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DR. ROBERT HOUSTON, OF GLASGOW, THE FIRST OVARIOTOMIST.

By JAMES FINLAYSON M.D.

If the question were put — Who performed the first Ovariotomy? nearly every one would answer Ephraim McDowell, in America. But it has long been known, in various quarters, that Mr. Robert Houston, (also Houstoun or Houstoune) while practising in Glasgow, successfully performed this operation fully 100 years before McDowell's first case, or 70 years before McDowell was born. His case is quoted in the *Index Catalogue of the Surgeon-General's Library at Washington*, under the heading of „Ovariotomy, History of", and the date of the operation is there correctly given as 1701. It was admitted as a genuine case of Ovariotomy by Dr. Atlee, the American Ovariotomist, as far back as 1849, who called attention to it in a letter to the Editor of the *American Journal of Medical Sciences*, April 1849, p. 534; he there gives a copy of the report of the case. Houston's paper appeared in the *Philosophical Transactions*, of the Royal Society of London, vol. 33, London, 1726. The delay in reporting the case enabled him to state that the woman remained well, till shortly before her death in 1714. The title of Houston's paper is „A Dropsy of the left ovary of a woman aged 58 years, cured by a large incision made in the left side of the Abdomen." A bibliography of ovarian tumours is appended. Not only is the case admitted to be a genuine ovariotomy by Dr. Atlee, but it is also given at length by Mr. Lawson Tait in his *„Diseases of the Ovaries,"* 4th edition, Birmingham, 1883 p. 238.

How comes it that a case communicated to such an important body as the Royal Society of London should have been so persistently ignored, and that the recognition of Houston as an Ovariotomist should be forgotten or disputed? Dr. Peaslee, (*Ovarian Tumours*, London, 1873, p. 227), in defending McDowell's priority as an Ovariotomist, denies that Houston's case was one of this operation; he says, „He simply made an incision four inches long through the abdominal walls and into the ovarian cyst (ovario-section) and

evacuated its contents." This contention is disposed of very completely by Mr. Lawson Tait who says, — „He certainly must have seen „and divided the pedicle, for he describes the disease as being of the „left ovary, therefore he saw the pedicle. That he performed a com- „plete ovariotomy is certain from his having noticed secondary „cysts, as well as from the recovery of his patient." Moreover the report bears clearly not merely that he „evacuated the contents" (as Dr. Peaslee represents), but that he dealt with „large pieces of membranes, which seemed to be parts of the distended ovary." At the end of his paper Houston adds: „The manifest success in this uncommon case may be of use and may show, that we ought not to despair too soon, in distempers that are seemingly most dangerous."

Mr. Lawson Tait points out that Houston had proposed operative treatment — a bold procedure justified by modern experience — in another case, communicated by him to the Royal Society (*Philosophical Transactions*, vol. XXXII, London, 1725): —

„An account of a case of Extra-Uterine Foetus, taken out of a woman after death, that had continued four and a half years in the body" (with plate). The woman had declined his offer of an operation: if he had been allowed to operate, and if success had attended him as in the ovariotomy, it would have afforded a still further distinction in the same kind of practice. An element in the successful result of the Ovariotomy Case lay, no doubt, in the dressings applied: „Several compresses dipped in warm French brandy; and because I judged that the parts might have lost their spring, by so vast and so long a distention, I dipped in the same a napkin four times folded, and applied it over all the dressings, and with a couple of strong towels, which were also dipped, I swathed her round the body." In this ample use of spirit, we have a form of antiseptic surgical dressing: another Glasgow surgeon, as is well known, Sir Joseph Lister, while Professor in the University there, introduced his antiseptic methods more than a century and a half later, and thereby robbed ovariotomy of some of its dangers. The only other literary contributions of Dr. Robert Houston known to us [1]) are two little books published by him, viz., „Lithotomus castratus; or Mr. Cheselden's treatise on the high operation for the stone, thoroughly examin'd, and plainly found to be Lithotomia Douglassiana etc, under another title; in a letter to Dr. John Arbuthnot, with an ap-

[1]) A cross eference in the American *Index Catalogue*, from Dr. Robert Houston to „Hoadly", arrises from a confusion with *Dr. William* Houston.

pendix, wherein both authors are fairly compar'd; to which is added a word of advice to surgeons," London 1723, and „The history of Ruptures, and Rupture-cures etc. wherein both are thoroughly and impartially considered ..... with a genuine receipt of the whole secret, part of which was lately sold for an immense sum of money etc. As also of a famous Stiptik ....." London, 1726.

A few further details as to Dr. Robert Houston are available. He was apprenticed to his father, Robert Houston „Chirurgeon Apothecar" in Glasgow, who was licensed by the Glasgow Faculty in 1669. The son studied in Glasgow, and took the degree of M. A. at the University. He became a member of the Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons, Glasgow, some time after 1684 (the records at this date are imperfect). His name appears as a donor of books to the Faculty Library. After being engaged in large general practice in Glasgow, during which time he performed the ovariotomy (1701), he aspired to the degree of M. D., so as to practise as a physician. The record of his application to the University and of his examination exists in the „Munimenta" of the University of Glasgow. Under date 31st. Decr. 1711, he is noted as having „some time ago" applied. The written tests were on Jan^{y} 3rd 1712; the oral examination was on Jan^{y} 4th, and the degree of M. D. was granted on Jany. 7th 1712. He seems to have been the third Doctor of Medicine created by Glasgow University. Soon after graduating as M. D., he went to London, and practised in the neighbourhood of Westminster, apparently as a general practitioner, ready to do surgical operations, as in the case of extra-uterine pregnancy, for this case occurred in 1717. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1725, and died May 15th 1734.

References: Lawson Tait: *Diseases of the Ovaries*, 4th Edition, Birmingham, 1883: see p. 238. — A. Duncan: *Memorials of the Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow*, Glasgow 1896: see pp. 114 and 117, 216, 248. — *Munimenta Almae Universitatis Glasguensis*, 4 vols, Glasgow, 1854: see under the dates quoted. — Dr. Thomas Thomson: *History of the Royal Society*, London, 1812: see list of Fellows, with date of election and death.