

Obituary : Charles Henry Felix Routh, M.D. (Lond.), M.R.C.P., M.R.C.S.

Contributors

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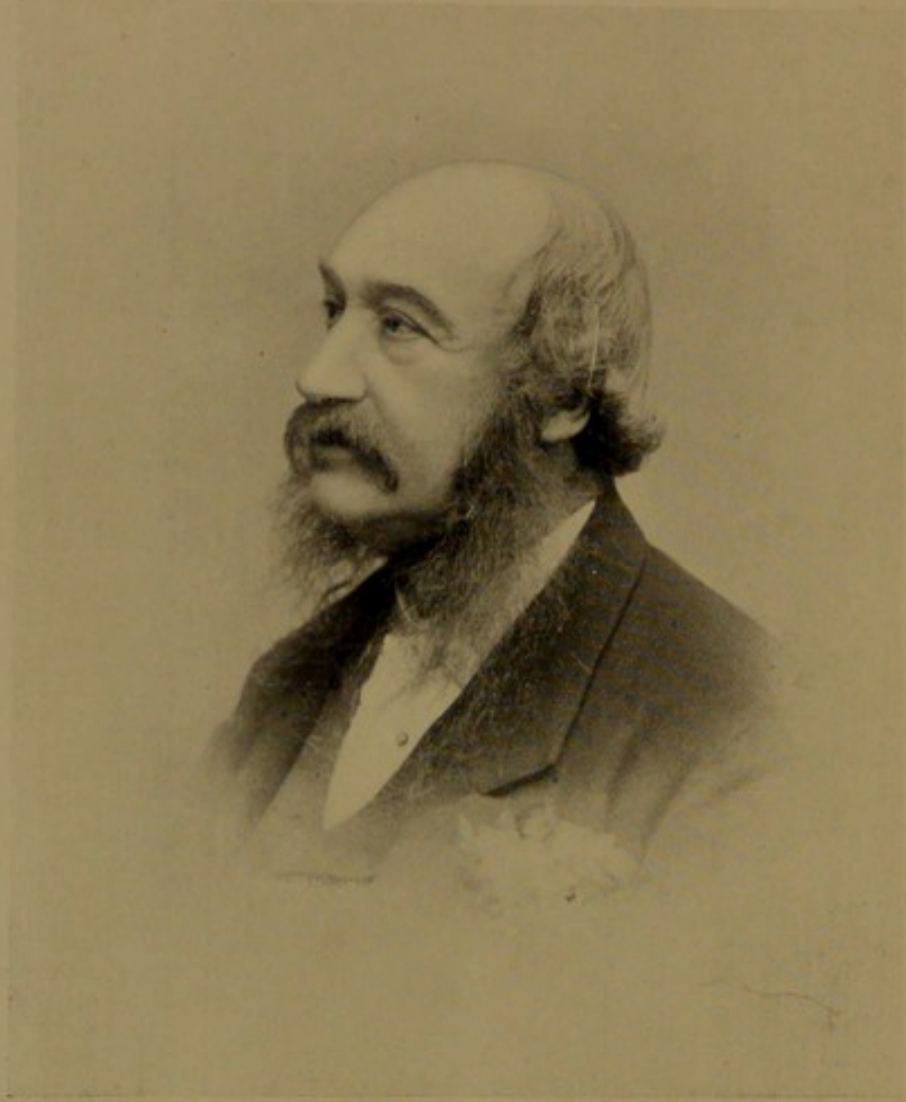
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London NW1 2BE UK
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CHARLES HENRY FELIX ROUTH.

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Obituary.

Charles Henry Felix Routh, M.D. (Lond.),
M.R.C.P., M.R.C.S.



SHERRATT AND HUGHES
33 Soho Square, London, W.
34 Cross Street, Manchester
1909

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Obituary.

**Charles Henry Felix Routh, M.D. (Lond.),
M.R.C.P., M.R.C.S.**

Consulting Physician to the Samaritan Free Hospital.

THIS veteran amongst British Obstetric Physicians died on February 19th, at the advanced age of 87. His medical studies began seventy years ago, and he had been for sixty-six years a legally qualified practitioner. He came of a very old family which took its name in the 12th century from Ruda or Routh in Holderness. He was born at Valetta, Malta, on January 4th, 1822; his father was Sir Randolph Isham Routh, K.C.B., Commissary General in the Army. In 1840 he joined the Medical Faculty of University College. As a sign of the times we may add that in the course of the same year T. Spencer Wells reported a case of "Placenta Presentation" in the *Lancet*, the same volume of that famous journal including a clinical lecture on "Ovarian Cysts" by Ingleby, at Birmingham, a great obstetrician. Routh distinguished himself as a student in his school, where Liston, Sharpey, Quain, Samuel Cooper, C. J. B. Williams, Anthony Todd Thomson, W. H. Walshe and Murphy the Obstetrician were the teachers, and it was Murphy who inspired him with a zeal for obstetrics and gynaecology.

