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LAWSON TAIT

By

CHRISTOPHER MARTIN

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LAWSON TAIT

His Life and Work, with
Personal Reminiscences

BY

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

*Consulting Surgeon to the Hospital for Women,
Birmingham.*

*(Reprinted from the Birmingham Medical Review,
June, 1931).*

In this reprint, which comprises the substance
of two lectures—one delivered to the Midland
Medical Society and the other to a company
of the North American Medical Society visiting
this country—I have endeavored to give an
unbiased account of the life and work of
Lawson Tait. I have added some of my own
personal reminiscences of the man as I knew
him. Whilst admitting his foibles and failings,
I have tried to give a true picture of one of
the greatest surgeons of all time.

CHRISTOPHER MARTIN.

35, GEORGE ROAD,
EDINBURGH.

July, 1931.



FIG. I.


45 FREDERICK STREET, EDINBURGH.

The house in which Tait was born, as it is now (1931).



FIG. II.

INSCRIPTION ON TAIT'S MOTHER'S TOMBSTONE,
WITTON CEMETERY, BIRMINGHAM.



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Lawson Tait :**THE MAN AND HIS WORK.**

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

Consulting Surgeon to the Hospital for Women, Birmingham.

I.—HIS LIFE AND WORK.

If I were asked to name the three outstanding figures in the surgical world during the nineteenth century, I should without hesitation say Simpson, Lister, and Tait : Simpson, who gave us chloroform ; Lister, to whom we owe antiseptics ; and Lawson Tait, the pioneer of abdominal surgery. Tait was one of the world's supermen and the greatest surgeon who ever practised in Birmingham. He died over thirty years ago ; and to the younger generation of medical men has become only a name. Most of those who knew him and worked with him during his meteoric career have either passed away or become old men.

I had the good fortune to have been more intimately associated with him than any other living surgeon. I therefore propose to give you a sketch of his life, and recall some of his great achievements. I shall then tell you something about the man himself and his personal traits and peculiarities.

1845-1866.

ROBERT LAWSON TAIT, to give him his full name, was born on the 1st of May, 1845, at 45 Frederick Street, Edinburgh. This house is situated on the east side of Frederick Street, not far from the Water of Leith, and is still standing. It is a plain stone house of the Georgian period, of which there are so many examples in Edinburgh. It has now, however, been cut up into flats and offices, and is occupied by no less than thirteen different tenants. The ground floor is at present a wine and spirit merchant's shop. (Fig. I.)

He was the second son of Archibald Campbell Tait, of Dryden, who was a guild brother of Heriot's Hospital, a lawyer by profession, and a cousin of the late Archbishop Tait.

His mother was Isabella Stewart Lawson, of Leven. After Tait came to Birmingham, she joined him and lived with him. During the last ten years of her life she was bedridden with rheumatoid

arthritis. She was an irascible old lady ; and, no doubt from her, Tait inherited his irritability of temper. She died at 7 Great Charles Street, in February, 1882, and was buried in Witton Cemetery. Her tombstone records the births and deaths of two other children, who both died in childhood (Fig. II). The inscription reads :

In Memory of

ISABELLA STEWART LAWSON TAIT
wife of Archibald Campbell Tait of Edinburgh.

Born April 3rd 1812.

Died February 26th 1882.

And of her children

JOHN ARCHIBALD TAIT.

Born November 15th 1841.

Died April 22nd 1846.

ARCHIBALD JOHN TAIT.

Born July 15th 1849.

Died February 26th 1852.

I fancy that she must have been a Roman Catholic, for he was baptized and brought up a Catholic, and, as a boy, often acted as a server at Mass.

He was educated at Heriot's Hospital, a famous boys' school in Edinburgh, not far from the present Royal Infirmary. Here he won a scholarship at the University, which maintained him there for four years. (Fig. III).

1860-1866.

In 1860, when only fifteen years old, he entered the University, and for about a year was an arts student, one of his teachers being the famous Professor Blackie. He then abandoned arts and took up medicine. (Figs. IV and V.)

Whilst still a student, he became the pupil of Sir James Young Simpson, lived in his house, and frequently assisted him in his private operations. He was evidently a great favourite with Simpson, who profoundly influenced him and moulded his opinions. To the end of his life he always spoke of him in terms of the greatest affection and reverence. (Fig. VI.)

By many Tait was believed to be his natural son ; and one must admit that there was an extraordinary resemblance between the two men. If you look at Simpson's statue in Princes Street,

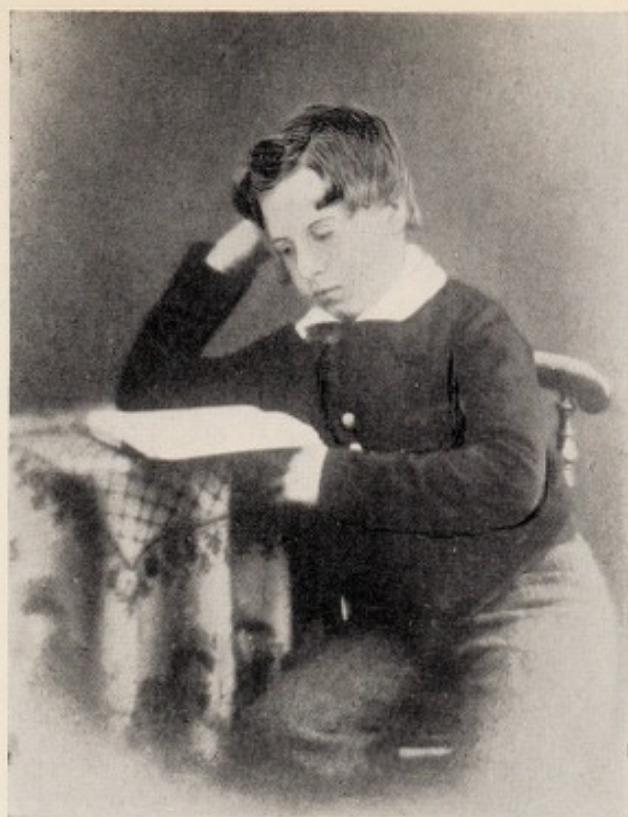


FIG. III.

