

**A private letter addressed to the gentlemen of the Royal College of Surgeons [of Edinburgh] / by a fellow member.**

**Contributors**

Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh.

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P R I V A T E   L E T T E R

Addressed To The

GENTLEMEN Of The ROYAL COLLEGE OF SURGEONS

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1798



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A

PRIVATE LETTER,

ADDRESSED TO THE

*Gentlemen of the Royal College of Surgeons,*

BY

A FELLOW MEMBER,

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EDINBURGH, JULY 9. 1798.



PRIVATE LETTER



Collection of the Royal Coll. of Surgeons

1771

The request, in answer to which the following short note was written, is one of the many motives for calling the attention of the Members of the Royal College of Surgeons to the present condition of that Society, the Elections, Offices, Business, and Duties of it.


S I R,

HAVING first received a letter from you, requesting my vote to make you President of the Royal College of Surgeons, you afterwards, in the streets, forced me into a conversation, which was, to say the least of it, unnecessary. On my part, that conversation consisted chiefly of one question, viz. Whether you yourself had not promised to vote for Mr. —? You said you had; and your resolution of keeping your word gives me such a singular opinion of your honour and good sense, that I cannot but vote along with you.—I am,

Your most obedient servant,

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S I R,

**T**HE constitution of the Royal College of Surgeons gives to every Member high privileges in speaking his sentiments among his fellow Members; but this is a dead law. The business is usually so formed by the official Members, that no man feels any peculiar call to do his duty; and his opinion degenerates into a silent vote, or unavailing protest. He is not encouraged to speak his opinions; he is indifferent about business; which can do no honour nor service to the Society;—its concerns roll on in one undistinguished routine; many Gentlemen have not condescended to appear at its meetings for years; and now, to the utter shame and disgrace of the College, no one public duty occupies their thoughts, till that season returns in which some single Member is to push his way into the Council Chamber, for purposes which it were best, even among ourselves, to leave unexplained.

When a Member of the College feels these things as he should do, it is his privilege, and his bounden duty, to speak his sentiments in that form in which he thinks they will be most effectual; but he should endeavour to do it with tenderness towards others, and under that restraint which becomes an individual Member, addressing himself to a public body, and to the Members of a public body. The person who now addresses you, feels that he acts honestly; protests himself purged of malice, free and honourable in his motives; with no little-minded private resentment lurking about him; but with an honest and growing indignation at a public abuse which has been increasing upon us for years, and now knows no bounds.

It is the fate of every public body to struggle, first for existence, then for privileges, for honours, last of all, when in the end, it falls, like the natural body, into slow decay. Our College has been much honoured, and often;—it has had large privileges, renewed from time to time;—it was once a learned body, and published those essays which have been so much admired abroad;—it was then struggling for the highest privileges, and obtained them, and was elected into a Royal College;—but at the present time, though it has those privileges entire within it, like the spirit of life, yet it hardly lives, but merely exists.

A long narration of this would ill suit the present purpose. The appeal is to those who, being integral parts of this general body, feel, or need to feel, all the meanness of their situation: and, ungracious as the task may be, I wish to prove to you, and all my fellow Members, how shamefully low this College has fallen; for this evil, if fully and generally felt, could not be long endured.



We feel nothing interesting or honourable in the business of this College, in the character which it confers on its Members, in the privileges which they enjoy, or in the use which is made of those privileges. To be a Member of so old an institution, so highly chartered—so respectable by its privileges, should be an honour; but it is so fallen in reputation, that, bating the right of practising in this city, there is no one privilege which a sensible man would value. The money, time, and services, by which those privileges are procured, are a mere squandering of the best years of life.

This College, to which we belong, would very ill bear to be compared with the Great Schools of other Countries. Its name is not known abroad; or, if it is so, it is only by being confounded with the University; for what stranger could think that it were not a literary body, as our profession is a learned one. Its examinings, and its five guinea diplomas, are matter of trivial form: as official passports, they have but limited effect. They have no currency—no respectability;—they are of no authority nor value;—they are accessible to all those who cannot procure degrees, and are then their only refuge to satisfy their friends, like the parchments of private societies.—Who cares for our diploma?—

The business of the College cannot interest a rational man, who is entering into life with serious thoughts. Its laws relate to fines and meetings—the distributing of worthless diplomas—the examining of the most ignorant young men, of whom no regular qualifications are required;—to the election of a Deacon, who goes to the Town Council but to be neglected; who, if he were truly chosen for his proper office, of Presiding over a Royal College, over a society of men bred up to science, and thinking of their profession alone, would feel himself but little connected with the Town Council, and not at all with politics; would go there seldom; and would be accordingly honoured. The business of the College is not passively despised, it is detested;—the place is forsaken;—its business is abandoned to those few who need to hunt for some little office, or who have to run backwards and forwards, at the call of the whipper-in, and yelp in order to turn the game.—Who besides minds the business to this Royal College?—Is this a fit or decent thing for men who belong to a serious profession, and a learned one?