After qualification Routh, receiving the degree of M.D. in 1845, studied in Paris, Prague and Vienna. In the Austrian capital he worked with the great and injured obstetrician Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis and returning home because of the revolutionary disturbances abroad he read at a meeting of the Royal Medical and Chirurgical Society a remarkable communication, which excited much attention yet was soon to be forgotten for years. In this memoir he demonstrated to the obstetricians of the United Kingdom Dr. Semmelweis' theory and practice, which he stoutly defended.

The importance of Dr. Routh's communication being so evident, we may disinter it from the dusty archives of the Royal Medical and Chirurgical Society and review its main features.

Its full title was "On the Causes of the Endemic Puerperal Fever of Vienna," it was communicated by Dr. Murphy, as Dr. Routh did not become a Fellow of the society until the succeeding year, 1849, and it was read at the meeting held on November 28th, 1848. An abstract appeared in the *Lancet* for December 9th, 1848, and as will be shown, the reading of the report was followed by an active

discussion. The entire paper is published in the *Medico-Chirurgical Transactions*, vol. xxxii, p. 27.

Routh began by stating that his attention had been called to a few cases of puerperal fever at home, so that when attending the hospitals of Paris and Vienna he had a rare opportunity of obtaining more extended information relative to the causes of this disease. Then he relates in full the management and mismanagement of the midwifery department associated with the University of Vienna. The general facts of the case are now well-known to us. There was a midwives' clinic and a student's clinic, the wards in the former were not so large nor so airy as those in the latter, yet the mortality in the fine wards where the students were instructed was scandalous. It ranged from 1 in 9·16 to 1 in 3·92, whilst in the midwives' clinic the range was from 1 in 91·66 to 1 in 34·37. The student was instructed on the *dead body of some female*, and each patient in his clinic was examined by at least five different persons. The midwife pupil was instructed on the *leather phantom* and *not* upon the *dead body*, yet each patient was examined as frequently or even more so than in the students' clinic. We reproduce Routh's italics. Several theories professing to explain the difference in the mortality in the two clinics were shown by Routh to be fallacious, on statistical evidence gleaned from the reports of French maternities. Blackman, of Edinburgh, he added, had stated in 1845, in the *Provincial Medical and Surgical Journal*, the ancestor of the *British Medical Journal*, that the medical attendant might communicate the disease, by retaining a portion of poison *subter unguis*, which he afterwards applied directly to the patient on making an examination *per vaginam*. Though this fact may have been suspected by many others, yet Routh was of opinion that it was first clearly enunciated by Dr. Semmelweis, assistant physician in the students' clinic at Vienna. The real source was found in the *hands of the medical men in attendance contaminated with cadaveric poisons*, staff and students, who diligently attended the numerous autopsies in the adjacent dead house. Then Semmelweis remembered how the midwife students made no autopsies and worked on the phantom. He, as we all know, put all students in quarantine for a day after attending an autopsy and directed all who worked in the students' midwifery clinic to wash their hands in a *solution of chlorine prior to and after every examination* made on the living subject. The result of these precautionary measures was that the *number of deaths at once fell to seven per month*, or the usual average in the midwives' clinic. Routh further reported that Michaelis, of Kiel, had for several months employed chlorinated lotions and had only lost one patient, although before that period the mortality was so great that he had been deliberating the closure of his hospital.

