

Reminiscences of Lawson Tait / [Christopher Martin].

Contributors

Martin, Christopher, 1866-1933.

Publication/Creation

Manchester : Sherratt & Hughes, 1921.

Persistent URL

<https://wellcomecollection.org/works/vq9fandw>



Wellcome Collection
183 Euston Road
London NW1 2BE UK
T +44 (0)20 7611 8722
E library@wellcomecollection.org
<https://wellcomecollection.org>

Reminiscences of Lawson Tait

BY

CHRISTOPHER MARTIN, M.B. (Edin.), F.R.C.S. (Eng.),

Consulting Surgeon, Birmingham and Midland Hospital for Women; President of the Midland Obstetrical and Gynæcological Society.

[Reprinted from "The Journal of Obstetrics and Gynæcology of the British Empire," Spring, 1921]

MANCHESTER :
SHERRATT AND HUGHES
34 CROSS STREET

1921

1914-15

1914-15

Reminiscences of Lawson Tait.¹

By CHRISTOPHER MARTIN, M.B. (Edin.), F.R.C.S. (Eng.),

*Consulting Surgeon, Birmingham and Midland Hospital for Women,
President of the Midland Obstetrical and Gynæcological Society.*

WHEN you did me the honour of nominating me for the post of President of your Society, I felt that instead of addressing you on some obstetrical or gynæcological topic, it might be more interesting if I gave you some of my personal reminiscences of the greatest of all Birmingham gynæcologists, Lawson Tait.

I was intimately associated with him from 1889 to 1893—during the very acme of his career—as pupil, assistant and partner.

In July 1889 I came from Edinburgh with a letter of introduction from Prof. Sir Alex. Simpson (whose house surgeon I had been), and became one of Mr. Tait's pupils. It was his custom to take a limited number (usually four) of post graduate pupils, who each paid him a fee of from fifty to one hundred guineas for a period of three to six months. These pupils were mostly Americans, and he told me "he had to charge a fee to keep out the crowd." They were not all Americans, for I can recall, amongst others, Morse of Norwich, Septimus Sunderland of London, Tenison Collins of Cardiff, Hawkins Ambler of Liverpool, John Campbell of Belfast, Albert Morison of Hartlepool, and Stewart Mackey of Sydney. I believe also Thomas Wilson was a pupil for a time. Within a week of my arrival in Birmingham I fell ill with scarlet fever, and was in hospital for six weeks. When I was convalescent Mr. Tait kindly took me down to his beautiful house, in the New Forest, to recuperate. He used to come down most week ends, and so we got better acquainted. About this time he quarrelled with his private assistant, Mr. Teichelmann, and offered me his post, which I gladly accepted. In May 1890 a vacancy occurred on the staff of the Women's Hospital, and I was appointed almost entirely through his influence. In 1891 he took me into partnership; and the same year my brother Charles joined us as our joint assistant. So much for the way I became connected with him.

1. A Paper read before the Midland Obstetrical and Gynæcological Society on October 14th, 1920.

He died over twenty-one years ago, and therefore most of those present never saw him. But once seen he was not easily forgotten. He was a short, stout man with a magnificent head, thick bull neck, corpulent body, podgy legs, and small hands and feet. Someone—I forget who—described him as “a man with the body of Bacchus and head of Jove.” He had a small, beautifully shaped mouth, a firm chin, and eyes which had a wonderful power of fascination. His voice was soft and musical—I have heard him sing sweetly—but when enraged he could roar like a lion. He had a very big head—he took “8” in hats—and a fine head of hair just beginning to turn grey.

He was a man of great force of character, great will power, great genius. By his personal magnetism he dominated all with whom he came in contact, certainly all those in his service. They worshipped him and would do anything for him. In this respect, as in many others, he resembled Napoleon. He was a man of untiring industry and immense vitality and energy. He never spent an idle moment. He had many interests—inside and outside his profession—many irons in the fire at once; and the amount of work he got through was marvellous.

