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Yours truly
Jonathan Ormea

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IN MEMORIAM.

JAMES MATTHEWS DUNCAN,

M.D., F.R.S., Etc.

BY

ALBAN DORAN.

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Dear Doran

I thank you very much for giving me your Memoir of the good man Matthew Duncan. Both your intimate and your description of his character and his work seem to me excellent.

Very truly yours

James Paget.

JAMES MATTHEWS DUNCAN,

M.D., F.R.S., Etc.

This great obstetrician died at Baden-Baden on September 1st. His fame was so widespread, his work so valuable, and his individuality so marked, that a short review of his professional career and opinions will doubtless prove of interest to our readers. His personal character, his manly bluntness harmoniously blended with wit and geniality, and other equally admirable qualities, earned for him profound love and esteem amongst his relatives and pupils. His memory requires no vulgar and tedious panegyric, nor need we dwell on the numerous academic honors which were showered upon him from an early stage of his career. They were the result of the fame reaped from his labors, and it is with those labors that we have to deal.

Dr. Matthews Duncan was born in April, 1826, in the city of Aberdeen, where his father was engaged in mercantile pursuits. Educated in his native city, he early displayed scientific instincts. His professional studies were carried on in Edinburgh and Paris; in 1846 he took the degree of Doctor of Medicine at Marischal College, Aberdeen. Paris, in those days, afforded the industrious student unusual opportunities for studying pathology. The mortality was high, the facilities for obtaining necropsies were great, and the system of medical education did not force study on the unwilling, at the expense, perhaps, of the able and the industrious. Young Duncan eagerly sought every case of death during pregnancy or after labor, in times when obstetrical pathology would hardly be said to exist. He thoroughly examined the pelvic viscera, connective tissue, and peritoneum in these victims of the relative ignorance which then prevailed. Thus was founded

his fame as a scientific authority in obstetrics and gynecology. Thanks to him and to certain excellent French tutors and fellow-students who were associated with him in his labors, humanity gained invaluable knowledge of the treatment and prevention of diseases of the puerperium.

Attracted by his merits, Sir James Simpson engaged Dr. Duncan as his private assistant. The history of the introduction of anesthesia is familiar to every American. Our readers are, therefore, doubtless aware that, when Simpson began his experiments on chloroform, Dr. Duncan was the first person who submitted to be placed under the influence of that compound.

Dr. Duncan at this period commenced private practice in Edinburgh. He was appointed physician to several institutions, and in 1853 he began a course of lectures on midwifery at the Extra-Mural School which rapidly established his reputation as a teacher.

When thus settled in Edinburgh he soon attracted the attention and excited the admiration of the profession by the valuable contributions which he made to science and to medical literature. A fair review of all his work would fill a whole number of this JOURNAL, but some notice must be taken of his best known theories and doctrines. The first of his writings appeared in April, 1853, in the *Monthly Journal of Medical Science*, and was entitled "The Theory of Menstruation in Early Pregnancy, Superfetation, and the Site of Insertion of the Ovum." He brought forward anatomical proof of the possibility of menstrual fluid being naturally or easily derived from the lining membrane of the cavity of the uterus, up till the end, at least, of the second month. The mucous plug which sealed up the os uteri might easily become displaced. In 1855 appeared "The Statics of Pregnancy." This work contained certain deep researches into the natural philosophy of gestation. The section on the position of the fetus was a fine specimen of sound scientific work. With regard to the uterus, he held that, both in the horizontal and in the erect position of the woman, the pregnant uterus was in an oblique position. By this arrangement the uterus was preserved in a uniform condition free from many statical variations which might otherwise affect it suddenly

