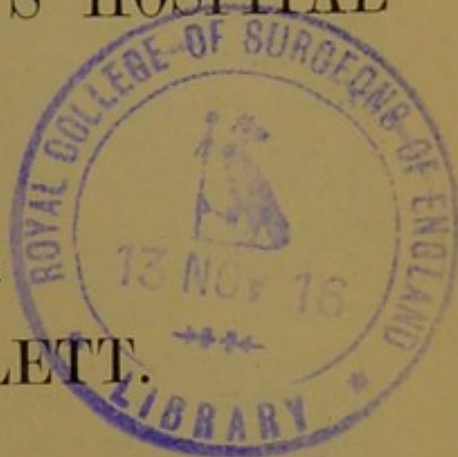


ALFRED WILLETT.

SAINT BARTHOLOMEW'S HOSPITAL REPORTS.

In Memoriam

ALFRED WILLETT.



Alfred Willett was born in 1837, so that, at the time of his death, he was in his seventy-seventh year. He was the son of Mr. William Catt, one of the best known and most highly respected citizens of Brighton. In 1863 Mr. Catt, by royal licence, and under the terms of his sister's will, took the name of Willett. Although our late colleague, in the early period of his life, was Alfred Catt, it will be best to speak of him all along as Alfred Willett, the name under which he was known among us for a period nearly approaching sixty years, and by which he will be held in lasting and affectionate remembrance. He was educated under the Rev. Edward Welldon (father of Bishop Welldon) at Tonbridge School, where he had for his schoolmate Tom Smith, who, later on, was to be his colleague and lifelong intimate. On leaving Tonbridge School he became a scholar at King's College, London, where he met with his cousin, William Grantham, afterwards Sir William Grantham, Judge of the Queen's Bench Division of the High Court of Justice. When he came to choose a career he was offered an appointment in a bank with the prospect of a lucrative commercial future, but he declined it and turned to the medical profession, to which he had long felt strongly attracted, and was articled to Mr. George Lowdell, a surgeon practising in Brighton. Soon afterwards he became a pupil at the Sussex County Hospital, an institution with which, in after life, he was proud to have been connected, and for which he always entertained a warm interest and regard, for he felt that while there he had gained much valuable experience and

made many good friends. In 1857 he entered as a student at St. Bartholomew's Hospital, where Langton came in May, and Marrant Baker and myself in the October of the following year (1858); a group of four, all of whom in turn became members of the surgical staff. At this period of his life Willett was a conspicuous figure; he was a little over six feet, straight-limbed and strongly built, dark and very good-looking, and with a manner which was very attractive,—quite self-reliant, yet always kindly and considerate. He was a good swimmer, and became an excellent fives player in the court facing the Abernethy block. He was so often silent while others in the hot blood of youth were ready at any moment to "expatiate free o'er all this scene of man" that many thought him dull, but this was a false impression. Those who really knew him, while wishing that he would move on, alike in talk and action, with less measured deliberation and with a little more esprit and go, saw that he had the sterling qualities of thoroughness and robust common-sense, and that he so thought out everything with which he had to deal that his opinion was always weighty and reliable; there was nothing trivial or out of focus in what he said, and he defended any views which he had formed with increasing warmth and animation, and a stolid persistence which his opponents thought amounted to obstinacy. I often watched him and never, that I can remember, saw him yield, yet one admired his tenacity, for it was obviously the outcome of conviction, and completely honest. He never wanted to win for the sake of winning, or for the pleasure of getting the better of an opponent; he was quite incapable of playing a trick or stealing a march, and if he found his adversary shifty or changing his ground he became stern or even contemptuous.

In 1860 he was house-surgeon to Mr. Lloyd, and a little later was appointed Demonstrator of Practical Surgery in the Medical School. In 1865 he became Warden of the College in succession to Dr. James Andrew. This office he resigned in 1867 on his marriage with Rose, the only daughter of Sir George and of Lady Burrows—whose father was John Abernethy. From this date he resided for many years at 36 Wimpole Street. In 1865 he became Assistant Surgeon, and in 1879 full Surgeon, while in 1889 he was made Joint Lecturer on Surgery with H. Marsh. He did not, however, find this work congenial, and after a short interval resigned.

