

An address delivered to the members of the Parisian Medical Society, at the opening of the summer session April 16th 1841 / [James Henry Bennet].

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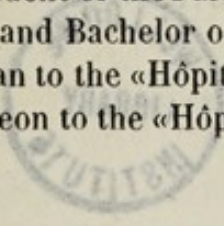
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AN
ADDRESS
DELIVERED TO THE MEMBERS
OF THE
PARISIAN MEDICAL SOCIETY,
AT THE
OPENING OF THE SUMMER SESSION
APRIL 16TH 1841.

PUBLISHED AT THE REQUEST OF MANY OF THE MEMBERS
OF THE SOCIETY
BY

JAMES HENRY BENNET,

Vice President of the Parisian Medical Society,
Bachelor of Arts, and Bachelor of Sciences of the Sorbonne,
House Physician to the «Hôpital de la Salpêtrière,» late
House Surgeon to the «Hôpital St-Louis,» etc.



PARIS,
PRINTED BY MOQUET AND CO.,
90, LA HARPE STREET.

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PRINTED BY MOUQUET AND CO.

NO. 17, MARSEILLE STREET.


1847

TO THE
GENTLEMEN MEMBERS
OF THE
PARISIAN MEDICAL SOCIETY,

THE FOLLOWING ADDRESS

IS RESPECTFULLY

DEDICATED.



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GENTLEMEN,

Owing to the recent departure of our illustrious President Dr Mott of New-York, the duty of opening the summer session of the present year has fallen upon me. This duty I have undertaken with pleasure as it affords me an opportunity of addressing to you a few observations on the past and present state, as also on the future prospects of the society over which I have this evening the honour of presiding.

The infancy of scientific as that of political bodies is always the most doubtful, and to the philosophical observer, also the most interesting period of their existence. Success and permanency in the one as in the other must depend on the nature of the elements of which they are constituted. Even when these elements are such as to warrant the belief that success will eventually crown the efforts of the founders, the difficulties which have to be

overcome are so numerous, so formidable, so incessantly recurring, that we cannot but look forward with doubt to the result of their labours. But if, on the contrary, the newly created institution is merely supported by artificial means, or called into existence by temporary circumstances, it falls, as soon as this artificial support is withdrawn, or the circumstances under which it has originated are changed.

Deeply impressed with these truths, I intend this evening briefly to examine the circumstances under which the Parisian Medical Society was established, as also the nature and extent of the resources on which it must lean for future support. I shall then cast a rapid glance on its history since its foundation, and guided by these data I shall endeavour to lay before you an impartial statement of its future prospects.

The French revolution of 89, which, however disastrous in its immediate consequences, has been the means of raising France to its present unparalleled state of national prosperity, had a marked influence on the state of medical knowledge in this country. The system of centralisation adopted by the gouvernement, a system which enabled it to wield with such tremendous energy the entire resources of the country, was immediately applied to medical legislation, and, with the assistance of the concours, soon produced the most splendid results. The public appointments at the Faculty and the hospitals being open to all, emulation was excited to an unprecedented extent, and amidst the din of war, at a time when all Europe was in combustion, the Parisian Medical

School revived the recollection of its former fame, and added new laurels to those it had previously acquired.

The impulsion thus communicated to medical science by the social changes to which I have alluded, has not been merely temporary. The concours imposes on all those who aspire to medical honours in France the necessity of preparing themselves for the contests they have to undergo, by a course of study the limits of which are only fixed by the knowledge of their opponents. This necessity has proved a stimulus to exertion which has contributed to perpetuate that impulsion, and to raise the Paris School to the first rank among the medical institutions of Europe.

Our medical countrymen have been among the first to take advantage of the labours of the French men of science. With that thirst for true knowledge, that perseverance and liberality of feeling which characterises the scientific descendants of Bacon and Newton, not satisfied with studying the French writers at home, they have resorted in crowds to Paris, since the peace, in order that they might themselves judge of the theoretical and practical attainments of those with whose works they were already familiar.

The number of British and American medical graduates who are thus induced to visit this capital at the termination of their studies has steadily increased since 1816, and at present amounts to several hundred yearly. Indeed a visit to the Parisian University is now considered the necessary completion of a sound professional education.