Let me describe a typical day's work. He was called at 7 a.m., had a very light breakfast in bed of tea and bread and butter, had his bath, and was usually down about 8 a.m. He ran rapidly through his morning letters (and they were numerous) and dictated replies to his secretary. At 8.30 a.m., with a big cigar in his mouth and a sheaf of papers in his arms, he got into his carriage—the familiar Victoria with two grey horses—picked up his assistant, and drove off to the Women's Hospital at Sparkhill. Here he would do from one to three operations, and be back at his house in the Crescent about 11 a.m. Here there would be probably one or two more operations; and then about noon he would get his lunch. This was a substantial, but not heavy, meal. From 12.30 to 3 or 4 p.m. he had consultations at home; and I need not tell you how thronged his rooms were. He was a man of few words, grasped very quickly the gist of the patient's story, and was equally quick in his examination and diagnosis. His abdominal examination would take less than a minute, his vaginal examination was just as rapid; and then he had made up his mind as to his diagnosis—right or wrong. He wasted few words on his patients. He told them briefly and abruptly what was the matter and what must be done; and they “could take it or leave it.” He was no respecter of persons, and never toadied to the rich or great. I have known him miss a big fee by losing his temper with a foolish talkative woman. On the other hand, he was most generous to the poor. He took scores of poor women into his private hospital,

kept them there for four to six weeks, and operated on them for nothing. He made no difference in treatment or food between these patients and those who were paying him handsome fees.

His consultations over, he would rush out perhaps to see out-patients at the Women's Hospital, perhaps to a Committee meeting at Mason College, the Medical Institute, or elsewhere. Then may be, he would drive out to a consultation in the country and be back for dinner at 7 p.m. After dinner, he might read a paper at a medical society, or take part in a debate. On returning home he would perhaps sit down and sketch out a medical article or indite to his secretary a scathing letter to be sent to the *British Medical Journal* in reply to some antagonist. He revelled in such wordy warfare and "drank delight of battle with his peers." My brother Charles was his private secretary for over a year, and was often successful in toning down some of his most fiery letters. Mr. Tait would rush into the library, fling down a letter and say: "Write to this man and tell him I'll see him damned before I'll do what he wants." The letter when typed would perhaps read: "Mr. Lawson Tait deeply regrets that he is unable to accede to Mr. B's request." "But that is not what I said, Charlie," Mr. Tait would exclaim when he came to read the letter. "No, but it means the same thing and reads better," my brother would reply; and the amended letter would be sent.

He was very clean in his person, dressed for comfort rather than appearance, and did not care what people thought or said about him. In the house and in his consulting room he usually wore a black velvet lounge coat. He never played cards, chess, billiards, or golf. He enjoyed the good things of this life, but he was neither a gormandiser nor a drunkard. He was, however, a heavy smoker and consumed innumerable strong cigars. He was fond of the theatre, and numbered many leading actors, such as Irving and Toole, among his intimate friends.

He had many hobbies and took keen pleasure in pursuing them. His house was full of curios, especially Chinese and Japanese. I remember one evening when the Honourable Hugh Fraser (the British Minister to Japan) dined with him, and I was asked to join the small party. The conversation turned to Japanese curios and incidentally ladies' combs. Mr. Tait left the room and brought down several drawers full of these articles—there were scores of them—which he had picked up, arranged, put away, and almost forgotten.

He had in his house many beautiful Catholic emblems, crucifixes, triptychs, and pictures. He once told me that he was brought up as a Catholic and, as a boy, sang in the choir

and acted as the priest's attendant or server at the office of the Mass. Though in after life he ceased to attend the services because he no longer accepted its doctrines, up to the day of his death he had a great affection for the Roman Church and a love for all forms of Catholic art. He once delivered a sermon in the Church of the Saviour "On the Image of Baal," in which his religious views were boldly expressed. From it I gathered that they were those of a Unitarian, but certainly not an Atheist.