As a member of the Medical Committee and of the Medical Council he was entirely in his element, and rendered most valuable services to both his school and hospital, for he was a thorough man of business and spared neither time nor trouble. He was

Treasurer of the School from 1879, when he succeeded Callender, until he retired from the post of Surgeon in 1901, and it was very largely through his sympathy and active co-operation that it became financially possible to carry through the scheme for acquiring a recreation ground for the use of the students. Dr. Shore writes:

"Before 1892 the various students' clubs had been separate, and isolated from each other, and each club had made its own arrangements for the use of grounds, &c. This was very inconvenient, and it gradually came to be recognised that the only satisfactory arrangement would be to have a ground common to all the clubs that might wish to use it. The necessary preliminary, therefore, was the amalgamation of all the students' clubs. This was agreed to unanimously at a general meeting of students in July 1892.

"After the amalgamation of the students' clubs had become sufficiently established on a working basis, Dr. Shore as President, and Mr. Bowlby as Treasurer of the Amalgamated Clubs, searched round for suitable land, and when they had decided that a plot at Winchmore Hill was in every way suited to the requirements of the clubs, they approached Mr. Willett, as Treasurer of the Medical School, to find out how far the school could help financially. Mr. Willett was most sympathetic, and was soon ready with a scheme for providing money.

"After these informal negotiations, the matter was brought formally before the school committee, and a sub-committee consisting of Dr. Church, Mr. Willett, Mr. Bruce Clarke, Dr. West, Mr. Bowlby, and Dr. Shore was appointed to consider and report on the question of the purchase of a ground for the students' clubs. Early in August 1893 this sub-committee reported in favour of the scheme for the investment of School funds in the purchase of freehold land.

"This sub-committee, which was called the 'Ground Sub-committee,' was then reappointed to carry the proposal into effect, and Mr. Willett's influence and business acumen as a member of it were of the greatest help in arranging the financial details connected with the purchase of the ground, the fencing of it, levelling and laying it out, and the erection of a pavilion, all of which was carried through at a capital expenditure of £7668. This work of necessity took considerable time, but everything was ready for the use of the students at the beginning of the cricket season in 1895, and the ground was formally opened on 8th June 1895 by the Treasurer of the Hospital, Sir Trevor Lawrence.

"The basis of the arrangement regarding the ground is:—

The Medical School invested some accumulated funds, partially allocated to endowing some of the scholarships, in the purchase of the ground, &c. This not proving sufficient to complete the scheme, the school borrowed on mortgage the Brackenbury Scholarship Fund from the Hospital as Trustees for that fund; and the Students' Amalgamated Clubs undertook to pay a fixed sum of £300 per annum out of the subscriptions to the amalgamation as interest on the total capital outlay. Thus the students obtained the use of a first-class ground at a moderate annual cost, and the School was enabled to slightly increase the value of the Brackenbury Scholarships, whilst having a sufficient annual income over and above to gradually accumulate a redemption and reserve fund. The ground is 10 acres in extent, and is probably now worth considerably more than the sum for which it was purchased."

Willetts was always so honourable and fair-minded, so generous, and so inclined to kindness in all its forms, that a single phrase describes him—he was one of Nature's gentlemen. It has been the good fortune of our School that for many years we have had those among us who have not only attained professional eminence, but have been exponents of the highest principles of conduct—among others Sir George Burrows, Paget, Henry Jeaffreson, Kirkes, Savory, Tom Smith, Morratt Baker, and Samuel Gee. On this list Alfred Willetts was conspicuous. The worthiness of his character was strongly shown in the influence which he exercised amongst his colleagues. It was very difficult to contravene good taste or to make bad blood when he was present. There sat the strong inflexible man who, though perhaps he said nothing, wore the aspect of earnest protest. After witnessing a warm encounter in which I was concerned, he came to each of the combatants and urged us to think the matter over and compose our differences, for, he said, there must be no quarrels. Although I had no doubt that I was absolutely in the right, while my opponent was equally sure that he was right and that I was entirely wrong, neither of us could resist him, and the matter afterwards ran a smooth course. I know that he played the part of peacemaker on other like occasions, not, however, by ignoring difficulties, but by appealing to good feeling and good colleagueship.

