Address to the Medico-Chirurgical Society of Edinburgh : delivered on the occasion of taking the chair of the Society, December 17, 1856 / by James Miller.

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Miller, James, 1812-1864.
Medico-Chirurgical Society of Edinburgh.

Publication/Creation

Edinburgh : Printed for the Society by Murray and Gibb, 1857.

Persistent URL

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ADDRESS

TO THE

MEDICO-CHIRURGICAL SOCIETY

OF

EDINBURGH,

DELIVERED ON THE OCCASION OF TAKING

THE CHAIR OF THE SOCIETY,

DECEMBER 17, 1856.

BY

JAMES MILLER, F.R.S.E.,

PROFESSOR OF SURGERY IN THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH.

EDINBURGH:

PRINTED FOR THE SOCIETY, BY MURRAY AND GIBB.

MDCCCLVII.

EXTRACT FROM THE MINUTES OF THE MEDICO-CHIRURGICAL SOCIETY,

DECEMBER 17, 1856.

THE PRESIDENT having delivered his Address, it was moved by Dr Alexander Wood, seconded by Dr Gairdner, sen.,—That the thanks of the Society be voted to Professor Miller, for his excellent and able Address, and that he be requested to allow it to be printed.

On this motion being carried by acclamation, it was moved by Professor Simpson, and carried unanimously,—That it be remitted to the Council to carry into effect the wish of the Society.

ADDRESS

TO THE

MEDICO-CHIRURGICAL SOCIETY OF EDINBURGH.

GENTLEMEN,

IN taking my seat, for the first time, as President of the Medico-Chirurgical Society of Edinburgh, I have to thank you most sincerely for the honour you have been pleased to confer upon me; an honour altogether unexpected, and, I fear, almost altogether undeserved. Casting my mind's eye back on my connection with this Society, the prevailing and paramount feeling educed is one of regret that I have been able to do so little of what it was my duty to have done. Looking forward to the time in which our connection is to be more intimate, and, on my part, far more responsible, than heretofore, the sentiment of my heart is a solemn resolve, God helping me, better to acquit myself, in all respects, and seek to warrant, at least in some degree, your present appointment.

One circumstance I deem especially fortunate. In my predecessor in office, who entered on his duty manfully, discharged it faithfully, and, withal, most gracefully laid it down—I have a safe model on which to form my public service; and, while his shadow may, no doubt, dim and darken any little effort towards brightness I may be permitted to essay, it will far more than counterbalance that disadvantage, by kindly covering and concealing the many shortcomings which I cannot hope to avoid.

But one obvious impending error let me at once steer clear of; and, ceasing to talk of myself, let me speak to you of what occurs

to me as specially important in connection with the progress and success of this Society. In this pre-eminently utilitarian age, the doubting, if not sceptical cry, meets us at almost every turn, and of almost every thing—"Cui bono?" Applied to us, the answer seems most ready—The advantages of such an Association are both manifest and many.

1. *It promotes a generous emulation in advancing our common profession.* We are not sent into the world to feel a certain number of pulses, look at a certain number of tongues, prescribe a certain number of doses—and there an end. Every man has his mission, besides. Let him both know and do it. And, very plainly, it will contribute to both the knowing and the doing, to mingle in such a Society as this. Very often, a man has not felt his power, which has lain dormant and latent within him for a long season, until its action was aroused by hearing or seeing the doings of another, and a conviction came that he himself surely could do like things at least or almost as well. It needs a spark, oftentimes, to kindle the flame of a "gift;" and where, more readily, are such useful, friendly, stimulating sparks to be found, than among professional brethren honourably contending for a common good? At home, in ordinary society, and in his common daily rounds, he might have gone on, even all his days, in a quiet, jog-trot way; no kindling spark alighting on his intellectual tinder; and this "talent"—which, if duly exercised, might have been fraught with great blessings to his kind—becomes, in consequence, withered, and atrophied, and effete, as it lies rolled up in a napkin—at last growing altogether too dull and damp for any shower of sparks to kindle into burning. Whereas here, the professional furnace is at a genial, glowing heat; the metal, too, is incandescent, and on the anvil; stroke after stroke is sturdily delivered by brawny arms, some skilful hand turning it the while; and, as the sparks fly around, one cannot come near with matter within him in any degree inflammable, without sustaining profitable ignition. Thus the "gift" within him is detected, and made apparent, at least to himself. And that is enough to an honourable mind. He needs then only to remember that he is one of a learned and

liberal profession, the full status and attainments of which are yet to win; and the very sight of his brethren, time after time, busy in the onward movement, striving together to lift that status higher and higher, will surely prove stimulus enough to make sure of him as an earnest and faithful coadjutor.

