

**Letter to the Right Honourable the Lord Provost and Toun-Council of
Edinburgh / by Dr. Knox.**

Contributors

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LETTER

TO THE

HONOURABLE THE LORD PROVOST
TOWN-COUNCIL OF EDINBURGH.

BY

DR KNOX.



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NEWINGTON, 6th July 1837.

Thursday, 4 P. M.

TO THE

RIGHT HONOURABLE THE LORD PROVOST,
AND TOWN-COUNCIL OF EDINBURGH. *

GENTLEMEN,

I HAVE only learned this moment that it is now fully the intention of Dr JOHN THOMSON to resign the Chair of General Pathology in the University of Edinburgh, and that, at length, he has resigned it conditionally ; I beg leave to offer myself as a candidate for that Chair. * Of my qualifications as a Teacher of the most important branch of Medical Education, viz. Anatomy, the public has long ago given a favourable and far too flattering verdict, in the numerous Classes of Medical Students I have had the honour to teach, —Classes probably exceeding in numbers those taught by any individual in Britain in proportion to the time, † and comprising, in addition to the strictly professional student, a large proportion of gentlemen in other ranks of life, and following other professions, such as distinguished Clergymen, Professors in the University, Advocates, &c., together with the sons and relatives of a great proportion of the Clergy of Scotland.

Of my qualifications in other respects to do justice to the

* As I farther understand that the Council purpose coming to a decision to-morrow at 10 A.M., the shortness of time thus allowed me to address you will, I trust, be an apology for whatever haste appears in the composition of this Letter.

† See Note I. of Appendix to this Letter.

Chair of Pathology, I beg leave respectfully to submit to you, that I have been constantly and deeply engaged in pathological inquiry ever since my earliest years as a student, never having lost sight of it for a moment :* that during the campaign in Flanders as an army surgeon, I enjoyed the most ample opportunities of pursuing pathological inquiry ; in the south of England, as Surgeon to the Military Hospitals of Hilsea and Fort Cumberland ; abroad in the Colonies ; again in Paris in 1821-22, where, for a whole year, my entire attention was devoted to pathological inquiry, favoured by facilities which can fall to the lot of few :† and, lastly, here, in Edinburgh, whilst engaged in forming the Museum of the College of Surgeons (a museum exceeded only by one in Britain), and which was almost exclusively the work of my brother and myself. I am quite within limits in stating to you, that at least 15,000 specimens of pathological anatomy have passed through my hands, nor am I acquainted with any person at this moment who has enjoyed similar opportunities for observation and research.

Of the extent to which I may have profited by these opportunities, it is not for me to speak, and I also feel that my position as a scientific man forbids me applying any where for testimonials. Perhaps my election as Corresponding Member of the French Academy of Medicine (an honour bestowed on so few foreigners) may best explain to some my scientific status with the most enlightened body of medical men in the world ;‡ but the determined opposition and hostility of numerous individuals, and even of associated public and corporate bodies in my own country, present the best proofs which those acquainted with the world can require, that the individual so strenuously opposed must at least have attainments and a status in science, which could not with safety be entirely overlooked.

* See Note II. of Appendix.

† See Note III. of Appendix.

‡ See Note IV. of the Appendix.

Should I have the good fortune to be selected by you to fill this office, I hope it is needless for me to say, that those energies and activity hitherto employed in a fair and honourable rivalry to the University, will then be devoted to its support. By teaching Pathological Anatomy properly so called, I should endeavour to bring back the Chair to its proper and legitimate object, and thus avoid collision with the teachers of the Practice of Physic, of Surgery, of Therapeutics, of Medical Jurisprudence, &c.; in other words, I shall endeavour to teach this branch of medicine PRACTICALLY, aided by a very extended Private Museum, which has cost me at least eighteen hundred pounds; by the opportunities afforded me through the kindness of numerous medical friends; and by the free access I enjoy with other members of the College to those extensive museums, the greater part of which was originally put up by my own hands.

As a further proof of my intimate acquaintance with Pathological Anatomy, it may not be altogether out of place to point out here, that on several important occasions, I have been appointed to examine and value extensive pathological and anatomical museums for public bodies; the museum, for example, of Sir Charles Bell, which I valued by desire of the College of Surgeons, and which was moved from London to Edinburgh under my own care; the museum of the late Mr Allen; that belonging to the University of Durham, and others: thus large public bodies have already decided on my perfect competency to judge of the most expensive and extended pathological and anatomical museums; to appreciate the value of each individual preparation; to attach a price to it; to value the MS. catalogues, &c.; and have repeatedly, and by many letters I could submit to you were time allowed, thanked me publicly for my exertions, confessing themselves highly pleased and satisfied therewith.