His natural sense of justice and his inborn generosity were always evident in his attitude towards his Sisters and his House Surgeons and Dressers. He was not easy-going, but had very clear views as to how things should be done, and if work was not properly and fully carried out he would at once show not only that he was dissatisfied but that he expected amendment. But

one and all felt that he appreciated and was grateful for their help. The difficulties in which nurses are often placed are greatly mitigated if the surgeon under whom they have to discharge their duties is a gentleman, and Willett could never be anything else; and many a nurse who, at starting, felt that she could scarcely face her work, was grateful for his chivalrous consideration; and, of course, his influence reacted on everyone who was working in connection with him. He treated his House Surgeon as a colleague to whom he stood *in loco parentis*, and he promoted his interests in every way he could, especially by letting him perform any operations, under his supervision, for which he considered him competent; while if his junior fell into any of the traps which always beset the path of a house surgeon in a large London hospital, he forthwith ascertained all the circumstances, and unless there was something really wrong, he was determined that the reputation of his colleague should be fully cleared. The result was that he enjoyed not only the confidence but the warm regard and gratitude of every one with whom he worked. Only his intimates knew the part he played in dealing with instances of misfortune or distress. Whenever he heard that any St. Bartholomew's man, or his family, was in trouble he at once took the matter up, and if the case was genuine—this was essential—he spared no pains to see what kind of assistance would be most useful. He always had sound advice to give, and many a one could tell how much he owed to the fund which Willett either collected or furnished out of his own pocket.

And there was a personal note of sympathy between him and every patient under his care. His patients were not mere "cases," but each one was an individual for whom he did his best.

In any instance about which he asked for a consultation, I was struck by the thorough and sound manner in which Willett had thought the case over, and the care he had taken to make up his mind as to what should be done. Whatever proceeding he adopted he carried out with invincible steadiness and perseverance. Indeed, he was so deliberate that some of his operations were unduly prolonged. When he was in charge of the Orthopaedic Department, Lewis Sayre had recently introduced the plaster of Paris jacket for the treatment of scoliosis and of tuberculous disease of the spine, and he determined to give it a thorough trial. There were plenty of cases, and every Friday afternoon, beginning at 2.30, he sometimes had not finished till 6.30. Through all this he went steadily on without hurry, or complaint that the work was tedious. He soon, however,

satisfied himself that Sayre's estimate of the value of the treatment had to be very considerably discounted, and he afterwards mainly used Cocking's poro-plastic felt.

He was very successful in the treatment of advanced cases of flat-foot. His method was, the patient being under an anæsthetic, to forcibly turn the foot inwards so as to amend its position and break down any adhesions which had formed. Then, after moving the foot freely in all directions, he put it up, well inverted, in plaster of Paris. In a few days he removed the plaster and used passive movements and massage, soon to be followed by "tiptoe" and other exercises, regularly carried out and persevered in for several weeks, and combined with necessary rest. He used mechanical supports only in exceptional cases. It is interesting to notice that these proceedings bear a very close resemblance to the kind of treatment now employed by bone-setters and osteopaths, with remarkable results which have never before been witnessed, and which, in the eyes of the public, clearly show that bone-setters and osteopaths possess knowledge, and practise methods of treatment of which surgeons are entirely ignorant. In his Bradshaw Lecture at the College of Surgeons in 1897 he gave a very instructive account of his experiences of osteoclasis and osteotomy—proceedings of which his experience was very large and to which he had devoted much attention.

Willett was a member of the Council of the Royal College of Surgeons from 1887 to 1903, and twice Vice-President. When his time came to be President, and when, had he consented, his election was a matter of course, he declined. His reasons for this decision did him great honour. He differed on some important questions from a considerable number of the Council, and he felt that his position as President would bring him into variance with those with whom he ought to be able to work with confidence and agreement.

The College Council is a body of mixed tendencies. In Willett's time some of its members were staunch Conservatives; "with pack-horse constancy they kept the road": for them was no variableness, neither shadow of turning. Another group, of whom I was one, were advocates of changes which the whirligig of time, as Shakespeare has it, and the fitness of things had, as we believed, made desirable. Two examples will illustrate Willett's position. He was strongly in favour of the direct representation of Members of the College on the Council, and he considered that the President should be elected not by the Council but by the general body of Fellows. The arguments for and against the direct representation of Members

need not be fully considered here. I may, however, frankly own that it has always seemed to me desirable that direct representation, although it cannot be demanded as a legal right, should be granted. I do not believe that any harm could come of it, but that, on the contrary, it would, by consolidating and strengthening the profession in its dealings with the public, be highly advantageous. Had the relations between the Members and the Council, instead of being those of long-standing distrust and open dissension, been those of mutual confidence and amity, the history of the recent struggle between the profession and the Government in connection with the Insurance Act would, from the first, have taken a very different course and led to a very different result. As matters stood the profession was as a house divided against itself, and the usual result followed. It was a very grave matter that, owing to its old internal dispute, the College of Surgeons was not in a position to join the College of Physicians with the profession solid behind them, in demanding fair play at the hands of the Chancellor of the Exchequer. As it was, Insurance, the idea of which met in the profession with universal approval, was rushed through helter-skelter with crude violence and very unscrupulous methods, and the service of medicine to the community was very heavily discounted. Perhaps the attempt to renew confidence and friendly feeling may some day be renewed by those Members of the Council who feel a liberal impulse stirring within them, and even the most conservative may see that the time has come when a limited representation, sufficient for direct interchange of opinions and discussion, may be safely accorded.