In such society, too, the principle of Division of Labour is likely to be reverenced. Among so many, there are sure to be diversities of gifts; and these diversities come not only to be detected by the respective owners, but also to be known and recognised by all. Order and arrangement inevitably grow out of this. And, instead of a multitude hammering confusedly at one and the same bar, there are many irons simultaneously in the fire—and that without any of the proverbial loss or detriment; for each iron has its well allotted complement of workmen; and thus, while toiling at different parts, all conduce to the perfect elaboration of the whole.

A thought, in harmony with this, can hardly be kept down, viz.—Might there not be an amalgamation, both pleasant and profitable, of the medical societies of this school? Might not the Obstetric and Physiological Societies, for example, be constituted as sections or subdivisions of a central and comprehensive Medico-Chirurgical Society? By such an arrangement, might not a harmonious action be imparted, with a regularity of movement and certainty of result superior to what could otherwise be hoped for?

2. A second advantage I would name, is the *prevention of practical empiricism, and of the spirit of quackery.* The overt and palpable quackery of secret nostrums, and ill-disguised dishonesty, I do not mean; for such things cannot raise their heads in this Society. The filthy fungus, venturing to shoot up among fragrant flowers, and useful plants, and pleasant herbage, is at once detected, and cut down.

I allude to two things. 1. The inadvertent lapsing into practical empiricism, which is apt to befall the best practitioner, if left to a daily and solitary routine. In a way almost unknown, and altogether unsuspected by himself, he is apt to assume an indolent, unsafe, and unscientific habit of treating diseases pretty much by their

names, and after one little-varying slipshod fashion; seldom shaken out of this unseemly rut into which his wheels have fallen, save by some untoward event, the result of such negligence, which for a time recalls him to a more prudent and painstaking progress. Such a man obviously needs the spur; it is safe neither for himself nor for others that he be without it. And how can such friendly stimulus be better applied—more truly, more timeously—than in amicable reunion with his fellows, where interchange of thought, as well as of experience, goes freely round, and the awakening comes not after the untoward professional stumbling, but to prevent it?

2. I mean, also, and mainly, the spirit of quackery, concealed under the cloak of professional knowledge, and practised in the guise of the scientific and the orthodox: the holding of a fair face to the public, while inwardly conversant with duplicity and guile. Should a man's mind be unfortunately constituted so as to predispose him to this, he will not only be warned of his risk, in such meetings as these, but he will also be so dealt with in his whole inner man, as either to escape the lapse, or obtain a speedy and safe correction. He cannot, from day to day, be an unconcerned and unimproved spectator of his brother practitioners meeting as brothers ought to meet, opening bosom to bosom, reasoning frankly and freely with one another as to the causes and courses of disease, as well as of the success and failure of remedies; making common stock, as it were, of their knowledge and experience, and seeking honestly to harmonize and enhance it all for the general good of suffering humanity. In such an atmosphere, the spirit of quackery cannot live; it must sicken and die.

3. A third advantage is the *exposure and suppression of heresy*. "In the multitude of counsellors there is safety." One man, or two or three men, may be readily enough deceived as to what is heretical. They may, on the one hand, imagine what is wrong to be right; or, on the other, what is right to be wrong. But let the matter come under the shrewd cognizance and sustained inquiry of numbers, such as ours; each man looking at it from his own peculiar point of view; one after another taking it by as many different handles as

the thing possesses, and turning it about in all possible directions—outside in, and inside out—upside down, and downside up: under such sifting examination, it is hard to suppose that, while what is subtle and refined either of good or evil may for a time escape detection, the glaringly false and erroneous must not be, sooner or later, made patent to the day.