and injuriously. Dr. Duncan also created a sensation in the anatomical and obstetrical world by the theories expressed in his "Pelvis studied with a View to Obstetrics." In this paper he demonstrated that the sacrum was not a wedge, nor was it the keystone of the so-called "pelvic arch." It was a strong transverse beam curved on its anterior surface, its two ends, the auricular surfaces, coming in contact with the corresponding parts of the iliac bones. From its position it could not, in Dr. Duncan's opinion, act as a wedge. In a series of "Papers on the Female Perineum"[1] Dr. Duncan insisted that at first labors an inevitable posterior laceration of the vaginal orifice took place. He favored the practice of supporting the perineum in labor. He considered that laceration of the perineum was not, in any strict sense, a cause of prolapse or procidentia. It favored complete descent of the uterus, so that restoration of the perineum was useful to resist the progress of the descending uterus, but the operation did not remove the cause of displacement. In 1869 appeared a work which was perhaps the most characteristic production of his mind and pen. This was the famous "Practical Treatise on Perimetritis and Parametritis." We all know how he drew sharp pathological and diagnostic distinctions between the two diseases. His conclusions remain contested to the present day—indeed, his theories on gynecology were never so widely accepted as were his doctrines on pregnancy and labor. The work, however, won the admiration of its readers on account of the extreme clearness with which the author expressed his propositions and conclusions. It was the forerunner of his "Lectures on the Diseases of Women," compiled throughout in the same scientific and literary style. The most remarkable, though not the most characteristic, of Dr. Duncan's works was his "Fecundity, Fertility, and Sterility," which first appeared in 1866, and formed the basis of his Galstonian Lectures "On Sterility in Women," delivered in the Royal College of Physicians in 1883. This valuable publication was the fruit of very subtle researches into ques-

[1] Published collectively, under that title, in 1879, after the author had settled in London. The other papers above mentioned may be found in Dr. Duncan's "Researches in Obstetrics" and "Contributions to the Mechanism of Natural and Morbid Parturition."

tions of age, sexual temperament, and other factors in relation to barrenness and the reverse condition. In 1870 Dr. Duncan brought out an essay "On the Mortality of Childbed and Maternity Hospitals."

In 1870 Sir James Simpson died, and a contest took place for the vacant chair of midwifery in the University of Edinburgh. Dr. Duncan, Dr. Keiller, and Dr. A. R. Simpson were candidates, and the opinion of the profession was strongly in favor of Dr. Duncan, but Dr. Simpson was the successful candidate. This election caused a great deal of stir at the time, and there can be little doubt that Dr. Duncan's disappointment was intense; nevertheless he continued to work for seven years longer in Edinburgh with unabated energy.

The British Empire is controlled by a race whose instincts are essentially averse to extreme centralization; nevertheless British talent nearly always gravitates to London. Dr. Matthews Duncan was drawn to the metropolis through the fame of his reputation as a teacher, and also through his own inclination, for London was a new field for the indulgence of his favorite resource—the education of pupils. Dr. Greenhalgh retiring in 1877, Dr. Duncan was appointed in his stead Physician-Accoucheur and Lecturer on Midwifery to St. Bartholomew's Hospital, an institution with which is associated the largest medical school in London.[1] The peculiar system which prevails alone in the British capital is open to certain objections, but it greatly favors voluntary enterprise and individual action. Dr. Duncan took full advantage of his liberty. Not only did he teach in the wards with great energy, but, holding that the regulation course of systematic lectures on midwifery was insufficient, he increased their number, delivering a lecture on every week day in the summer session. In winter he gave a clinical lecture once a fortnight—the foundation of his famous "Lectures on the Diseases of Women," a work which has passed through several editions. His discourses proved highly popular and drew large audiences, partly composed of qualified men. His pupils soon began to distinguish themselves before boards of examiners,

[1] There are eleven such schools, it must be remembered, attached to hospitals in London, exclusive of an institution for female students. They must not be confounded with the "faculty of medicine" at universities.

but the still greater good which he effected by instilling high principles of professional morality into the minds of his disciples was incalculable. Of his attitude in respect to operative gynecology more will be said presently, as it needs special consideration.

