

**An address delivered to the members of the Royal Medical Society,
December 16th 1836 / by John H. Bennett.**

Contributors

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ADDRESS

DELIVERED TO THE MEMBERS

OF THE

ROYAL MEDICAL SOCIETY,

DECEMBER 16TH 1836.

BY

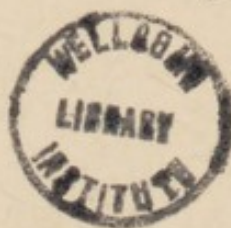
JOHN H. BENNETT,

PRESIDENT OF THE ROYAL MEDICAL AND ROYAL PHYSICAL SOCIETIES; AND
VICE-PRESIDENT OF THE ANATOMICAL AND PHYSIOLOGICAL
SOCIETY OF EDINBURGH.

EDINBURGH:


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TO THE
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OF THE
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ADDRESS.

GENTLEMEN,

To be placed in this chair has ever been considered the highest distinction which it is possible for a medical student in the University of Edinburgh to attain, and is one which some of the most eminent members of our profession have felt proud to acknowledge. Entertaining as I do a very exalted idea of its importance and value, I cannot but feel sentiments of the deepest gratitude towards you for the honour which has been conferred on me. Conscious also of the responsibility and arduous nature of the duties it imposes, I must crave your indulgence for any deficiencies that may arise in my method of discharging them, promising however that, with your assistance, and with the assistance of the talented colleagues you have associated with me, that I will use every endeavour to support the dignity of this chair, and perform the duties connected with it, so as to merit a continuance of your good opinion.

You may now, gentlemen, consider that I have said all that is strictly necessary ; but on an occasion like this, in a session so important to the annals of the Society, I should consider myself deficient in duty did I not allude to some of those circumstances which led to the foundation and subsequent celebrity of this institution, and point out to the large assemblage I have the honour to address, a few of the many advantages of which it can justly boast.

There was a period in the history of society when knowledge was confined to a few, and when even these amassed the fruits of science not for the purpose of ameliorating the condition of man, or of benefiting their fellow-creatures, but for the unworthy motive of establishing an influence over the multitude, and of subjecting it to the yoke of tyrannous authority. It was in those days that discussion was deemed heresy,—that the mutual interchange of thought was considered one of the greatest crimes, and the contest of abilities which the improvement of science required, led only to the infliction of inquisitorial vengeance. A time however arrived, when the energies of men increased, when the intellect was no longer to be confined, and when, aided by the press and milder forms of government, it overcame the dogmas of old, cast aside the trammels of power, and launched into the ocean of scientific discovery. It now became apparent that mental as well as physical power gained strength by association ; that the prejudices of different opinions were often corrected by their collision with each other ; that the co-operation of various minds best tended to the enunciation of truth ; and that knowledge was only to be

increased by the united efforts of understandings directed to its prosecution. Such it appears to me must have been the general views which led to the institution of Societies ; and the results which followed have more than realized the expectations of their founders. The establishment of the Royal Society of London, for instance, followed by others of a similar nature abroad, gave an impulse to science which is felt to this day, and dragged from obscurity crowds of illustrious men, to advance the knowledge of mankind, and extend the boundaries of civilization. Among other advantages, it led to the more successful cultivation of individual sciences ; and none received greater benefit from the stimulus thus given to it than that of medicine.

This important science, almost coeval with the history of mankind, has been prosecuted by the learned in all ages with the utmost diligence and enthusiasm ; and we can easily imagine how, with the first dawnings of intellect, man must have felt a natural instinct to alleviate the diseases to which he was subject, and experienced a restless curiosity to investigate into their causes. Hence we can trace in the mythological fables of the most ancient nations the existence of deities supposed to preside over health and disease, attended by priests who were the immediate agents for affording relief to suffering humanity. We can follow its progress, although enveloped in mysticism and the allegorical imagery of the Egyptians, to the time when it became mingled with the philosophy of the Greeks. We can pursue the various additions it received as a practical art from the Romans, and continue our observation of its successive improvements, until in com-

mon with the other branches of knowledge, it was overwhelmed by the inroads of barbarians, and subsequently fettered down by the bigotry and superstition of the middle ages. It was, however, the first to break through the clouds which enveloped it, and assist in dispelling the obscurity in which all the sciences were involved. It was now it received in common with these the stimulus imparted to them by learned associations ; now it was that schools of instruction became established for its more zealous advancement, and that crowds of students, attracted by the beauty and utility of the study, prosecuted with an ardent enthusiasm all its various branches.