Until within the last few years in addition to all the

social difficulties which are usually encountered on a first visit to a foreign country, the medical observer in Paris had also many serious drawbacks to contend with in the prosecution of his professional inquiries. The organisation of medical studies is, generally speaking, a complete mystery to the recently arrived student, and fortunate, indeed, might he then be considered if, after several months of mispent, misdirected efforts, he at last found a clue to guide him through the labyrinth which the numerous medical institutions of this capital at first presented to him. Even when this had been attained, he still laboured under many scientific disadvantages. Debarred from all opportunity of consulting the scientific journals and the medical literature of his own country, he found it difficult to derive that benefit from his studies which he might have derived had he been able occasionally to refresh his recollection of former reading, and thus to compare the doctrines he had learnt at home with those which he found professed abroad.

In enumerating the disadvantages under which our professional brethren laboured a few years ago, I must not omit to mention the absence of any institution in which their doubts on scientific subjects might be discussed, and perhaps solved, or to which the result of their labours might be communicated. Nothing, certainly, tends more to strengthen our recollection of facts, and to render more vivid and more distinct our conception of theories, than their communication to, or discussion with others. The soundness of this view is amply illustrated by the history of the learned Societies of our native

country, Societies which have always taken the lead in science, and have perhaps tended more than any other institutions to raise medicine to the height which it has attained in Great Britain. Nor can we be surprised that such should be the case when we reflect, that ideas if not communicated are often allowed, from indolence, to remain indistinct, half formed in our mind, and that the very effort which is requisite to give them a body, to clothe them with words, frequently increases tenfold their depth and their brilliancy. Many are the glorious thoughts which have been called into existence by discussion, and many are the improvements in science and in general knowledge which have originated in the collisions of debate.

Such was the state of things in Paris a few years ago. On the one hand, a medical school, justly celebrated, and full of energy, promising, long to continue a centre of scientific attraction, and on the other, several hundred of our countrymen endeavouring with laudable perseverance to penetrate its spirit, and to gather its lore, but disseminated throughout a vast capital, isolated, without any common tie, although their views and their interests were the same, although they were labouring in the same cause.

It was at this period (november 1837) that the Parisian Medical Society was founded by a few individuals who conceived that if a Medical Society, on the model of the most celebrated learned Societies of Great Britain, were once firmly established, it would effectually remedy all the disadvantages to which I have alluded. They thought

that a society thus formed might become a permanent institution, and constitute in the course of time a centre round which every medical inquirer speaking the English language would rally.

The gentlemen who founded the Parisian Medical Society were only eighteen in number, and a remarkable circumstance in the history of its creation is that these gentlemen were nearly all members of the Royal Medical Society of Edinburgh, and that their leader and our first President (1), is an ex-president of that Society. It thus appears that, like the London Medical Society, the oldest institution of the kind in England, the Parisian Medical Society owes its existence to the medical association which of all others has exercised the greatest influence on medical science. We cannot be otherwise than proud of such an origin, and most fervently do I hope that it may confer as much honour on its parent, and enjoy as long and distinguished a career, as its sister institution in London.

About three months after the formation of the Parisian Medical Society, I had the honour of becoming a member, and having ever since taken an active part in its proceedings, I shall be able from actual observation to give you a slight sketch of its history until the present day.

I seek in vain, Gentlemen, for terms to express the admiration which I feel when I reflect on the perseverance, and abnegation displayed by the office-bearers

(1) Dr John Hughes Bennett.

and more especially by our first President, during the first year or two of the Society's existence. You must not think that it was then such as you now see it, when success has crowned their exertions. However sanguine they might be as to the future prospects of the Society, the greatest prudence, the greatest energy were then necessary, and continually shewn.

The scientific meetings of the Society were at first held in a private amphitheatre engaged for the evening, and the journals and books were circulated from member to member. By the commencement of the second session, however, we were able to establish a reading room; before the expiration of the third we had a locality of our own, and at the termination of the winter session 1839-40, we found ourselves able to take our present rooms which are admirably calculated to fulfil the views of the Society.

It was during the first three or four sessions which followed the foundation of the Society that the greatest difficulties were experienced. Its very existence was unknown to the medical world, and even to most of our countrymen in Paris, and as the members were resolved to resort to no means of publicity inconsistent with the dignity of medical associations, it was only gradually that its reputation as a scientific body could become established. Many, even, who heard of its proceedings, stood aloof, because public opinion had not yet placed upon it the stamp of approbation.

Nor had the Society only to contend with the indifference of many of those to whom it might naturally

have looked for support, it had also to meet the direct opposition of the government of the country in which it was established.