The offices of the College of Surgeons are such as bring no honour. They are considered only as the means of procuring other offices out of the profession—less honourable, but gainful; and yet it is strange that such mean offices should be sought after in this way:—for these offices must be filled up; without these sneaking methods, each office must be given to some one; and it is only the intense desire to procure them that hurries us into needless baseness. But yet this is the pitiful motive for which an office, that of President of the College of Surgeons, which should be honourable, has been long disgraced; and now, more than ever. Did no man propose himself for this office but with manly and respectful notions of what the College of Surgeons should be, and with a due sense of the value of his fellow Members, and of the dignity of the station to which he aspired. Those high thoughts would make him worthy of the honour. But are those, indeed, the motives? It were cruel to say of any individual that he did not solicit the office with such honourable intentions, or were not fit for its duties;—but if the Members of the Royal College of Surgeons had that respect for themselves, and for each other, which they should have, no one would dare to offer himself who were not, in some degree, worthy. It were surely requiring no hard thing of every right minded man, that, laying his hand on his heart, he should say, I believe the man for whom I vote to be worthy of this office;—I do not vote for him in consideration of his



private interests, or peculiar situation ;—I support him with no other thought than that he is to busy himself in the interest and honour of this College, and in that alone. Do we now acknowledge that this would be honourable, strictly honourable ? and yet it is not done !!!

Once we had a College, and Presidents—and business, interesting to every Member. Our College was associated with physicians, for the purpose of publishing books of Science. Then character was equally divided in this commonwealth of knowledge, and the name of Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons, and especially the title of President, was honourable abroad ; and, what is more difficult, more interesting, was respected at home.—But now that collection of observation, which once was a chief business of the College, is neglected ;—and though this work of our forefathers has been infinitely approved of—which it is a lasting benefit to our profession, and an honour to the College to which we belong, is a reproach to us.—Do our present Members think so meanly of themselves ?—or are they insensible to such duties, and to such honours ?

There is no public business, nor any motive for assembling in the Hall. There is no private harmony—no means of cultivating a good understanding one with another ; but we feel as if some spirit were working among us to divide us into absurd parties, without apology or motive, or with such motives only as a sensible man would blush to own.

There was indeed a time when every social meeting, was accompanied with those loathsome excesses which could not long have been endured, which are, in our profession, particularly disgraceful. But those disorders had absolutely ceased, when they were made an awkward pretence for abolishing every public meeting ;—yet those who proposed that such social meetings should be dissolved, were by no means remarkable for their chasteness of conduct, nor the most backward at those seasons of revelry and riot ; nor the most earnest for moral reform. The true reason lies much deeper than this. Those shameful excesses had well nigh ceased. The College meetings were subsiding into a more gentleman-like form ; points of professional knowledge were assuming the place of political cabals. Young men were daily admitted ;—it seemed possible that the Society might change its complexion altogether, and reform from other follies than the pardonable levities of any occasional debauch ;—it looked as if the Members were amalgamating and running together into some new shape. The general Society began to be weary of those politics, and of that eternal irritation, which was profitable to a few only. It was found that votes and promises could be more easily bargained for—bartered—and interchanged in streets and corners, than in general meetings ;—and it was plainly perceived, that, should the College of Surgeons become one united and respectable body ; should it become a Society of industrious men, especially of young men ; and, most of all, of young men aspiring to any character of knowledge in their profession, the College would put away all this idle business ;—it could no longer endure those trifles which had hitherto been its sole and constant occupations ;—it would no longer be steered through all the wiles of politics, by a Deacon and his Council. The conclusion was obvious, and much to be feared. It was thought easier to pick up the scattered particles than to move the congregated mass ; and, for this worthy cause, the College was scattered like chaff ;—all means of disunion were provided ;—all attempts at reunion were observed with a very jealous eye ; and the successive proposals of establishing a useful and improving Society out of those among the younger Members who wished to be usefully and honestly employed, has been so managed in the Deacon's Council as to show plainly that politics and science have no natural connection.



I make it my duty to speak thus plainly my sense of what I have seen, and of the tendency of it; for this system has grown into such a flagrant enormity, that now the College of Surgeons has degenerated into a set of politicians, not of the most exalted rank; and every succeeding abuse has its particular end, and every movement explains what is designed. I think almost a man might forsake his profession, and still retain influence enough to struggle against a whole set of young men zealous and earnest to do well!!!