It was at this period in the history of our profession, that a few of these enthusiastic students, then humble and unknown, afterwards destined to acquire celebrity and renown, urged by their insatiable thirst after knowledge, and deeply impressed with the advantages it would afford, founded the Royal Medical Society of Edinburgh. On looking back to this event, now more than a hundred years ago, what important topics are presented to me for consideration. How interesting would it be to contrast the state of medicine as it existed then, with the position it at present occupies, or to point out the successive great improvements that have occurred within the past century, and endeavour to trace how far the production of these is connected with the existence of this Society. However conjectural it may appear, it seems more than likely, that by an idea, originating in some debate, Cullen perhaps was led to form those extensive views which caused him to revolutionize the state of medicine.

To the members of this Society probably, Black exhibited carbonic acid gas, pointed out its connexion with the animal economy, and explained his beautiful theory of latent heat. Here Beddoes, the early patron of Davy, might have been stimulated to commence his inquiries into pneumatic chemistry ; and not to single out further individual illustrations, to this Society, Fordyce, Fothergill, Blagden, Rutherford, the Monros, Duncan, Blane, Bateman, Gregory, Gordon, and a host of other illustrious men, living as well as dead, may have been indebted for that spark which kindled within them the desire of distinction, and lit the torch which guided them to renown.

To enter minutely, however, into these inquiries, would absorb too much time, and they are somewhat superseded by a topic, to us, if possible, still more interesting.

Gentlemen, it appears from authority which cannot be questioned,* that this society originated in the month of August 1734, although it was not firmly established till three years after. It was then that six students,† after spending a social evening together, determined to meet periodically, and discuss medical questions. This plan produced such beneficial effects, that the little society thus formed became extended by the admission of others, many of whom were thus acquiring that knowledge which was afterwards to direct the energies of our profession, and advance the science to its present position. Favoured by

* See Life of Dr. J. Fothergill, prefixed to his works, by Lettsom, 4to, and Dr. Stroud's History of the Medical Society of Edinburgh.

† Dr. Cleghorn, Dr. Cuming, Dr. Russell, Dr. Hamilton, Mr. Archibald Taylor, and Dr. James Kennedy.

the thus fluctuating state of medical opinion, and the facilities offered for free discussion, an association of young and ardent minds was admirably calculated to examine the false theories which had become consecrated by usage, and eradicate the errors that preceding ages had established. It has indeed been stated, that discussion perverts the understanding, depraves the temper, occasions personal hostility, and induces a spirit of idle wrangling; and circumstances certainly have not been wanting to give a colour to these charges. But if properly conducted, it has led, and continues to lead to far different, nay, very opposite results, while it has been the great agent by which all the dogmas that have shackled science from the days of Pythagoras to our own times have in turn been overthrown. It was by discussion that the sophists' doctrine of old was shaken to its foundation; it was by discussion that Descartes exposed the errors of the Aristotelian philosophy; it is to discussion we are indebted for the overthrow of those hypothetical and speculative doctrines promulgated by Galen, which so long delayed the advance of medicine; and it was by discussion that the members of this Society, shortly after its establishment, proved the fallacy of those principles taught by Boerhaave, introduced into this school the more enlightened views of Hoffman, and by the revolution in medical science thus brought about, first laid the foundation of that celebrity and fame which the University of Edinburgh has since maintained.

From the ranks of the Society, as it then existed, Cullen arose, who, it has been said, did for medicine

what Newton did for astronomy. His works evince the greatness of his genius ; the influence of his labours will be felt by future generations ; and his name descends to posterity, not only in connection with the University, whose celebrity he caused to be extended over the world, but as the individual who, in the year 1775, laid the foundation-stone of this building, and contributed by his advice and exertions so much to the Society's reputation. Since then the institution has continued to advance in honour and usefulness ; its property has been confirmed to it by a royal charter ; freedom of discussion has ever been maintained within its walls ; for in this very hall were fought those well known mental contests between the disciples of Brown and Cullen, the noise of which spread over Europe ; and from that time it has weekly been the arena of intellectual battles, and never wanted combatants anxious to engage in them. Our library has gradually become one of the most select and valuable now extant ; the extended education of modern times has introduced into our reading-room all the leading foreign, as well as domestic periodicals ; our laws having undergone successive alterations, to meet the changes of the times, present a code excellently adapted for conducting its affairs ; while, besides a floating capital more than sufficient to meet the annual expenditure, a sinking fund has been established which must ever guard the Society from the pecuniary distress which mutations of income are liable to occasion.

With these advantages, then, we enter upon a new century of existence. The present celebrity of the insti-

tution has been built up by the talents and labours of our predecessors ; its future honour and prosperity must come from you. Let me therefore earnestly solicit your united endeavours in transmitting its reputation unsullied to our successors. Do not say that your object in entering here was to acquire rather than to communicate knowledge ; for it is not only our duty to collect information, but it becomes us, as we value liberality of sentiment, to diffuse it for the good of others. If a proper sense of the advantages conferred by the founders of this institution have ever excited in you feelings of gratitude—if, among the number of illustrious names to be found in our list of members, there be any entitled to admiration ; let the enthusiasm displayed by them for the benefit of the society stimulate you to like exertions—let their busts and portraits which adorn this hall witness struggles on your part emulative of deeds performed by the originals—let their influence extend even from the tomb, so that centuries hence the transactions of this session may be pointed out as among the memorable eras in the Society's annals.

