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183 Euston Road
London NW1 2BE UK
T +44 (0)20 7611 8722
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The Royal Medical Society, with some Remarks on Medical Education.

BY

SIR DONALD MACALISTER, K.C.B.,

*Principal of the University of Glasgow, and President of the
General Medical Council.*

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THE ROYAL MEDICAL SOCIETY, WITH SOME REMARKS ON MEDICAL EDUCATION.¹

By SIR DONALD MACALISTER, K.C.B.,
Principal of the University of Glasgow, and President of the
General Medical Council.

THE task you have given me is at once easy and difficult. It is easy because the toast of the Royal Medical Society—your noble selves, in other words—is assured of an enthusiastic response at this gathering. Indeed, I do not know why it is not proposed, like the health of “The King,” without any but the briefest speech to commend it, on the ground that it speaks for itself. I throw out that suggestion to you in the interest of my successors. Knowing the elaborate and deliberate manner in which you proceed when making changes in your laws and customs, I fear it is too late to expect any anticipatory action in my own favour now. Your ancient laws include an awe-inspiring chapter “of providing subjects for dissertations,” and your President is invested with no less awe-inspiring power to enforce that and all other laws. He has assigned me this toast as the subject of my dissertation, and I have not even the feeble satisfaction of being able to “challenge him to a duel”—for that is forbidden by the same laws.

What makes the task difficult for anyone who has not had the advantage of sharing your privileges is just the intrinsic importance of the theme itself, and the high standard of excellence which you justly demand of all who are called upon to treat it. *Maxima reverentia debetur—senioribus.* What depth of reverence is due to the Senior Medical Society in the United Kingdom—a Society whose life extends over the bounds of three centuries, and is still in its vigorous prime? You were older than Moses ever was when the General Medical Council, now a stripling of fifty years, was born. And when I regard your legislative output, as contained in a precious codex entrusted to me by your officers, it seems as if the mantle of the law-giver of Israel had descended upon you. Your history bears the scars of the '45 in the eighteenth century, and of the Napoleonic Wars in the nineteenth. Among your nursing-fathers were William Hunter, and Cullen, and Black, whom the ancient University of Glasgow enrols among *its* ancient glories. For a century and a third you have possessed your own buildings, and have looked “the whole world in the face” with as

¹ The toast of the evening, at the Annual Dinner of the Society, 9th February 1909.

good reason as the village blacksmith, for you "owe not any man."

In sober earnest, one may apply to you what Shakespeare's Master Constable says of himself: "*I am a wise fellow*"—that goes without saying: "*and, which is more, an officer*"—with four presidents a year and a multitude of subordinate functionaries, that may pass for a just boast: "*and, which is more, a householder*"—si testimonium requiris, circumspice: "*and, which is more, as pretty a piece of flesh as any is in Messina*;" those who knew that famous city before its late most pitiful calamity will agree that this implies no mean standard of physical beauty; yet such a company as this (to say nothing of the lady medicals) need not shrink from the comparison: "*and one that knows the law, go to*"—if you don't, I refer you to chapter xii., "Of fines, and the collection of them:" "*and a rich fellow enough, go to*"—witness your accumulating Capital Fund, and your flourishing finances generally: "*and a fellow that hath had losses*"—even that mark of respectability has not been wanting, to judge from the records of 100 years ago: "*and one that hath two gowns, and everything handsome about him*"—that may well refer to the Bachelor's gown and the Doctor's; to the Royal Charter of Georgius Tertius; to the imposing diplomas you confer on the *ingenui*, or *eximii*, or *spectatissimi* whom you are pleased to honour, and each of whom you, in the handsomest way, describe as *ornatissimus*; to the many historical treasures in your hall; and, lastly, to the sumptuous appointments of this banquet. You are justified, as few such societies are, in claiming that you have "everything handsome" about you, in the material sense.