As to the election of the President. This question may be looked at from two points of view. Of course, as a general rule, when any committee or consultative body has been appointed the members proceed to elect one of their number to preside over and guide their deliberations. And inasmuch as this individual—President or Chairman—is to be endowed with authority to which all agree to submit, the lot naturally falls upon the person who enjoys the confidence and commands the assent of the greatest number concerned. Now it may well be maintained that, so far as any committee itself is involved, this is the best method of selecting a chairman. But it is to be remembered that in many cases a chairman has a good deal of influence not only over the committee immediately affected, but over the whole body which the committee represents. So that a strong Liberal may exercise a general influence

directly opposed to that of a strong Conservative and vice versa. And it seemed to Willett that, as this is the case, the election of the President of the Royal College of Surgeons should not be in the hands of the twenty-four individuals who form the Council, but in the hands of the whole constituency. The University of Cambridge is a case in point. At Cambridge the Vice-Chancellor is not elected by the Council of the Senate—eighteen in number—but by the Senate itself, which includes every graduate of the University who has kept his name on the books of his college. It is true, on the other hand, that the Speaker of the House of Commons is chosen by the members, but he is neutral and takes no share in influencing the preponderance of either political party. His functions are strictly limited to the keeping of order, and to the regulation of debate under the rules, the casting of the deciding vote in cases of an equal division, and speaking in general committee. This neutral position of the Speaker is so clearly established that instances have occurred in which a new House of Commons, instead of changing the Speaker in correspondence with the change of the party in power, has continued the former Speaker in office. In the American House of Representatives the choice of the Speaker is a matter entirely of party politics. He is a strong party man, and although *elected* by the members he is *nominated* by the dominant party. In other words, he is chosen not by the House, but by the whole constituency. Now Willett saw that it was quite possible that the Council might elect a President who would not have been elected by the general body of Fellows, had the choice been in their hands. It is difficult to say whether, in practice, the method which he considered the proper one would be satisfactory. Many objections readily present themselves, and obviously his view could not be realised until radical changes in the constitution of the College had been carried out. But that he held the opinion I have mentioned shows that he was by conviction a sturdy Liberal.

Willett held many important appointments. He was President of the Royal Medical and Chirurgical Society, Visitor for King Edward's Hospital Fund, and Member of the Council of the Committee of Distribution of the Hospital Sunday Fund. He was also Examiner in Surgery at the Royal College of Physicians, and in the University of Cambridge, where he was brought into official relation with Sir George Humphry, whose strong points and engaging little ways he thoroughly understood, and with whom, from his youth, he was on very friendly terms.

He was so willing to be useful and so well known as a wise counsellor that he was in much request for honorary service to various hospitals and similar institutions. For many years he was Surgeon to St. Luke's Hospital for Lunatics, to Queen Charlotte's Hospital, and to the Foundling Hospital. He was for some time Surgeon to the Evelina Hospital for Sick Children, and a Member of the Council of Directors of the Sea Bathing Hospital, Margate, and he was on the Board of Management of the Metropolitan Convalescent Institution. To all of these institutions he rendered services which were much valued and very cordially acknowledged.

He retired in 1901, after having held the office of surgeon for the long period of twenty-two years. During this time he had had forty-four house-surgeons, and all of these by a common impulse determined to present him with a testimonial, in the form of a marble bust; and Mr. Hope Pinker, who had produced the very admirable bust of Sir William Savory now in the Council Chamber of the Royal College of Surgeons, was asked to furnish it. This proved extraordinarily good and characteristic. From it a silver medal prepared by Mr. Boucher, with quite remarkable success, became the "Willett Medal" to be awarded each year to the candidate in the Brackenbury Surgical Scholarship Examination who should obtain the highest marks in operative surgery. Those who win it in the years that are to come may trust it to bring home to them a true presentment of the man who challenges them to do their best in one of the most important departments of surgery.

H. M.

