

**Address on the occasion of conferring medical degrees in the University of Glasgow, May, 1868 / by Allen Thomson.**

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Thomson, Allen, 1809-1884.  
University of Glasgow.  
University of Glasgow. Library

**Publication/Creation**

Glasgow : Printed at the University Press, by George Richardson, [1868?]

**Persistent URL**

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ADDRESS

ON THE OCCASION OF CONFERRING

MEDICAL DEGREES

IN THE

University of Glasgow,

MAY, 1868.

By ALLEN THOMSON, M.D., F.R.S.,  
PROFESSOR OF ANATOMY IN THE UNIVERSITY.

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GLASGOW :

Printed at the University Press,  
BY GEORGE RICHARDSON, 55 GLASSFORD STREET.

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## ADDRESS.

MR. PRINCIPAL AND GENTLEMEN,

At the commencement of the Winter Session I was called upon to address some words of welcome, encouragement, and guidance to those who were then about to enter on the study of Medicine; and I have now, in fulfilment of the duty which devolves upon me as Promoter for the year,—in the name of my Colleagues and for myself,—to take leave of those who have completed their course of Academic study by the attainment of the Degree, and to express to them our hearty congratulations on the honours they have gained, and our cordial good wishes for their future welfare and success in life.

Before going farther I must refer to the melancholy circumstances in which we are this day met in consequence of the Death, two days ago, of our Colleague, Dr. Pagan, who has filled the Chair of Midwifery with ability and success during eight and twenty years.

This event is too recent to warrant my doing more than to express the deep regret caused to my Colleagues and myself by the loss of so able a member of the University, and so honest, genial, intelligent, and valued a friend.

The Students of this University will feel the want of the straightforward and acute practical advice which was dictated by his long experience in a department of which he was a consummate master; and very many of the public of Glasgow and its neighbourhood will mourn the departure of one from whose warm kindness, reassuring sympathy, extensive knowledge, and practical skill they had long been accustomed to receive relief in suffering and comfort in affliction.



## GRADUATES,

Knowing well the arduous nature of the labours by which your Degrees have been obtained, my Colleagues and I can fully appreciate the satisfaction and relief you must feel in this temporary cessation of your exertions. We wish you joy of the change from a life of anxious preparatory study to the more ostensible position of privileged members of a dignified and learned profession. We can sympathise in the anxieties with which you now look forward to your establishment in a life-long occupation, and, in connection with that object, in the pleasure which is now in store for you in the consolidation and increase of your professional knowledge, heretofore gathered together, it may be, in too hurried and crowded a manner, and under the unpleasant incentive of preparation for College examinations, but hereafter to be pursued with freedom and avidity for its own more permanent usefulness. We can even foresee and understand the surprise with which some of you may now have learned how superfluous was much of the formal preparation you anxiously undertook, and how much more profitably your labour might frequently have been applied, if your studies could have been directed to no other object than that of obtaining knowledge for its own sake.

You are at all events now emancipated from the irksome trammels of forced study, and if you have rightly understood the nature and objects of the profession of which you are this day enrolled as members, you will become aware that one of the greatest pleasures which awaits you in the change you have made will consist in your being permitted henceforth to observe nature for yourselves and at leisure: throwing aside the unsatisfactory information of shorter text-books, to search the wider sources of knowledge contained in our extensive medical literature; to study voluntarily and completely such subjects as circumstances and inclination may interest you in; and to set about the work of forming your professional character and of laying up a store of solid professional knowledge, with the laudable object and in the pleasing hope that you may thus establish your own credit in the world, and be the means of extending the benefits conferred by our profession upon society.

Resting upon the groundwork of knowledge and mental discipline derived from your Academic studies, you will now make yourselves independent and truthful observers and accurate recorders of all that relates to the phenomena, causes, and treatment of disease;



you will reflect calmly upon the facts noted by yourselves and the opinions expressed by the best authors on the same subjects; you will select with cautious judgment those plans of treatment which have been suggested by matured experience as best calculated to relieve suffering and prevent the inroads of disease; and while paying due regard to the ascertained learning of the past, you will keep your minds free from prejudice, open and active, to give place to new discoveries and opinions as they may arise.