No one among us can be ignorant from what motives it is that men have sought to be placed in the chair of the Royal College of Surgeons. Their abilities to fulfil an honourable charge;—their desire to acquit themselves well;—their respectability in their profession;—their long standing, or repute, never enter into their own minds;—no anxieties of this kind trouble the electors or the elected; it is to procure an office that they are elected; and, when they are elected, their object is almost ensured. For those who need or desire such appointments, he must be an ill hearted man who does not feel some concern and sympathy, according to his degree of connection and intimacy; but he should feel himself infinitely degraded in showing his friendship in this way. Let us choke up this thoroughfare to politics through sacred ground; for while objects so tempting are in view, men will not be restrained. It is easy to perceive how the best and most industrious of our profession may be seduced by this rage like gaming, which absorbs all other thought, and disdains no means of acquiring its object. Often, in the entering into the world, a young person is like one “struggling for life among the waters,” and feels those labours and hardships, those disappointments and necessities, which drive a thinking man almost to despair; without blame he is easily seduced from his profession; he is anxious to make provision for those depending on him the easiest and shortest way, and is induced to go after expectations far different from those which animated him in the first proud outset of life, when he thought he had made choice of that profession in which he could delight to work his way to a respectable station with pleasant labour.

The man who does this may be pitied, but cannot be blamed. Should a private individual see the companion of his early days abandon his profession, and break all those expectations which made a part, as it were, of their mutual friendship, and make himself wretchedly dependent on chances which no man can controul, and the slave of others, what would he feel? Could he approve of this? Would he not be sensible that his friend was lost to himself and to the world? And if a private friend should thus lament a man of abilities in his profession abandoning himself to such objects, should a College encourage this temper, or tempt its Members by bribes, or suffer them to abandon or neglect their profession, which it is the very essence of the institution to support? When once such motives and objects generally prevail, and are considered as the direct or indirect motive of every connection among our fellow Members, they absorb every honest or industrious thought in the vortex of jealous and uneasy passions; and the business of the College, its offices, its public meetings, its annual elections, are all turned to this one point. A man shall pretend to solicit the chair of the Royal College of Surgeons from the most honourable motives—shall cheat his fellow Members with promises of reform—and yet shall neglect all those measures which might put science in motion, ensure improvement, raise the Society from its present meanness, and give to each individual Member his share of reputation—shall think of nothing but how to stick up, in the place which he must appear to leave, an image which will move when he draws the strings—of the pretty puppet!

Thus it is that our dishonour is perpetuated; that the President of the Royal College, and,



by implication, every Member of it, becomes a suitor for some despicable post, and even in the Town Council is despised, but still must be gratified—because he has been made Con-  
vener—has got the command of his fellow Deacons—has drunk them into good humour with  
himself, and ill humour with the Town Council—has procured another set of votes—has estab-  
lished a second cabal; and, in short, has inoculated another public body with that venomous in-  
fection which he has carried out of his own. To be plain, the College of Surgeons *does gamble*  
*with its votes for places and pensions such as they are.* Their President is as a consul to negotiate  
the trade for himself or his friends, and Deacon after Deacon labours in the filthy craft without  
shame.

But, Sir, the open disgrace is nothing, compared with the inward unhappiness which prevails  
among us.—There is no chance of harmony or friendship among a public body, unless they are  
open, generous, and honest with each other, employed about some public and responsible business,  
and with no thoughts which they may not easily disclose.—But, with us, no one knows what another  
is doing.—He looks in another's face, and sees that he has been tampered with; he sees coun-  
sels and whisperings in stairs and passages;—each is vexed with solicitations—jealousies foreign  
to his own honest thoughts are cunningly infused into his mind; he is irritated and stirred up a-  
gainst some particular person.—He is his enemy before he knows.—Other reasons are acknow-  
ledged for liking or disliking, than those which arise from the mere intercourse of gentlemen  
one with another.