He was passionately fond of animals and always possessed a large number of cats—mostly blue Persians. His love of animals led him to take up an extreme position with regard to vivisection, which he denounced in no measured terms. He abominated every form of sport that involved cruelty to animals, such as fox hunting, pigeon shooting and grouse shooting. But he did not object to fishing; indeed, at one time, he had a fishing cottage at King's Bromley, where he used to go for the week-end. It is still in existence, a black and white half-timbered bungalow, now run, I believe, as a tea house.

He was fond of the country and, whenever he could, got out of Birmingham. He had, in addition to the fishing cottage and his house in the New Forest, a bungalow out at Yardley Wood, a half timbered house at Cropthorn called "The Den," a sailing yacht on the Solent, a steam launch and a house-boat on the Avon. Here some of his happiest hours were spent, and he was never merrier than when entertaining a few friends, and especially in cooking for them. I remember well he once took a party of friends, including the late Dr. Saundby, up the river from Worcester. Dr. Saundby and I were at the prow; and, as the launch went up stream, we noticed we were getting into very shallow water. We shouted back to warn Mr. Tait, but he was busy cooking in a frying pan our lunch, a weird mixture of eggs, cheese, tomatoes, onions, and potatoes. Suddenly the stern grounded, the current swept the boat sideways, and we were nearly capsized. As it was, the frying pan and its contents were upset and spoilt. Mr. Tait called us a pack of damned fools, seized the tiller and got us safely to the shore. We then scrambled out and sat on the bank whilst he proceeded to cook another lunch for us in the boat.

Speaking of Saundby reminds me of a characteristic incident. Tait read a paper at the Midland Medical Society, I believe on Appendicitis, and, as was his wont, invited several doctors (including Saundby) to dine with him before the meeting. Well, after the paper there was a rather heated discussion; and Saundby and Tait flatly contradicted each other's statements. Finally, Saundby blurted out, "Really, Mr. Lawson Tait is the rudest man I know." Tait at once retorted, "It is very strange that Dr. Saundby cannot

open his mouth without insulting somebody." Truly a case of the pot and the kettle!

He was an able and convincing speaker and debater, ready in retort, quick to see the weak points in an opponent's arguments, and clever in concealing his own. Some of you may remember a debate on the "Germ Theory of Disease" at the Medical Institute in 1895. He had the whole of the local surgical talent against him—Jordan Lloyd, Priestley Smith, Morrison, Barling, Leedham Green, etc.—all tearing his arguments to pieces. But he was a match for the lot of them and came out of the debate triumphant; though we all knew he was wrong and they were right.

Another occasion on which he gained an intellectual victory over his opponents was in the action for libel Dr. Denholm brought against him at the Manchester Assizes. He had some of the ablest of the Manchester medical men arrayed against him—Whitehead, Lloyd Roberts, Dreschfeld, Reynolds, Japp Sinclair and others. The case looked very black; but when he got into the witness box he refuted their arguments and statements so cleverly that both Judge and jury were won over to his side and the case against him collapsed ignominiously.

He was a hater of hypocrites, humbugs and cowards; but in his heart admired those who had the courage to stand up to him. I remember once he went into a patient's room and rang the bell several times for a nurse, but no one came. He stormed out of the room and down the corridor to the nurses' sitting-room. There he met a new nurse—an Irish girl—who had just joined his staff. "Where the devil have all the nurses got to?" he roared. "I'm damned if I know, sir," she calmly answered. This "soft" answer turned away his wrath and rather pleased him than otherwise.

He was an ugly enemy; and when he hit he hit hard, and did not mind whether it was above or below the belt. He was fond of rushing into print, both in the local press and the medical journals. Some of his controversies with Keith and Spencer Wells in the *British Medical Journal* between 1889 and 1892 were acrimoniously conducted on both sides, the letters being very pungent and scathing.