#### PRIVILEGES AND FIRST DUTIES ATTACHED TO THE DEGREE.

In what I have now said, pointing out to you as it were that the real and more laborious studies of the Medical profession may be said to begin rather than to be completed with the acquisition of a legal qualification, I have no intention to under-rate the information you have obtained in your Academic Course. On the contrary I have the highest appreciation of the value of its discipline; and I know that many of you have laboured most earnestly, ably, and successfully in its accomplishment. But I wish rather to impress upon you the truth of the view (acknowledged both expressly and in the practice of their lives by all worthy members of our profession) that the attainment of the degree or license is for you only one stage passed in the labour of learning, and that the studies of the physician or surgeon, if he will acquit himself faithfully of the trust reposed in him, can terminate only with his professional career.

The Degree or other qualification in Physic or Surgery, from whatever body it may proceed, gives it is true a legal right to engage in practice throughout the British dominions, nay, according to the words of the diploma, your degree authorises you in so far as it has power, to practice Medicine "ubique terrarum" or all over the world; and it furnishes evidence at least that you have passed through a course of education which is generally held to qualify you for the safe commencement of practice. But I trust that most of you will not suppose that you are already in reality either Physicians or Surgeons, and still less both.

I will admit that a few of you may have been so favourably situated as already to have acquired sufficient practical skill to warrant your undertaking at once the treatment of disease: but of these there can be but a few, and I feel assured that the majority of your number will be disposed to acknowledge (if not just at this moment at least some time hereafter) that something more than the



magic touch of the venerable cap under which you have knelt, or the possession of the diploma parchment, is still required to confer upon you that discriminating knowledge of disease and its remedies on which satisfactory practice can be undertaken.

As to the distinction between Physic and Surgery, supposed to be established by the titles of the formal diplomas which are granted by one board or another, I believe that they are no more than merely verbal as regards the first part of the professional career. A general knowledge of both Medicine and Surgery is all that the Graduate or Licentiate can at first be expected to possess; and unless the education upon which he has been admitted to either title has comprised nearly equally the study of both divisions of the profession, I believe it to be in a great measure insufficient. To make either a good Surgeon or a good Physician a considerable probation of general practice is required; and it is only your fuller acquirements, the bent of your disposition, and the influence of external circumstances which can in the end determine whether you are to continue in the occupation of a General Practitioner, or to adopt exclusively that of the Physician or Surgeon, or to restrict your attention more specially to some particular branch of either. In any case the foundation should be the same and equally extensive:—and this you will find to have been the guiding principle of the course of instruction through which you have passed in this University. And just as the formal or University education must be nearly the same for both divisions of the profession, so also must to a great extent be that second stage of education which is passed through in the earlier years of practice.

Let me therefore persuade such of you as have not yet been so fortunate as to obtain a thorough practical training in the knowledge and treatment of disease, to seek in the first place to supply this, the most essential part of a Medical qualification, by establishing yourselves in some situation where you may be daily and hourly called upon to witness the phenomena and undertake the responsible care of all forms of disease. I feel very certain that no one who has not gone through such a discipline,—not by merely attending or walking the wards of a Public Hospital, but by being actually engaged in its service, or in that of a great Dispensary, Workhouse, or some equivalent Institution, can be possessed of that familiarity with the symptoms of disease and the application of remedies which will give him the requisite promptness and confidence in ordinary practice, or prevent him from falling frequently into a state of



doubt and vacillation, which will prove a source of much anxiety and a continual bar to his after success.

Should it be impossible for you to obtain such a position, there is still open to you the gratuitous attendance upon the sick poor, from your charitable exertions in which you will receive ample reward by the increase of your professional skill, untrammelled by mercenary motives, and altogether free therefore from some misleading accompaniments of the young practitioner's struggle for existence even in a better paid and more ostensible position. Above all avoid sinking into habits of listlessness or indolence, which must not only marr the success of your professional career, but seriously endanger the safety of your moral character.

#### FORMATION OF PROFESSIONAL CHARACTER AND HABITS.

In claiming the privileges which belong to your Degree, you will of course consider how best you may fulfil the important duties and responsibilities which are attached to them.