Such was Routh's testimony as to Semmelweis's practice, and it

is advisable to study the above quoted paper in full, not only in justice to Routh's memory, but also because it was a round unvarnished tale of his whole course of practical instruction in the elements of antiseptic midwifery. Many years later it was looked up and much of its contents largely quoted by Semmelweis himself, Györy and others, and we indicated Routh's claims in an article on "Oliver Wendell Holmes and the Contagiousness of Puerperal Fever" in the *JOURNAL* for December 1905. A good brief review of Semmelweis's life and its sad end was written by Theodore Duka in 1888, and entitled "Childbed Fever, its Causes and Prevention: A Life's History." But, in insisting as is consistent in this Obituary on the vindication of Semmelweis and the due recognition of his claims, we must remember it is with Routh that we are mainly concerned. Therefore, we will note what was said in the discussion which followed the reading of his paper, as reported in the *Lancet*. Dr. Webster, Physician to the St. George's and St. James's Dispensary, testified that the Vienna hospital was situated in a damp position, and was ill-ventilated and unclean. The students also were anything but cleanly. Dr. Murphy himself said that the novel point in the paper was the fact established by the author that puerperal fever was propagated by the students, who had been recently examining dead bodies. Let us note the word "novel" in Murphy's remarks. He further pointed out that Collins, Master of the Rotunda, entering into office when puerperal fever was raging there, succeeded in banishing it by insisting on cleanliness and ventilation hitherto neglected. Murphy, however, "referred to the case of a German student who was constantly at post mortem examinations, both within and without the house" (presumably the Rotunda?). "Puerperal fever seemed to attend him wherever he went; but on his giving up his pursuit after dead bodies the fever subsided." Routh, by the way, speaks of this student in his paper.

After Murphy's remarks, we find a curious passage. "The President" (J. Moncrieff Arnott) "enquired if it accorded with the experience of accoucheurs present, that pupils from the dissecting-room gave puerperal fever to their lying-in patients more frequently than midwives? *This appeal of the President was not responded to by a single accoucheur.*" Dr. Gregory, of the Small Pox Hospital, asked another question—Why puerperal fever had recently been so prevalent in lying-in hospitals? Dr. Copeland, Consulting Physician to Queen Charlotte's Hospital, admitted that the facts in Routh's paper were so convincing that obstetricians could scarcely doubt their accuracy, but he added that matrons and midwives who did not examine bodies were not free from contamination, which, we may add, was undoubtedly the case in 1848. Mr. C. Hewitt Moore, Surgeon to the Middlesex Hospital, gave sensational evidence of his experience in Vienna. "The amount of *post mortem* examination

(sic) going on in the Vienna University was remarkable. He had seen as many as fifteen bodies lying for examination in a morning. The students and professors had their hands immersed in these (sic) for hours together." The city itself, he added, was insanitary and typhus (*i.e.*, typhoid) was prevalent. In conclusion, Mr. Marshall warned the meeting that ablution in chloride of lime was not absolutely trustworthy. "He had been examining a body. He was called from thence to a labour, but took the precaution of changing all his clothes, and washing his hands in solution of chloride of lime; his patient, however, was seized with puerperal fever, and the next following three suffered from the same malady."

It seems strange that Routh's paper was so soon forgotten when we find that it gave rise to so active a discussion. Marshall was admirably candid; the curious episode about the President and his query is hard to explain.

Semmelweis proved deeply grateful to Routh for supporting his views, and in 1861 sent a copy of his work, *Die Aetiology, der Begriff und die Prophylaxis des Kindbettfiebers* to his former pupil. The copy, now in the library of the Royal Society of Medicine, bears the following letter on the fly leaf.

"Pesth, 22/5/61.

"Dear Friend,—As you have been so friendly in the year 1848 at the meeting of the English Doctors in London to bring forward a discussion on my opinion about the origin and prevention of fever in childbed, I take the liberty, having just finished a complete work upon the same subject, to send it you with the request to mention it again at the same meeting. I have also send my work to Webster, Copeland, Murphy, Simpson, Weber. Thanking you before for your trouble and hoping to hear something of you very soon, Your sincere friend, Ignaz Semmelweis."

This letter shows that Semmelweis could write English, the errors which it contains being purely orthographical. "Meeting," where it occurs for the second time, should of course be "society," and is probably a slip of the pen.

Turning to the text of Semmelweis' book, the author states on page 283, in reference to some discrepancies between his own views and Sir J. Y. Simpson's theory, that Routh returning from Vienna propagated Semmelweis' teaching in England and wrote to him as follows, on January 23, 1849.

"Comitiis in ultimis septimanis Novembris (1848) convocatis, illic discursus, in quo tuam inventionem enunciavi, reddens tibi, ut voluit justitia, maximam gloriam, praelectus fuit. Enim vero

TELEPHONE,
6208 GERRARD.

April 22. 1909.

42, UPPER BROOK STREET. W.

Dear Doran,

I can't read it!

I read your article, or
part of it, on Dr. Kautz,
I hope to read it all
repeatedly. It seemed
to me quite good.

The Latin is of the
highest! Semmelweis'

Especially; but I da
say it is exactly as
written. I read it
through carefully.