The founders of the Society, being ignorant of the French laws respecting associations, had omitted to obtain the sanction of government, and at this period, its meetings having attracted the notice of the authorities, the entire proceedings of the Society were suddenly stopped by an interdict from the Minister of the Interior, and the office-bearers threatened with imprisonment. From this blow the Society had some difficulty to recover; it was not until a delay of several months had elapsed, and not until the intercession of the University of Paris had been resorted to, that the Society was definitively recognised by the French government as a scientific body, and its meetings legally authorised. I feel great pleasure in being able to state that we were, in this instance, mainly indebted for our success to the energetic and persevering efforts of one of our oldest and most distinguished French members (1).

All these obstacles, however, have been overcome by the perseverance and energy of the early members. For the last eighteen months or two years the Society has had few if any difficulties to contend with, and its prosperity has daily become greater. The number of members has rapidly increased; its scientific proceedings have attracted the attention of the profession

(1) Dr Henri Roger.

both in England and in France, and various memoirs and essays read before it have been subsequently published either in the British or foreign scientific journals or as separate works; many valuable donations of books have been added to our library, and nearly all the principal medical Reviews and Journals published in Great Britain and France, with some of those which appear in Germany and America, have been laid on the reading room table for the use of members.

The present state of the Parisian Medical Society, Gentlemen, is most satisfactory. It counts nearly three hundred members, among whom are the principal resident British practitioners in Paris, and several of the most eminent medical men of Great Britain. Its finances are, I am happy to say, in a prosperous condition. Its library amounts already to above three hundred volumes, comprising many of the most valuable medical and scientific works in the English and French languages, and is rapidly increasing, not only by contributions from members, but also by donations from some of the most celebrated medical writers of Great Britain. A classified catalogue of the works which it contains has just been completed, at the expense of great labour and great sacrifice of time, by our talented Librarian. (1) This catalogue it is the intention of the society to print in the course of the present session. I must not also omit to

(1) Dr Thomas Evans.

mention that more than fifteen medical Journals and Reviews are received and regularly filed. The various offices of the society are in the hands of able and active members, who have repeatedly shewn that they feel as great an interest in its welfare, and are as ready to devote their time and efforts to ensure its prosperity, as their predecessors were in more perilous times. Need I allude to our scientific proceedings? You have had, or will have, yourselves, an opportunity of judging how they are conducted. I may, however, safely assert that in no Medical Society is more valuable or more interesting scientific matter brought before the members; indeed, as long as the meetings are attended, as they now are, by the elite of the British, American and continental Schools, this will necessarily be the case. The Parisian Medical Society has the privilege of assembling within its walls the representatives of the medical doctrines of every school, of every clime, and it is to this circumstance, no doubt, that we are partly indebted for the interest which generally attaches itself to the scientific proceedings of the Society.

With regard to our future prospects, Gentlemen, I have but little to say after the details into which I have entered.

The Parisian Medical Society is now a permanent institution, and a noble monument of our national character. The elements on which it is based are not of an ephemeral nature, for so long as the French School retains its eminence, an eminence founded as I have shewn on its organisation, so long as medical science is cultivated

in the countries in which the English language is spoken, so long, I trust, will the Parisian Medical Society prove the common centre round which our professional brethren will assemble and unite their exertions, in the furtherance and extension of our noble profession.



is the country in which the English language is spoken so long, I trust, will the Parisian Medical Society prove the common centre, round which our professional brethren will assemble, and unite their exertions, in the furtherance and extension of our noble profession, as well as their efforts to ensure its prosperity, as they are now so happily united in more extended times. Need I add, that you will have not only the opportunity of judging how they are conducted, I may, however, safely assert that in a Medical Society, a more valuable or more interesting scientific matter brought before the members; indeed, as long as the meetings are attended, as they now are, by the ablest and most distinguished members of the Faculty, this will necessarily be the case. The Parisian Medical Society, within its sphere of influence, has had the reputation of the medical doctrines of every school, of every age, and it is to its circumstances, no doubt, that we are indebted for the interest which generally attaches itself to the scientific proceedings of its Society.

With regard to our future prospects, Gentlemen, I have but little to say after the details which I have already given.

The Parisian Medical Society is now a permanent institution, and a noble society of our national character. The elements on which it is based are not of an ephemeral nature, but such as the French School would always regard as the basis of a permanent and successful organization, so long as medical science is cultivated