In private life he was a charming companion, and it was a pleasure to listen to his conversation. Some of the most interesting hours I have spent were at his dinner table, where he entertained all sorts of guests—Kropotkin the Nihilist, Prof. Blackie of Edinburgh, Alfred Hayes the poet, Toole the actor, Hugh Fraser the diplomatist, Canon O'Sullivan of Solihull, and others. It was indeed a treat to listen to them, with their wit and repartee and their merry stories. I only wish I had recorded some of the latter.

He had a violent temper and when he let himself go was like a

raging bull. I remember once he got into a passion with a telephone operator; and, as he could not lay hands on him or her, he tore down the instrument from the wall and smashed it on the floor. Needless to say his blind rage cost him dearly both in inconvenience and loss of time.

He was not often ill, but when he was he was difficult to treat and manage. On one occasion, Mr. Gilbert Barling (as he was then) had to remove a calculus from his urinary tract. Mr. Tait took the anæsthetic very badly, went black in the face, and nearly died. Immediately after the operation, Mr. Barling went off for his holiday and left him in my charge. Needless to say, I told him to keep to a bland milky diet and to stay absolutely in bed. Would you believe it that, when his friend Dr. Donovan called next day, he found him sitting in an armchair by the fire in his dressing-gown with a Tam o'Shanter on his head, a pint of champagne at his elbow, and a big cigar in his mouth. "Hullo!" said Donovan, "is this allowed?" "Oh yes," said Tait, "Christopher ordered it!" In spite of this and of his refusal to allow me to use antiseptics to the wounds, he managed to recover. On the fifth day he got up and insisted on leaving Birmingham and driving out to his bungalow at Yardley Wood—against Mrs. Tait's entreaties and my protests. After his arrival he sent me a defiant telegram: "Arrived safely, temperature normal, had beef and pickles for dinner."

He was a man of great physical strength and tremendous energy, both bodily and mental. I think he was able to do so much work because of his marvellous faculty of sleeping. He could sleep anywhere and at any time. He had often to take long railway journeys. One day he might be called down to operate in Southampton; and, next day, as soon as he got back, be summoned to Inverness. He slept nearly all the time in the train and would arrive after a long night's journey as fresh as a daisy. I have often seen him finish an operation and sit down and fall sound asleep whilst the second case was being anæsthetised.

As an operator he was wonderful. He worked without the least appearance of haste and with marvellous rapidity and dexterity. He was seen at his best in a bad case of pyosalpinx or a hysterectomy for myoma. Though he encountered appalling difficulties he proceeded silently, swiftly and undauntedly to a triumphant issue. He used no antiseptics but trusted to simple soap and water cleanliness. This was the great mistake of his surgical career. Had he only accepted Lister's teaching and done his operations under more aseptic conditions his results (good as they were) would have been marvellous. But he was obstinate, and up to the last refused to accept and practice what he called "Listerism."

What he did for gynæcology and abdominal surgery is known to all. Amongst other achievements I would recall that—

(1) He reduced the mortality of ovariectomy by discarding the “clamp,” simply ligaturing the pedicle and dropping it.

(2) He was the first to remove gall-stones by operation.

(3) He was the first to operate for tubal pregnancy.

(4) He was the first to remove the uterine appendages for inflammatory disease.

(5) He devised a new, simple and speedy method of repairing the perineum.

(6) He introduced washing out and draining the peritoneum for peritonitis.

(7) He was the first to advocate Cæsarean section for placenta prævia.

Lawson Tait was undoubtedly the greatest surgical genius who ever practised in Birmingham. That he had many failings I will not deny. But who is perfect? “Let him that is without sin cast the first stone.” Let us bury his faults and failings with him in his grave; but let us cherish the memory of the good he did, of his pioneer work in gynæcology and abdominal surgery, of the incalculable services he rendered to mankind. “We shall not look upon his like again.”