I need not, however, dwell only on the merits and abilities of those who have preceded us. I am surrounded, this evening, by members who combine among them a mass of learning, talent, and intelligence, which, if animated by the enthusiasm shewn by their predecessors, and brought to bear on our discussions, would render this year equal, if not superior to any of the past. I see many who have returned from various countries, laden with the experience and knowledge of foreign science. Many of

you have listened to the prelections of the greatest luminaries of medicine abroad—have visited the numerous and scientific institutions of France, Holland, Germany, and Italy, and are come hither this session, I trust, to communicate the result of your observations, as different topics in the course of debate may recall them to your recollection. The younger members should reflect, that as they at once reap all these advantages which the industry of others has collected for them, and that as they have enrolled their names on the list of the Society, they are bound to support it. This is only to be done effectively by cultivating their talents, and seizing every opportunity for improvement : regular attendance on the Society's meetings will contribute in no small degree to the advancement of both ; and by listening attentively for a short time to the discussions of their seniors, and thus exposing themselves as it were to the sparks which the heat of debate occasions, they themselves will at length be inflamed with the desire of contributing to its brilliancy.

I have spoken of the intense interest and enthusiasm which former members exhibited ; but this session has produced a most gratifying proof that these feelings, so necessary for continuing the honour and fame of the institution, are still kept alive, and exist undebased and unalloyed in the bosoms of our most respected and active members. None but those who have engaged in such a task can in any way appreciate the enormous labour which the formation of our Catalogue Raisonné has occasioned. It must be remembered that this is not a work that could

have been performed by a mere scrivener ; it evinces literary, professional, and scientific knowledge in an eminent degree ; while the judicious arrangement which characterises it throughout, stamps on it the feature of originality. Figure to yourselves the labour and toil of reviewing separately, the numerous works which compose our library—of even writing their names. Add to this the trouble of classifying them, and the necessity of perusing many, the ambiguity of whose titles was such as not to denote their nature. Reflect on these circumstances, gentlemen, and consider that all this was undertaken without the hope of reaping any of those rewards for which most men enter into literary composition,—without the satisfaction even of having their names attached to their own publication : yet was this herculean labour cheerfully performed for the good and advantage of that institution endeared to them by the remembrance of the benefits it had conferred, and at whose shrine they thus offered up the most disinterested and undoubted proofs of devotion. The records of history point out to us, that nations and states were most worthy renown, and that their honour and glory shone brightest at those times when the citizens evinced a pure patriotism, unmingled with the feelings of self-interest which debase our nature. We may judge of private associations by the same criterion ; and how proud ought we to be that in the hundredth year of the Society's existence, at a period when most institutions are crumbling into dust, that we can thus triumphantly point to an unerring test of its usefulness and stability.

I am conscious that the humble eulogium thus paid for such disinterested conduct is far from adequate, and that in alluding to this event, I have offered a very insufficient tribute to the labours of those gentlemen by whom the catalogue was completed,* and more particularly to those who superintended its progress through the press.† The latter, with a laudable anxiety to present the work at the commencement of this session, have performed incredible exertions. I myself have had occasion to observe some of these, and know that the rising sun, and midnight lamp have often been witnesses to their toil. They have all received the unanimous thanks of the Society; and although this was the only reward for which their labours were undertaken, they now also possess the inward satisfaction of not only having benefited their fellow members, but of having conferred no inconsiderable boon on the profession at large.

In addition to this, everything evinces that the laurels formerly acquired are still preserved by the Society green and flourishing. I have never witnessed or heard of a session which bids fair to become more prosperous than the present; for, besides the excellent series of papers provided for us, the eagerness with which members have come forward, and the number of communications on various interesting topics that have already been announced, promise a fertile field of instruction, and hold out the expectation of reaping a rich harvest of improvement.

* Drs. Wood, Balfour, Maclagan, Dyer, A. Thomson, Imlach, G. Paterson, Ransford, Taylor, and Mr. Seaton.

† Drs. Wood, Balfour, and Maclagan.

Long then may the Society continue its career of honour and usefulness ; may the prudence and talent which have been its support and guide through the past century continue to uphold and direct its progress for centuries to come, so that ages hence, when the transactions of this session shall be reckoned among the things that were—when all who are now present shall have long mouldered in the “ tomb of all the Capulets”—when arts and sciences, when knowledge and civilization shall have been introduced into countries yet unknown, this institution, I hope, will not merely serve “ to point a moral or adorn a tale,” but will then, as it has ever done, introduce into our profession some of its brightest ornaments, and perpetuate to succeeding years that thirst for improvement and persevering exertion which is the student’s only certain path to scientific renown.