In the first place your expectations of success must not be too sanguine; as you can scarcely hope without patience and much labour to be soon established in a thriving practice. Our profession is as little lucrative in its return as it is unmercenary in its object. It is indeed inevitable that it should be followed as a means of obtaining a livelihood; but it must be admitted by all that in proportion to the cost of the education, the risk to life and health from the study, and the anxiety and labour of its practice, the remuneration is very moderate, and indeed far too low, and that its prizes are few and poor when compared with those of many other occupations.

Yet our profession is not on that account less dignified or deserving of commendation. And as in adopting it, you have resolved so far to sacrifice the more favourable prospects of riches and position which might have been open to you in other modes of life, the object of your choice is best to be attained by keeping more sordid and pecuniary considerations entirely subordinate to your endeavours to secure your own happiness in the conscientious discharge of your duties towards your patients, and to maintain the honour of your profession by the purity and excellence of your own character and conduct.

The first years of professional life must not only be employed in the acquisition of a sufficient amount of knowledge and skill, but they must also be mainly devoted to the Formation of Pro-



fessional character. For this purpose, you must, while your mind and disposition retain their plasticity, endeavour to mould them into those habits of thought and action which may be most serviceable in after life.

Among these, the most important and difficult perhaps is that of viewing your profession in the light of a branch of Science rather than as a mere Practical Art, and, while this is done, in maintaining the effort to increase continually the store of your knowledge by accurate observation and by the careful reading and consultation of the best medical authors. You will thus at all times gain credit by the fulness and superiority of your professional information, and, if favourably situated and endowed with sufficient ability, you will lay the foundation of future fame.

In the next place as intimately connected with comfort and success in practice, I would strongly recommend the habit of economy of time and exactness in attention to engagements. It is confessedly the idle and indolent who are tardy and irregular. The best employed and the busiest men place the greatest value on their own time and on that of others. Time and skill indeed are the only capital with which most of you will start, and you must therefore use the one with the strictest economy, and apply the other with your best judgment in order that they may produce a suitable return.

I need scarcely say that candour, truth, and fairness must characterise all your transactions both with your patients and with your professional brethren. Little is in the long run to be gained with the first by pandering to popular tastes, and nothing is in itself more contemptible or more likely to lower a medical man in the estimation of the public than professional jealousy.

You will remember that our profession is not always fairly judged by the public at large, at least by the less informed portion of it who cannot understand or appreciate the true nature of medical facts and experience, and that much circumspection becomes necessary on your part to avoid giving any real or supposed cause for such unfavourable judgment. Shun therefore not merely the reality but all appearance of quackery, by which I mean, as applied to a regularly qualified practitioner, the assumption of powers which he does not in reality possess. You must for the same reason resign yourselves with becoming indifference to the preference often shown by a certain portion of the public for the mere quack over the regularly qualified practitioner. This love of quackery, existing



occasionally even among men of high culture, proceeds in a great measure from the constitution of certain minds leading them to prefer fanciful theories and boastful promises to more plain and unassuming or sensible views. And at the same time it must be confessed that the regular members of the profession are not entirely without blame in promoting the preference by their occasionally imitating the devices of the less regular poachers on the preserves of medicine. It is prudent at least as well as becoming to make allowance for such mental peculiarities; and we can only hope that with the advance of medical science and the increase of knowledge among the members of the profession, a juster appreciation of their merits as the cultivators of a truthful and scientific art may come to prevail in the public mind.

Guard therefore most sedulously against the temptations too frequently offered by the more fanciful and ignorant part of the public to the assumption of knowledge or powers beyond the just limits of your science; and let all your professional transactions bear the stamp of sincerity and truth. It has always been the boast of our profession that the whole of its accumulated knowledge is common property, no part of it belonging to any individual, and all of it to be employed for the general good. But the man who (whether possessing a legal qualification or not) arrogates to himself powers beyond the reach of others, and professes to apply them in ways peculiar to himself, places himself without the pale of scientific medicine, and degrades himself to the position of a quack or charlatan.