Moreover, heresy, having been found and exposed, is here in favourable circumstances for being put down. I do not mean by force, or harshness, or oppression; for that would defeat its own ends; persecution proving always the friend, rather than the foe, of scientific error. But I mean by solid argument and sturdy demonstration, exposing the hollowness of the ground it has assumed; while, by merciless, yet courteous excision, you amputate each false pillar of support, and leave the mutilated thing not one sound leg to stand on.

But, besides, the work of heresy-hunting is not simply one of exposing and scattering chaff. There is always some grain, perhaps there are some grains of wheat, which are to be diligently sought out, and, when found, appropriated. This were no theft. It is restitution. The theft occurred before, and by other hands. Truth is common property. Let it not be purloined, and remain attached to error. Search it out, and take it back again; place it where it was, and ought to be.

From the high ground of truth and honesty, we look down on the unwholesome mists of heresy circling beneath, not in hate, and with sputterings of anger, but in sorrow, in pity, and in shame—sorrow for the deceived, pity for the simple-minded, and shame for the deceiver. By persecution, we should give him the advantage—raising him into the position of martyrdom; he exchanging the character of the quack for that of the hero, and much public sympathy going needlessly with him in his metamorphosis. There are at least three better ways of dealing with him. 1. Let him alone. Give him rope, and let him hang himself. If his creed and calling be of nought, it will come to nought. 2. But, better than this *vis inertiae*, reason with him, or rather of his doctrines, and with his

dupes. Study, as we have said, his heterodoxy; and knock him down by the force of argument, not by the argument of force. 3. Again, as we have just said, there is a third way—and these two last methods fall peculiarly within the province of such an institution as this—See what good there is in his so-called system. No heresy yet, whether in physic or in faith, ever held together for a twelvemonth, without some particle of soundness in it. Without this, it could not delude the most simple of men—or women either—even for a day. By the great Disposer of events, it would seem as if a certain amount of good, both in men and things, were lent, as it were, to delusions, to prop them up for a while, for the trying of men. And the best and surest way to overthrow the fallacy, is to remove the prop on which, for a time, it is permitted to rest. The brigantine (to vary the similitude), no doubt, ordinarily is piratical, and the public service is bound to put him down. But there is no sense in firing heavy shot to rake and sink him. You will not damage his hull—you will not cripple his rigging; both are too shadowy and gossamer-like for that, in the "Flying Dutchman." Your 68-pounder will go through and through, the gap will close, and the rakish craft will sail on, more jauntily and defiantly than before. Don't run him down, either; but rather take the wind out of his sails by skilful seamanship; and, as he then lies becalmed, you can overhaul him at your will. Do so! Haul down his false colours; run up the honest Union Jack instead; put an honest crew aboard; and the good ship Science may tow him astern, as her legal prize and tender. Water is an agent of good in many circumstances; so is exercise, so is rubbing, so is dieting, so is small dosing, or total absence of physic. Don't quarrel with water, because it has formed an illegitimate alliance with quackery; or, rather, this has perpetrated a violent abduction on the pure and virgin element. Don't abjure friction, or dieting, or cautious physic, because each of these has been, in some hands, made the stalking-horse of imposture. Forbid the banns in such unholy alliances. Sue for a divorce and separation. Detach the evil from the good—the chaff from the wheat. Scatter the former to the four winds of heaven; let Eolus have his

will of them; but make sure of the latter; store it up, and use it lawfully, as you have need.

And, withal, in charity let us remember, that delusions have their loan, as already said, of *men* as well as of *things*. A man is not necessarily immoral or untrue, in virtue of being professionally heretical. And, while we give no quarter to the thing of error—and as little to the wilful rogue—let us have yet a kind word, and a loving, sympathetic thought, for that brother who is honest and sincere in his belief, though wrong.

4. A fourth advantage is, that this Society, while *promoting generous emulation, represses petty and personal strife.* Our profession, more than any other, perhaps, brings its members, in the course of their ordinary avocations, frequently into contact, and perhaps into collision, under circumstances of an antagonistic kind. Self-interest, thinking itself imperilled, is very apt to give the emotions then a repellent character; and it may require much care, as well as kindliness of spirit, on the part of each, to avoid heart-burnings and offence. Here, however—in this place—all is different. It is the common interest that is concerned; individual effort is working not for one, but for all; and the chemico-vital force in operation is not repulsion, but attraction, blending the component atoms into one harmonious whole. There are not many interests, but one; the objects to be obtained do not conflict, but conspire to one great end. Individuals may quarrel, and colleges may clash; but there seems to be no good reason why this Society should not be, in all essential things, in true brotherhood—of one heart and one mind.