Is not this the pure spirit of party?—Has not the designing secrecy of these cabals an ill influ-  
ence on the minds and manners of men?—Let me ask you, Sir, as a Member of this College,  
Has a man leave to be neutral?—Has he leave to indulge the natural bent of his disposition?—  
Does he not see every moment men divided from him, almost without a motive, with whom he  
had expected to live in constant and useful friendship?—It has really come to pass, as Voltaire  
says, “That one must either be hammer or anvil.”—He has no choice.—This spirit of party  
interrupts all friendship, but I hope not permanently—is deadly to every principle of ho-  
nour.—Accustomed to dabbling in the Town Council for posts, our Members learn to call  
it politics; and, having professed themselves politicians, they assume, along with the title, all  
the privileges of politicians—restlessness—neglect of their proper duties,—enmity without a cause,  
and breach of faith without a motive;—till, at last, every thing dishonest ceases to be dishonour-  
able;—and *divide and govern* is no doubt among the maxims which some assume as part of  
this broad charter, which confers on our little doings the title, the privileges, and apolo-  
gies, and all the dignified villanies of high politics.—One solicits a vote to establish a friend  
in the President's chair—that that friend may assist another friend to make votes in the Town  
Council—to procure a place which he has solicited for five years—For they are building a  
house of correction—and it will be soon built—and perhaps people will be put into it—and per-  
haps it will need a Surgeon,—and probably the Deacon of the year will be made Surgeon,—and  
very likely the salary that shall be assigned him will bear some sort of proportion to the steadiness  
of his influence; and perhaps though he is elected this year, and has got the place, if he be not  
Deacon next year he may have no salary at all, and so get the dish which Grumio proposes to his  
termagant mistress, “Now, good sweet lady, what would you think of the mustard without  
“the meat.” This is the priest all shaven and shorn,—that loved the maiden all forlorn,—  
that *MILKED the COW with the CROOKED HORN*,—that tossed the dog,—that worried the cat,—that  
killed the rat,—that eat the malt,—that lay in the house that *JACK BUILT*.————



These are the purposes, Sir, for which you and I and all of us are kept in perpetual torment, till some among us have as fairly forgotten what a vote or a promise means, as they have the ten commandments. Every thing dishonest ceases to be dishonourable, and all because it is called politics, till at last a person, either from making too nice distinctions, or too coarse distinctions, or from making no distinctions at all, promises a gentleman his vote to make him President of the College of Surgeons, as if he wished him success, and then proposes himself as a candidate, as if again he were so ABSURD as to wish himself success, and then he promises to keep his word and his HONOUR, as if he meant that both should succeed, and so he pulls with the left hand, and draws with the right. "Then be these juggling friends no more believed that paulter with us in a double sense; that keep the word of promise to our ear, and break it to our hope.—I'LL NOT FIGHT WITH THEE."

But there is perhaps another interest working against all improvement, and it is the fancied superiority of certain gentlemen, who yet are prudent enough to secure that superiority by other means than a fair pre-eminence in knowledge. They are fearful of every young man,—jealous of every approach,—their distinction would be infinitely lessened if they were surrounded by young people whose individual essays might compose a respectable volume. This is not generous, perhaps, but it is surely true. It is not my own observations only, it was the observation of other sensible men who felt it sorely. It has been said, that there are men against whom you can commit no higher offence, than to show any anxiety that your profession should be generally improved: The least movement or tendency that way excites a jealousy and resistance, as if the struggle were for life and being. If this College were but what it should be, no one would dare to show even a lukewarm temper towards so high an interest, or, if he should dare to interrupt such useful designs, would be branded with the name of traitor to that science which he was sworn to promote.

I would have the College of Surgeons look well to its respectability and good name, and let no individual Member say it is none of my concern.—We feel, indeed, little connection with this public body, because we have no common interest in it—we have no honour in being common Members of it; the institution has been thoroughly degraded. But if it could be raised to a respectable station among Colleges, or if it should fall yet a little lower than we should indeed feel, how much we are individually affected by its state. Our profession stands on the difficult ground of public opinion, and in a public body the conduct of Members is more observed than they are apt to believe, and it forms a part of their general character—ours is a public profession and a busy one, every man's way of pursuing his profession is perfectly known, and that public which seems to think so little, and yet judges so truly, gives to every one his due reward.

It were well if the College of Surgeons, in place of striving to debase itself every day more and more, in place of busying itself in behalf of a few, not the most respectable of its Members, in cabals and solicitations for petty offices, were to employ itself in matters which might make the present Members respectable; and in settling a system of education in a University where every kind of education can be procured, such as would ensure a succession of valuable Members who might maintain the respectability of the College and the honour of a profession which needs continually to be supported; for it stands upon the difficult ground of opinion, and by a very little misconduct, all that makes it respectable, honourable, or useful, might go to wreck. We must be serious when serious matters are concerned.

You cannot be insensible of the strong reasons a Member has for putting his thoughts toge-



ther in this hasty way ; and you must have had some uneasy feelings on that occasion whether you have been busied in conducting a matter which you have no reason to be proud of ; or whether you are submitting yourself, on the other hand, composedly and quietly to what you must consider as no small disgrace ; whatever your connections in politics or in friendship are, I hope and trust you will feel for a moment the necessity of laying aside all such partial considerations, will come to the meetings of the College prepared with the honest feelings of an independent man, anxious for his profession, sensible of the mean condition into which the Royal College of Surgeons has fallen, and ready to act a generous, open, and manly part in that College.