Yours very truly
F.H. Champney

possum dicere, totum discursum optime exceptum fuisse, et multi inter socios doctissimos attestaverunt argumentum convincens fuisse. Inter hos praecipue Webster, Copeland et Murphy, vires and doctores clarissimi, optime locuti sunt. In Lancetto, Novembris 1848 possis omnia de haec controversia contingentia legere. Credisne novos casus, qui in hospicio ex tempore mei abitus admissi sunt, opinionem tuam confirmant?

Febris ne puerperalis rarior est quam antea? Si morbus sic periculosus in cubilibus obstetriciis non adsit ut ante, certe effectus magni momenti denuo firmatus. In Praga quoque, ubi febris puerperalis tum frequenter obvenire solebat, eisdem causis consecuta fuit ingenerari!"

Next follows a letter dated Dorset Square, London, 21 May 1849: "Meas annotationes de tua inventionione in libellulo publicavi." This refers to a reprint of the communication read before a meeting of the Royal Medical and Chirurgical Society.

There is a third letter dated Dorset Square, London, 3 December, 1849: "Jam inventionionis tuae fama ac veritas in existimatione publica accrescit, et inter omnes medicorum societates quam res est maxime utilis, percipiunt et agnoscunt, nec vero etiam temere, nam magna est veritas et praevalebit." Semmelweis adds that Murphy referred to Routh's paper in an article entitled: "What is Puerperal Fever," published in the *Dublin Quarterly Journal of Medical Science*, August 1857, and agreed with him in his support of the Viennese reformer's theory and practice, whilst Simpson himself had given up the opinion that childbed fever was a contagious malady.*

Thus Semmelweis admits at considerable length and with the aid of that documentary evidence so comforting to those who insist on "higher criticism" that Routh was the first apostle of his teaching in the United Kingdom. When we remember how momentous was the experience of Semmelweis when junior to the perfunctory Professor Klein in the 'forties, and what a boon antiseptic midwifery has proved to humanity, we must not allow Routh's share of glory to be forgotten.

Semmelweis died insane four years after his monograph appeared, but Routh was destined to live for many years. It is to be regretted that he was never appointed physician to a lying-in hospital and never attached to a medical school, as he was thus prevented from carrying out Semmelweis' principles and from instructing youth. In 1847 Dr. William Jones established a general dispensary in Gray Street, removed within three months to North Audley Street. After

*The Latin correspondence has, I find, been quoted in Fischer's *Geschichte der Geburtshilfe in Wien*, 1909, pp. 301-302.

many difficulties Jones, assisted by Henry Savage, set up a hospital in Orchard Street in March 1850, and it was devoted to the treatment, as far as in-patients were concerned, of diseases peculiar to women. Routh's name appears in the archives of this famous institution as early as 1850, so that he was undoubtedly one of the founders of the Samaritan Free Hospital, but it was not until the Autumn of 1854 that he was elected assistant physician, together with J. S. Stöcker and Graily Hewitt. In 1858 Spencer Wells performed his first ovariectomy in the Orchard Street building, in 1859 the hospital was moved to Lower Seymour Street, into the premises it occupied till 1890; but owing to a desire to keep all abdominal cases separate, a branch hospital for vaginal and perineal cases was set up in 1874 in Dorset Street, and it was in this branch that Routh did the greater part of his work, from the day of its opening almost down to its close in 1889, resigning before the whole hospital was united in the present building in the Marylebone Road.

Routh was one of the founders of the Obstetrical Society of London, and at the Inaugural Meeting, held at the Freemason's Tavern on December 16th, 1858, spoke strongly in favour of the examination and registration of midwives, a reform which the Society was destined to bring about many years later. Routh joined the British Gynæcological Society at its foundation in 1883, became one of its Presidents, was elected an Honorary Fellow, and lived to see both the rival societies united as the Section of Obstetrics and Gynæcology of the Royal Society of Medicine in 1905. In 1864 he delivered the Lettsomian Lectures before the Medical Society, choosing "Uterine fibroid disease" as his subject, and he occupied the chair in 1875.

Routh wrote a few works independent of contributions to societies, of which the best known is *Infant Feeding and its Influence, or the Causes and Prevention of Infant Mortality*. He received many honorary distinctions and was associated with several philanthropic institutions. He also took great interest in the Church of England.

Dr. Routh leaves three sons, two of whom are members of the medical profession, Dr. Amand Routh, Obstetric Physician and Lecturer in Midwifery to Charing Cross Hospital, and Mr. Randolph Routh, Surgeon to the Bridgewater Infirmary. Succumbing to the infirmities of age, he died after a brief illness in the course of which he was attended by Dr. C. Theodore Williams, and was interred in Kensal Green Cemetery after a memorial service had been held at St. Paul's, Portman Square.