During his residence in London, which lasted from September, 1877, till his death, Dr. Duncan's private practice became large and fashionable. He attended H. R. H. the Duchess of Albany in her confinement. Notwithstanding his practice and his hospital duties, he found time to get through plenty of scientific work. He was an almost constant attendant at the meetings of the Obstetrical Society of London, of which he was president in 1881, and contributed yearly one or more memoirs. They mostly related to the physics of labor, and have appeared in abstract in this JOURNAL. Perhaps the most important were the exhaustive monographs on "Lupus of the Female Generative Organs." The author caused a fine series of water colors to be prepared, taken from life; they illustrated the appearances of several varieties of disease which he classed together as "lupus." These drawings were presented to the museum of the Royal College of Surgeons of England.

Dr. Matthews Duncan's health became greatly impaired during the early part of last spring. He suffered from gouty eczema and attacks of angina. He lectured on obstetrics as usual and with undiminished energy till the middle of June. Early in that month he spoke for the last time at the Obstetrical Society. At the end of June, however, he broke down completely and gave up all hospital work. A month later he went to Blankenberghe, a seaside resort in Belgium, where he enjoyed the company of Sir William Turner. His health improved and he bathed in the sea. Early in August he went on with his family to Baden-Baden. For long he believed that his symptoms were neurasthenic; but his father had died of heart disease, and now unmistakable signs of cardiac mischief set in. On August 17th, 18th, and 19th violent attacks of angina occurred, and edema of the lungs, albuminuria, and anasarca developed. Under the care of Dr. Gilbert, of Baden-Baden, and Dr. Aldren Turner he improved, the pulmonary and renal symptoms subsided after cupping, and it

was decided to remove him to London on September 2d. At 5 o'clock on September 1st, however, he died suddenly when lying in bed comfortably supported by pillows.

The funeral took place on September 8th. The first part of the ceremony was held at St. Mark's Church, North Audley street, London, near the residence of the deceased in Brook street. The clergyman who officiated was the Rev. R. Borrodale Savory, rector of St. Bartholomew's the Greater, and son of the eminent surgeon. Notwithstanding the time of year—for London doctors take their annual holiday about this season—the church was crowded with members of the profession, including Sir William Savory, Sir Spencer Wells, Sir Crichton Browne, Dr. Quain, who represented the Queen, a large portion of Dr. Duncan's colleagues from St. Bartholomew's Hospital, and more than half the senior and junior obstetric physicians from the eleven medical schools in the British metropolis. There were besides a large number of old pupils, English, Scotch, and Irish, and many doctors unassociated in any way with the deceased. The interment took place at a cemetery at East Finchley, to the north of London. The day was warm and bright.

Dr. Matthews Duncan died just upon the eve of his retirement from his hospital and teaching appointments. The instruction of his class was to him not so much a labor of love as an intense pleasure, and he certainly did not look forward to retirement with enthusiasm. The loss which his family and the profession have sustained is indeed irreparable. To his wife and children he was devotedly attached, and all must sympathize with them in their bereavement, sustained at a time when they were looking forward to days which he might have spent more freely in their company than during the period of his arduous though congenial academic duties. The profession, too, will sorely grudge the loss of many spare hours which he assuredly would have utilized for their benefit. As the writer of these lines can testify, no member of the profession, particularly of that branch with which this JOURNAL is concerned, could fail to be the better for the amount of medical knowledge, medical lore, and medical ethics which flowed from Dr. Matthews Duncan's lips in the course of an hour or two spent in his company.

Dr. Matthews Duncan will best be remembered as a teacher in the widest sense of the word, an educator of unqualified youths, and an instructor of his profession. Many men on the staff of medical schools have, of their own accord, devoted much more time to clinical teaching than was demanded by the regulations of the curriculum. Few, very few, however, have ever gone so far as Dr. Duncan, and of their own free will increased the number of systematic as well as clinical lectures required by the terms of their professorship. The natural result of his disinterested industry was the intense reverence with which his name was and is held by his pupils. None of us can fail to admire the energy with which he continued his self-imposed professional duties to the last, notwithstanding heavy professional work and severe physical exhaustion due to failing health.