It is as a fellow Member that I address you ; and if the Society were what it should be, that would be a title of some import, expressing some degree of esteem and friendship—some fellowship in occupation and intention—some privileges would be annexed to that name, which at this time we cannot boast of, it should at least imply that I meant very sincerely ; and yet, when a private Member addresses a public body, he cannot be without anxiety ; nor resolve upon so bold a measure, with urgent motives, and long delay. The very first step he moves, he will feel all the delicacy of his situation ; he will really feel himself performing a serious duty which nothing but a high sense of its importance can enable him to fulfil. He cannot suppose his private thoughts to have much influence unless they have been anticipated by his fellow Members. He cannot suppose the name of any individual to have the smallest influence in enforcing those sentiments ; fortunately the subject rests less on authority than on common sense and sound judgment in the ordinary affairs of life ; but in a case where some may choose to suppose themselves offended, it is not fit that any man should have leave to say, that by withholding his name, the writer of this letter means that it should be concealed ; it never shall be withheld on any urgent occasion ; and on an occasion so full of improprieties on the side of those whose conduct he condemns, he will be rather proud of any enmities he may entail upon himself from performing a duty so necessary, and but too long delayed ; such duties are more honourably discharged in any open and public manner, than in those private conversations which are so liable to be misrepresented, and which cannot in our divided state be always exclusively in the presence of sincere friends. If I should have the happiness to find that these sentiments are in unison with those of the more respectable and independent of my fellow Members, I shall come forward and call a meeting of the College, and propose such laws as may perhaps render the whole College completely independent. Without this encouragement, it were presumption for any individual to move. But whatever you, as an individual, may resolve in the present disorderly state of our Society, I beseech you to begin, before it be too late, to regard yourself more, and to think yourself more highly connected with a Society which you might help to re-establish, whose re-establishment would reflect honour on each of us,—which was once respectable ;—which might be so easily restored ;—whose privileges we have bought so dear, whose functions we should not suffer to be thus disgraced.

A FELLOW MEMBER.



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... in this last way and you must have had some nearly feelings on that occasion whe-  
ther you have been in conducting a matter which you have no reason to be proud of; or  
whether you are submitting the same to the hands of others, and desiring to what you  
must consider as no small success whatever your connection in business or in friendship be, I  
hope and trust you will feel for a moment the necessity of trying what all these partial consid-  
erations will come to the advantage of the College prepared with the honest feelings of an in-  
dependent man, anxious for his profession, capable of the more condition into which the Royal  
College of Surgeons has fallen, and ready to act a generous deed, and many part in that  
College.

It is a fellow Member that I address you; and if the Society were what it should be, that  
would be a title of honor, and a mark of esteem and distinction—some fellow-  
ship in occupation and intention—some principles would be annexed to that name, which at this  
time we cannot boast of. It should at least imply that I respect very liberally; and yet, when a  
private Member addresses a public body, he cannot be without anxiety; nor relieve upon to hold  
a number with urgent motives, and long days. The very day he says he never, he will feel the  
delicacy of his situation; he will well feel himself performing a laborious duty which nothing  
but a high sense of its importance can enable him to fulfil. He cannot suppose his private  
thoughts to have such influence which they have been anticipated by his fellow Members. He  
cannot suppose the name of any individual to have the smallest influence in entering those lists;  
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great occasion; and on an occasion so full of importance on the life of those whose con-  
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performing a duty to acknowledge that he has been deceived; such duties are more honorably  
discharged in any open and public manner, than in those private conversations which are so liable  
to be misapprehended, and which stand in our minds as a barrier exclusively in the presence of  
these friends. If I should have the happiness to find that these sentiments are in union with  
those of the more respectable and independent of my fellow Members, I shall come forward and  
call a meeting of the College, and propose that laws be made perhaps under the whole College  
completely independent. Without the encouragement, it were presumption for any individual  
to move. But whatever you, as an individual, may relate in the present dissipated state of  
our Society, I beseech you to begin, before it be too late, to exert your best words, and to think  
yourself more highly concerned with a Society which you might help to re-establish, which re-  
establishment would reflect honour on each of us—which was once respectable—which might  
be so easily restored;—whose principles we have brought to dust, whose functions we should not  
later to be thus neglected.

A FELLOW MEMBER.

There was such a battery as you  
of your society