In the intellectual sense your handsomeness is equally unquestionable. A roll that includes Oliver Goldsmith, and Charles Darwin, and Joseph Lister among its ordinary members is glorified for all time. But you handsomely allow Cambridge and Glasgow to share with you a portion of the glory these names have shed upon the world, and, in the name of both Universities, I here make my acknowledgments. In the like spirit of magnanimity you admit to your list of honorary and corresponding members those who have won or are winning fame in all the fields of medical science, at home or abroad, until the list scintillates with stars of the first magnitude. It relates you by personal links to the best that has been achieved in each generation for a hundred years and more. It constitutes in itself a patent of scientific nobility known and approved of all men. Of the Society it may be said, *noscitur a sociis—honoris causâ*.

And again, as in private duty bound, I acknowledge, on behalf of a third institution which I happen to represent, the hospitality of your Society to the members of the General Medical Council. In 1822 you awarded your honorary diploma to Benjamin Collins Brodie, and thirty-six years afterwards he became the first President of the Council. In 1868 you chose William Turner for the same distinction, and thirty years afterwards *he* was called by acclamation to occupy the President's chair. Of the two gifts to the Council, the best and greatest was the last, for the Council never had an abler, a wiser, or a juster President. At its jubilee last November it offered him its tribute of gratitude and affectionate regard. To-night you will not think it inopportune that I cordially recall that tribute, and add my own personal expression of admiration and esteem for a Chief who is also yours. He made the place he vacated harder to fill indeed; but he also made it more honourable by his tenure, and therefore more worthy of the best efforts of his successors to follow his example.

I am aware, sir, that according to one of your venerable laws, "If any *personal expression* should occur during the evening, the President shall immediately censure it; should the President be inattentive to this part of his duty, any member may remind him of it, and may require him to take the opinion of the Society immediately." I am as prepared as any member can be to bow to the law in question, and "to make such concessions as the Society may judge proper." But I would fain gather from your Olympian calm, and from the absence of any reminder on the part of your brethren, that such a "personal expression" as I have been constrained to make respecting my trusty friend and most honoured colleague, your Principal, may not be deemed "impolite or disorderly," within the meaning of the law; at any rate on such an evening as this.

As I glance over your lists, my eye catches the name of many another who has served the State and the profession as a member of the Council during my twenty years of office. Sir John Struthers, Sir William Mitchell Banks, Sir Patrick Heron Watson, Sir Dyce Duckworth, Sir Thomas Fraser, Sir Victor Horsley, Dr. James Little, Dr. Richard Caton, Dr. Robert Saundby, and Sir Clifford Allbutt are among those I recognise. They form a goodly fellowship. Everyone of them, by his work and worth, has gained the applause of his brethren, though some, to our loss, have passed beyond these voices.

I do not doubt that the tradition you have thus established

will be maintained, and that many of your members will hereafter take the places we now occupy in the Council. You will be unlike any other body of medical men with whom I am acquainted if you do not criticise it freely, and the more freely the less you know of its structure and functions. We do not complain; we are used to criticism. We get it from the public when we don't do something or other, and from the profession when we do, and *vice versa*. We have to keep the balance even according to our lights and our means. But we confidently expect that when *you* have gained seats at our council-table you will help, by your brighter lights and ampler means, to get things really right, and to satisfy everybody—yourselves included.

On the side of the medical profession our primary function, like yours, is educational. The kind of education the State has put under our charge is not education for culture, considered as an end in itself. The Medical Acts have a strictly practical end in view. They bid us see to it that a medical man, whatever else he professes or possesses, shall possess "the knowledge and skill requisite for the efficient practice of medicine, surgery, and midwifery." A university may properly impart to and demand from its medical graduates, who go forth from it with an academic laurel as well as a licence to practise, a higher and wider education than this. It may rightly insist on more "knowledge," but it may not be satisfied with less "skill." Greater proficiency on the one side must not be purchased at the cost of less efficiency on the other. The one concerns the reputation of the medical graduate as a man of learning, and of the school whose degree he holds; the other touches the public safety, and it was in the interest of the public safety that the Legislature created the Medical Council. You may remember what Aubrey says of William Harvey, who discovered the circulation of the blood: "Though all his profession would allow him to be an excellent anatomist, I have never heard of any who admired his therapeutic way." That, figuratively speaking, puts in a nutshell the antinomy which the Council and the Universities, the Medical Corporations and Societies, and the profession at large are to-day considering seriously. In the public interest it is urgent that some means of reconciling the antinomy shall be found. Knowledge of the ancillary sciences grows more abundant and complex. To compass it completely, much more than the first half of the present medical curriculum is required. Modern advances in medical and surgical treatment, in the *art* of healing and of prevention, put new powers for good