Let your professional reputation therefore rest entirely on your professional acquirements; and, while I would not undervalue the advantages to the practitioner of kind manners and pleasing accomplishments, let your guiding principle be the attainment of the greatest amount of good by means of your scientific knowledge and practical skill.

As our Profession is one of which the objects are purely benevolent, its practice cannot be other than a source of pleasure, mingled only with anxiety as to success in the attainment of the good we seek. If thoroughly imbued with a love of your profession, you will need few other sources of enjoyment, at least during the most active part of your career. And your duties, though arduous, have at all events this great advantage and charm that they are unselfish in their nature, and, being constantly performed in intercourse with others, are calculated thus to maintain and increase your sympathy with human nature.



## VARIETY AND EXTENT OF PROFESSIONAL DUTIES.

From the insight which you have obtained during your course of Study into the nature of your Profession, you must have formed some idea of the variety and extent of its duties and responsibilities. Were it necessary to retain in the memory the whole of the preparatory study necessary for initiation into these varied duties, the most able and resolute might well shrink from attempting the task. But fortunately a considerable part of the details you have previously learned may be safely forgotten or at least allowed to lie dormant in the mind. It is in truth the last effect which this preparatory study produces upon your minds in furnishing you with philosophical and scientific methods of observing and reasoning, rather than the individual facts themselves, which should be sought for and retained. Such methods are invaluable as instruments for the formation of the general principles which ought to form the basis of all your later knowledge and skill.

In addition to the routine duties of the profession, in the performance of which you will be chiefly occupied with attendance upon cases of the more common kind, there will present themselves from time to time more difficult and perplexing forms of disease which will tax your utmost knowledge and ingenuity. Morbid appearances altogether new to you may arise in new combinations and in new circumstances. You may be called upon to perform special duties in the Naval or Military Services. The medical superintendence of Sick Hospitals, Lunatic Asylums, Dispensaries, Poorhouses, Prisons or other like establishments, may demand your care. Sanitary and Hygienic questions of great importance and interest may be referred to your judgment by public authorities. The value of lives for insurance, intricate investigations of a Medico-legal kind, affecting the life and safety of individuals or bodies of men,—the effects of the products of manufactures and agriculture, the prevention and removal of nuisances, and many other topics included in or allied to Medicine may be referred to your arbitration. And although few can be expected to be prepared with an immediate settlement of such varied and extensive questions; yet it would be not less unpleasant than discreditable if your previous knowledge and methods of study did not supply you at the least with the means of arriving upon a fuller examination of the circumstances at an intelligent opinion upon most of them.

But while you thus place your chief reliance on the effects of the



early systematic study and continued cultivation of the principles of Medicine, it is important for you to bear in mind that a great part of that sort of skill which is most immediately serviceable in the practical art of medicine cannot be learned from the reading of books or from lectures, or from any kind of theoretical study, however extended or minute. The methods of diagnosis and treatment differ to a certain extent in each individual; and the knowledge of all the books which have ever been written would be unavailing without the nice tact and skilled eye of individual acquirement,—a combination of the inferences of multiplied observations amounting almost to intuition,—which every one must gain for himself, which some may labour in vain to acquire, and which it is somewhat melancholy to reflect cannot be transmitted at will from one individual to another, but must die with each of those in whom it has grown with the labour of their lives.

#### PROGRESSIVE ADVANCE OF MEDICAL SCIENCE.

Need I remind you farther that the Science and Art of Medicine are essentially progressive. Long as they have existed, their march, though slow, has always been onwards to greater extension and improvement,—and perhaps at no period of their history have more important or greater advances been made than during the past years of this century.

That the progress of the Practical part of our Art should have been slow in past time may be easily understood by those who know the difficulty of ascertaining with truth or accuracy the operation of remedies on the complex conditions of the human frame;—and that the Science of Medicine should have been still more tardy in arriving at systematic completeness is explicable by the close connection between its principles and those of collateral branches of Science. It is thus that the remarkably rapid advancement of knowledge of Anatomy and Histology, of Pathology, Organic Chemistry, Physics, and Natural History has contributed in recent periods to the prodigious strides made by the Science of Medicine.