And, besides, in such harmonious co-operation, our minds undergo a healthful training. Not only are they kept steadily at suitable work, and thereby saved from the temptation to mischief to which all idlers are exposed, while, by dint of wholesome exercise, the mental "*condition*" is strengthened and improved—they are also provided with *a higher class of work* than would otherwise, in all probability, fall to the lot of ordinary mere practitioners; and so the mind receives a polish as well as a tone, an elevation as well as a strengthening. It acquires, as if by a new instinct, a preference

for the excitements of science, rather than for those of self-interest, and a taste for the friendly contendings of courteous argument, rather than for the rougher and coarser play of personal enmity and strife; for these they grow to have neither time nor inclination. And minds so exercised, in building up the common wall of our profession, find no difficulty in answering the Tobiahs, and Sanballats, and Geshems, that would tempt them into the plain of personal dispute—Nay, "we are doing a great work, so that we cannot come down."

5. A fifth advantage is, *the promotion of brotherly concord.* Not only are we disposed to unite in a common interest and common work: we are also drawn together into a better and closer union—that of brethren, not in profession only, but in reality. The lower animals, when brought together in numbers, are not always amicable and kind; and man, too, in a barbarous or half-civilized state, is rather repellent than attractive, when accidentally gregarious. Of old, "Come, let us look one another in the face," was a message of war and bloodshed among the kings. But with the educated and civilized it is otherwise. Such "lookings in the face" as we are privileged to enjoy here, have a very different object, and a very different end. Under the warm gaze of the living eye, the mists of unconscious prejudice and ill-grounded dislike thaw and disappear; and often we are constrained to confess, that the oftener we meet and see a man, with free interchange of thought, the more we like him. Brought together, and moved briskly about by the wave of friendly debate, corners are rubbed off, rough surfaces are made smooth, and we come to fit in comfortably together, like pebbles on the rippled beach. There are round men, and square men, it has been said, in this world; naturally so. And the great practical difficulty in administration is alleged to be, to find square places for the square men, and round places for the round men. Now, we readily admit that some men are born square, and, if left in a state of nature, would remain so. But we much doubt the desirableness, as regards either himself or others, of any man remaining in the quadrangular form of his original construction. It may be well to retain a few, perhaps, as specimens of the class; and square places may be found

for them, constituting them outlying picquets of the army of science—studying astronomy, for example, or other philosophic observation, on the top of some high mountain's peak; but surely, it were well, in general, that the square man were rounded off, more or less, so that if he may not fit, he at least may enter and occupy every door of usefulness. And how can such smooth rotundity be more readily and pleasantly acquired, than in such happy and healthy attrition with his fellows as is here?

And a very special advantage of such smoothing influences is, that, while the *corners* and roughnesses, which, in the jostling of moving masses, might bruise, or wound, or tear, are taken away—the *edge* is in nowise blunted; but, on the contrary, the more the corners round off and disappear, the intellectual edge grows all the more sharp and keen. "As iron sharpeneth iron, so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend." And not only so. The sharpened edge is not set against his fellow; *the smooth surfaces* only come in contact; it is shoulder to shoulder; the edges are set all in one way, to cut and cleave the common obstacles in the onward progress.

This obviously implies *a right mode and spirit of conducting all our meetings*. Discussion must be frank, friendly, and free; the play of foils, and not of the pointed rapier; open, without reserve or concealment; unwarped by favour, untrammelled by fear; no man courting an isolated place, or seeking to stand aloof from his fellows; no set of men clubbing together as partizans, and seeking to appropriate for a few what is meant for all.

Perfect freedom in all our inquiries seems specially essential. If fair and friendly, as well as free, it can never grow licentious; and, besides, such freedom is most necessary to one great function of this Society, namely, the sifting of truth from error in all that is new, whether in observation or thought. We are as fanners, which, by dint of free ventilation and potent stirring of the mass, separate the chaff from the wheat, the true from the false, the useful from the worthless, the precious from the vile.