into the doctor's hands. But to learn to use them skilfully needs more study in the wards and more practice at the bedside than before. For this, more than the second half of the present curriculum is required. When the two half-sections are more than the whole will contain, something must *give*. Shall it be the first half, or the second half, or the whole? *There* is the practical problem, and I commend it to the Royal Medical Society as a problem worthy of its statesmanship. The one solution that is barred, from the point of view of the public, is that which would crush up or crush out the second half. The public is made up of patients, actual or potential. That is why the public thinks it worth while to make legal and educational provision for the production of doctors. And, as Oliver Wendell Holmes said, every "patient has a right to the cream of his doctor's life, and not merely to the thin milk that is left after 'science' has skimmed it off. The best that a physician can give is never too good for the patient."

The rise of Edinburgh, as a school of practical medicine for Scotland, and its steady development into a school of medicine for the Empire, dates from the establishment 160 years ago of clinical classes by Monro and Rutherford. By the thoroughness of their clinical teaching, and the sufficiency of the facilities they offer for acquiring clinical experience and skill, the Scottish universities and schools have won pre-eminence, and their alumni have won fame, as practitioners to be trusted, within these islands and beyond the seas. What they have thus won well they can keep surely, only by pursuing the same method and, if possible, bettering it. But the best of teaching and the amplest of facilities will not suffice if the student has not time enough to profit by them to the full. Clinical skill cannot be crammed. Time and a certain detachment of mind are factors in the product. If by our arrangements we stint these, it is practical efficiency that suffers; and it is by their practical efficiency that doctors, Scottish or non-Scottish, must in the end of the day stand or fall. It would not become me to forecast, even if I could, the changes that may be needful to secure us against the curtailment or overcrowding of the period destined for clinical study in our Scottish curriculum. But I trust that when the need arises, if indeed it has not arisen already, we may be granted freedom enough not only to institute but to modify as circumstances require the changes I refer to. The Medical Council will look after the minimum curriculum; that is its function. It is on the super-minimal after the bare essentials are provided for, on the higher

instruction provided, and on the stricter standards enforced, that the *special* reputation of a school or a university chiefly depends.

That brings me back to my proper subject. For the peculiar value and significance of the Royal Medical Society is just this, that for generations it has provided something over and above the routine course, excellent as that has been, of the Edinburgh schools, for those who enjoy the high privilege of its active membership. It enjoins on each of its members the practice of independent observation and reflection, that he may do himself credit by his statutory dissertation. It exercises his powers of free discussion and criticism, until he learns what Dr. Osler called "that all-important acquirement—to think and talk while he stands on his feet." It affords him discipline in the art of self-government, and the habit of obedience to the corporate law. It encourages the cultivation for the general good of his special tastes, whether these be literary or scientific, speculative or practical. And, lastly, it enriches him spiritually and intellectually, by making him the heir of a great historic tradition, and stirring in him the ambition to hand on that tradition, enhanced if he can enhance it, but at all events unimpaired.

In offering you this toast I cannot do better than remind you of a fine passage in the "Medical Essays" of one of your honorary members, the Professor of Anatomy in Harvard University, who is better known to the world as The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table. "Not to make silver shrines for our old divinities, even though by this craft we should have our wealth, was this Society organised and carried on by the good men and true who went before us. Not for this, but to melt the gold out of the past, though its dross should fly in dust to all the winds of heaven, to save all our old treasures of knowledge, and mine deeply for new, to cultivate that mutual respect of which outward courtesy is the sign, to feel together, to take counsel together, and to stand together for the truth, now, always, and everywhere;" for this your fathers instituted, and you accept, the offices and duties of this time-honoured Society.