It is more especially in the department of Diagnosis that this progress has been most apparent and may be farther promoted: but to the same or similar sources may be also ascribed great improvements in the preparation and administration of remedies.

This is not the time for me, even if I were able, to attempt to trace that progress; but it is enough for me to refer to the Microscope, the Stethoscope, the Ophthalmoscope, and Laryngoscope as



instruments of Diagnosis; and to Quinine, to Chloroform, Carbolic Acid, and Bromide of Potassium, as examples of remedial agents, indicating the rapid and solid improvements which our art has attained under the influence of scientific progress. You now leave the Schools, we will suppose, with a competent knowledge of the present state of medicine; but the next thirty years, elapsing before the most of you may have finished your practical career, may bring about as great a change in its aspect as has been effected by those which are past. And you must therefore be prepared with open and candid minds not only to learn, to examine, and, if approved, to adopt the new views and discoveries as they may be brought to light; but also if possible to contribute your share to extending the boundaries of professional knowledge.

Every medical man who hopes for distinction (and no one should enter the profession who does not aim at superiority or excellence) ought to make it a duty to record carefully all observations tending to the progress of medicine which come under his notice. Some of the most useful contributions to Practical Medicine have arisen from the records of Clinical Observations made by humble but truthful General Practitioners. To such records every careful observer will find the means of adding something; and those whose opportunities are greater may be expected to make more important additions to the information of their time.

In the absorbing occupation of a full practice you will find the greatest advantage in mixing freely with your professional brethren, and in discussing with them all medical or surgical topics of interest. The unreserved intercourse thus maintained with other intelligent members of a common profession will be found to prove one of the greatest incitements to properly directed exertion.

#### ACCESSORY ACCOMPLISHMENTS.

From this time forward, as I have said, your studies are to be carried on chiefly at the bed side of your patients,—and there it will be your business not only to observe correctly for yourselves, but to apply the results of the accumulated knowledge of others which you have learned from previous or repeated study. But although the sick room is to be the chief arena of your professional occupations, the intimate relation subsisting between the Art of Medicine and the Accessory Sciences forbids you to neglect the cultivation of the latter, if you seek to rise to eminence in your profession or to add to its stores of information. Indeed, it is the interest as well as the duty of all medical men to



devote a portion of their time to other than purely Professional pursuits, such as those of a Literary, Aesthetic, or Scientific kind. Nothing so immediately distinguishes the highly cultivated physician or surgeon from the mere routine empiric than the amount of knowledge possessed by the former of the accessory sciences: and nothing, in addition to solid professional attainments, is so likely to secure a favourable reception in society to a medical practitioner as the possession of superior mental culture.

The men who have risen to the highest eminence, not merely as authors, but as practical physicians and surgeons, have pursued with ardour the study of accessory branches of science, philosophy and art at their leisure hours; and indeed during the whole of their most active practical life. The names of such men as Cullen, the Hunters, Monros, Gregory, Baillie, Bell, and Brodie are sufficient to show that the most engrossing practice still leaves time for collateral study and cultivation.

After having passed through the busy years of an all engrossing professional career, you will find in the retirement of later life which must necessarily follow, when physical strength refuses to perform the task, or affluence enables you to claim the reward of ease and relaxation, that nothing will contribute so much to your own peace of mind and the happiness of those around you,—nothing will so effectually prevent the withering listlessness which oppresses the ignorant and idle, as the power of returning with zest to the study of those accessory sciences or other mental pursuits which have been the delight of your fresher days.

But I must not detain you longer with these observations.

In now taking leave of you as Students and cordially welcoming you to the honours of your Degrees we trust that you will ever preserve a fond recollection of the seat of your earlier studies. As we, your professors, will ever view with interest the career of those who have listened to our instructions,—so you doubtless will cherish recollections of affectionate regard for our venerable University, and remember with gratitude the exertions of her teachers whose earnest desire has been to send you out into the world worthy of her ancient reputation, and fitted to benefit your fellow-men and to do honour to the profession of your adoption.

With feelings of sincere regard and a deep interest in your future success in life in the name of my Colleagues and myself, I now bid you farewell.