If, gentlemen, in any past time, we have been wanting in any of

these respects; if, by reason of that frailty that is inherent in all humanity, we have sometimes been tempted to contend rather for victory than for truth, and with more of the acrimonious and personal spirit than is either seemly or profitable—let it be so no more. I speak not now as a censor of my fellows, but as mine own accuser. My conscience will not acquit me of all blame in such a retrospect; but as it reminds me of my past failings, it stirs me up to present wariness, with a humble, but honest resolve, to be more circumspect in all the future.

7. One other advantage let me mention. *While profitable to ourselves, these meetings are, at the same time, calculated to be in no small degree useful to the younger branches of the profession.* It were foreign to our constitution as a society, and hardly consistent with the objects we seek, to flood our meetings with a large and promiscuous attendance of Students. With inquiring eye, and open ear, the Student is also possessed of strong heels; and, when free among his fellows, he is prone to use the last-named organ at least as frequently and faithfully as either of the other two; producing thereby a strepitous accompaniment not advantageous to suitable prosecution of calm and philosophic deliberation. But when in a minority, and judiciously interspersed among his seniors, he is impressed with their sobriety of demeanour, and, with praiseworthy decorum, will look and listen by the hour. So circumstanced, he cannot fail to profit as a hearer of the important facts or reasonings from time to time produced; and shall we not hope that he is in the way of gain too, as a looker on the free, fraternal, philosophic spirit in which your discussions are conducted, and the self-denial and resolve with which you patiently and faithfully endeavour to advance our common science, and our common cause?

Gentlemen, permit me to say, that this is one more reason for careful conduct of our affairs. We may—we must—often be unconsciously moulding at least the public character of men that are to take our places, when our day of duty has reached its close. And, as we would rejoice to think of them as better men than ourselves, let us see to it that they have some ground to think of us as good

men now. And have there not been, and are there not now among you, those who are in all respects just models for the Student? There is one especially whom you will permit me to point out—one whose living voice we may not often hear again in this place, but whose living example and never-dying memory will remain ever present with us all. Who has been more faithful to his profession, to his country, to his God, than Alison? Who so self-denying in his daily walk of doing good?—who so single-eyed and single-hearted in the pursuit of truth?—who so patient and pitiful to the poor?—who so considerate and kind to his professional brethren?—who so thoughtful for others, and thoughtless only for himself? Surely he will ever be recognised in this Society as one of its brightest ornaments, and one of its best examples; and its members will esteem it both a duty and a privilege to take a forward part in any movement towards conferring suitable honour and reverence on one

> "Who, born for the universe, [ne'er] narrow'd his mind,
> [Nor gave party nor self] what was meant for mankind."

No doubt, gentlemen, there are many obstacles to the progress of our profession. On these, however, I will not dwell. Let me conclude with a glance at the opposite side of the picture; for surely there is good ground for congratulating ourselves that we are here, this day, in favourable circumstances for labouring towards that progress. Of late, the basis of medical science and practice has become both more extended and more sure. The laws of health are better understood, more successfully wielded, and more generally obeyed. Disease is more under control, and Death cannot boast of so large an average as he was wont to do. The members of our profession are more united than they were; and, if medical reform now and then set small parcels of us by the ears, we believe that the ultimate issue will be, under the pressure of a common danger feared, and a common safety longed for, to unite us all into a more compact, harmonious, and powerful body, than ever we have shown before. Moreover, with greater powers, have we not a wider field wherein to labour? No doubt, it is our special business to cure disease; but

we may, and must, do more—prevent it. It is not beyond, but thoroughly within our range, to include all efforts towards sanitary improvement, and almost all means of social reform. And, pre-eminently, is it not great encouragement to reflect that, in the present day, more than in any other since the apostolic time, Medicine is becoming the humble, but hearty—aye, and honoured—handmaid of Religion; taking no ignoble or unimportant part in spreading abroad the knowledge of those eternal truths which alone confer true life, either to men or nations? And whether, therefore, we regard the health, comfort, respectability, intelligence, or safety of mankind, we are entitled to raise our watchword high—"Floreat res Medica!"

MURRAY AND GIBB, PRINTERS, EDINBURGH.