In conclusion, I may state that it has been suggested to me, that for some few years I have not practised as a medical man, but merely taught Anatomy; and secondly, that I ought not to be a Candidate for a Chair, whose original formation I so strongly denounced and opposed as inimical to the best interests of the Schools of Medicine here and elsewhere. To these objections I beg leave to reply, first, that I have never resigned altogether the practice of a Surgeon, however convenient it may be for others to state so; and secondly, in respect to my opposition to the establishment of the Chairs of Pathology and of Surgery, which I naturally enough denounced to be a political job of the very worst description, my objections lay solely to these courses of lectures being made *imperative on all students* ultimately becoming candidates for a degree, whatever might be their previous studies or their means.* In this light I view it still, and hold, and will ever hold the same doctrine, that the circumstance of such Chairs as General Pathology, Botany, Medical Jurisprudence, Clinical Surgery, Natural History, &c. &c. &c. being made imperative, is a most unhappy one in the constitution of the University, and has done it incalculable, and I fear irremediable, mischief; and moreover, I hold, in common with all candid men, that the medical student, like every other class of society, is entitled to obtain his education *where and how he likes*, and that to render any Chair whatever imperative is to create a scandalous monopoly, and is to a certain class of the community the height of injustice.

I have the honour to be,

My LORD and GENTLEMEN,

Your very obedient servant,

R. KNOX.

* See Note V.

APPENDIX.

NOTE. I.—My Class-Book contains the names and countries of all my Students *in their own handwriting*; these books are at all times open to the class. The average numbers attending my Lectures for the years 1827, 1828, 1829, 1830, 1831, 1832, 1833, 1834, 1835, 1836, were 355 for each year. The average of the Practical Anatomy Class, for the same years, were 325 for each year. In the winter session of 1828-29, the number of Medical Students entered in my Books was 504, being perhaps the largest Anatomical Class ever assembled in Britain.

NOTE II.—In 1814, whilst almost a student, I published my first Physiological Memoir on the Phenomena of the Human Pulse, and from that time to the date of my latest work (Anatomical Memoirs, published a few weeks ago), the mere titles of the original Memoirs would far exceed the usual limits of a letter. I shall be happy, if time be allowed me by the Council, to refer to these individually.

NOTE III.—Through the kindness of Messrs Lherminier and Chomel, the utmost facility for Pathological inquiry was afforded me at the great Hospital “La Charité” in Paris. The mornings of an entire year were occupied in investigating the Pathological Anatomy of cases occurring daily in that Hospital.

NOTE IV.—I here subjoin a copy of my Notice of Election as a “Corresponding Member” of the French Academy of Medicine.

Académie Royale de Médecine.

MONSIEUR,

PARIS, LE 31. MARS 1835.

NOUS avons l'honneur de vous informer que dans sa Séance du 24 février dernier, l'Académie Royale de Médecine de France, vous a choisi pour être un de ses correspondans. Ce choix est un hommage qu'elle rend à vos lumières, à vos talens, à votre zèle pour les progrès des Sciences Médicales. Elle ose se flatter qu'elle recevra de vous les communications les plus fréquentes comme elle a la certitude que ces communications contribueront à l'éclairer sur les diverses branches de ces sciences si nobles et si nécessaires. C'est par le concours de vos efforts et des siens, qu'elle pourra remplir la glorieuse mission qui lui est confié, de servir les hommes et de laisser à la postérité quelques vérités utiles.

Nous sommes avec une haute considération,

MONSIEUR,

Vos très humbles et

Obeissans Serviteurs,

LE PRÉSIDENT
J. LISFRANC.LE SECRÉTAIRE PERPETUEL,
NAVIER.A Monsieur le Docteur KNOX (ROB.),
à Edimbourg.

NOTE V.—The unjust demand upon the pocket of the Student is not the only evil attendant on these imperative classes; the *loss of time* is even more to be deplored than the loss of means. The teacher of any branch of Medicine or Surgery enjoying the patronage of the Honourable the Town-Council, provided, moreover, with Class-rooms, paying neither rents nor taxes, such as press on myself and others of my fellow-citizens; enjoying also the extraordinary privilege (which cannot be long maintained) of being at once the teacher of the Student and his examiner for University honours, enjoys a monopoly of the most injurious kind to the public; and if, with these and such other unjust privileges over his fellow-citizens, a Professor cannot, by his own exertions, maintain the numbers and respectability of his Class, but it becomes still further necessary to declare it *imperative* on all students to fee that Course of Lectures, then is it time that the entire system be swept away, as one which has worked well for individuals, but ill for the public.