Science must, we believe, most commend Dr. Matthews Duncan as an obstetrician. His skill in the lying-in chamber was well known. He was second to none of his compeers in doing all that is possible to maintain obstetrics as a science and at the same time as a profession suited for men of culture, refinement, and education. He thoroughly investigated the physics of pregnancy and labor. His contributions to literature on the subject of the position of the fetus are amongst the best evidences of his correct method of research. He experimented on the normal fetus out of the uterus, placing it in fluids of the same specific gravity as the liquor amnii, and found that it floated in such fluids in the same position as it naturally assumed in the uterus. When the fetus became decomposed it floated in a different manner, just as, under the same circumstances, it tended to lie in a different position in the uterine cavity. Thus Dr. Duncan trusted to direct experiment, instead of beginning by an assumption that a vital force in the uterine walls or some mechanical arrangement in the bony pelvis forced the fetus into the right position, and then setting to work to prove the assumption.

Dr. Matthews Duncan held that the obstetrician should devote himself to the treatment of pregnancy, labor, and the puerperium, undertaking at the same time the management of diseases of non-pregnant women as far as therapeutic aid would avail. He distrusted the practice of abdominal section

by obstetricians. "Nobody can be a Sir Charles Locock and a Sir Spencer Wells at the same time," he would say; and he acted up to his convictions, although his most distinguished pupils have not all followed his example. This matter leads to another subject—Dr. Duncan's powers and opinions as a gynecologist. Most assuredly the profession in general never held him to be so recognized an authority in diseases of women as in obstetrics. He was none the less one of the soundest of pathologists and the best of clinical observers. His saying above quoted will clear away a great deal of misunderstanding; being a practical obstetrician, his bent was towards obstetrics. He never attempted "major" gynecology.[1] As to practical "minor" gynecology, he cannot be blamed for treating it with distrust when we bear in mind what the term implied in the days of his youth. We cannot be surprised if he occasionally overlooked what might be good when he had to deal with so much that was bad. It was inevitable that his training and surroundings must lead him to condemn operations which other good men practised on grounds which they deemed perfectly justifiable. This explains his aversion to trachelorrhaphy. Again, Dr. Duncan's peculiar views on gynecological ethics were the results of his instincts as a teacher. He considered that the student must first learn the nature of the parts with which he has to deal, and then acquire the art of detecting the diseases with which those parts are affected. This was his education, and when thus educated, and not till then, he could see an operation performed with profit; not till then was he competent to judge whether the operation was justifiable. Dr. Duncan strongly objected to a system which teaches the bare steps of major operations and justifies them on the score that a few experts can claim successful results. The student, however, is ever eager to see and hear of big surgery, and we all know that the teacher must cool such pernicious ardor and show him that he has many things to learn before he can profitably study and practise operations. Dr. Duncan constantly acted

[1] The arguments which he put forward in a paper entitled "Is Ovariotomy Justifiable or Not?" (*Lancet*, February, 1857) sound strange in the present day. They were then far from fallacious, for their end was the confutation of faulty arguments advanced by operators of small experience.

71, BROOK STREET,
GROSVENOR SQUARE. W.

Jan: 14 1881

Dear Dr. Doran

With reference to our Conversation (with you) in the Obst: Soc: meeting, let me refer you to Lawson Tait's new paper (p. 12) "An account of seventy-seven consecutive cases of abdominal section" &c. It is confirmatory of my report of use of hydrosperitoneum & opening abdomen

Yours Ly

J. Matthews Duncan

as the good teacher in this respect. The consequence was that many of his remarks which were meant for the class-room were sometimes taken as unjustifiable criticisms on operators of high experience. His real views on ovariotomy and allied operations may be better judged by the admiration which he often expressed for the work of his friend Dr. Keith. We must not harbor the impression that Dr. Matthews Duncan distrusted ovariotomists to the last because his system discouraged any ill-advised efforts to manufacture Wellses and Keiths.