TAIT AT THE AGE OF ELEVEN.

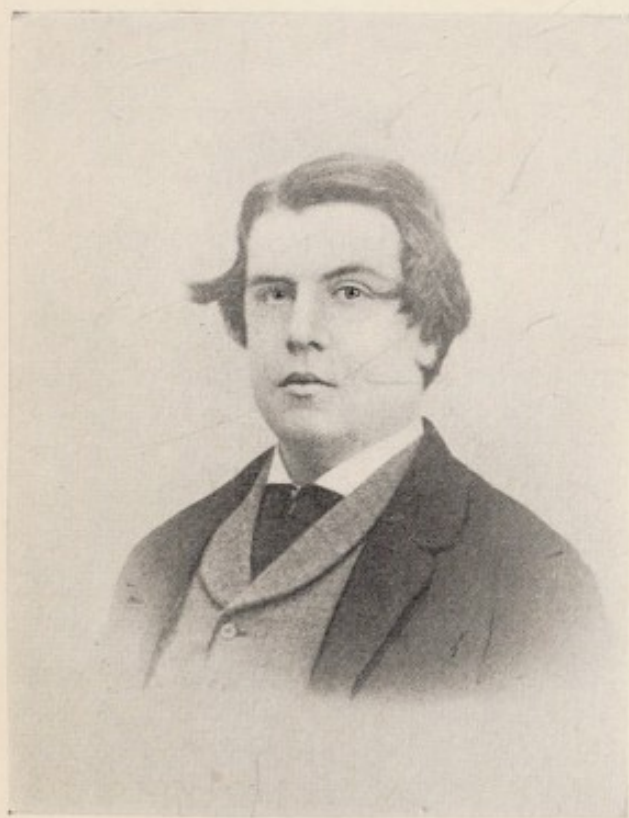


FIG. IV.

TAIT AT THE AGE OF SEVENTEEN.



FIG. V.

TAIT WHEN A MEDICAL STUDENT
AGED TWENTY.

Edinburgh, you might think it was Tait himself. And yet I have my doubts. Is it likely that Simpson would have introduced his illegitimate son into his own family circle, and taken him about with him to assist at operations? Tait always remained on most friendly terms with Simpson's children and nephews; and after his death one of them wrote a letter to the Press indignantly denying the story that he was his son.

For some reason unknown to me, Tait, though a medical student of the University, never took his M.B.; but, in 1866, he obtained the diploma of L.R.C.S., L.R.C.P. (Edin.).

1867-1870.

In 1867 he was appointed resident surgeon at the Clayton Hospital, Wakefield, where he stayed for three years. The committee and medical staff of the hospital appear to have given him a free hand to operate. He performed his first ovariectomy in July 1868, and four others before he left in 1870. He published many articles during these three years in the *Lancet* and other journals, on such subjects as "Cleft Palate," "Hare-lip," "Lithotomy," "Removal of the Coccyx," "Tetanus," and "An Easy Method of taking Casts" (with paraffin).

1870.

In October 1870, he left Wakefield and started in general practice in Birmingham, having acquired Dr. Partridge's practice and house in Lozells (317 Burbury Street, at the corner of Lozells Road). This house is now partly converted into a shop. (Fig. VII.)

He soon abandoned general practice and became a consulting surgeon. Towards the end of the year he took rooms at No. 7 Waterloo Street (where the present Midland Bank now stands), with Dr. Bell Fletcher, the senior physician to the General Hospital. He was evidently very short of funds; and, to eke out his professional income, wrote leading articles in the *Birmingham Morning News*. About this time he took his F.R.C.S. (Edin.) and his M.R.C.S. (Eng.).

1871.

Early in the year he married Miss Sibyl Anne Stewart, the daughter of a Wakefield solicitor, to whom he had become engaged whilst resident at the Wakefield Hospital. She was a sweet and gentle lady, with the face of a Madonna. She worshipped him, and through good and evil days devoted her life to promote his welfare and his happiness. They had, unfortunately, no family. (Figs. VIII and XVIII.)

He now lost no opportunity of bringing himself prominently before the public. He got himself appointed lecturer in physiology and biology at the Midland Institute, a post he held until 1879. In his lectures he boldly taught the doctrine of evolution and Darwinism. This raised a storm of abuse, and caused him to be looked upon by many pious people as an atheist and heretic.

He joined Mr. Arthur Chamberlain in a campaign to establish a special hospital for women. In spite of much opposition by the staffs of the General and Queen's Hospitals, Tait and Chamberlain carried the day; and in March, at a public meeting, the hospital was founded. The committee rented a house at No. 8 The Crescent (Fig. IX) and passed a rule that the acting surgeons must possess the F.R.C.S. (Eng.). This was awkward for Tait, as he had only the M.R.C.S.(Eng.). Though he had but three months in which to read up, he set to work; and, by June 8th, had obtained his Fellowship. At the election, which took place next month, he and Drs. Savage, Bracey, and Ross Jordan were elected. He remained a member of the acting staff until 1893, when he resigned. By his epoch-making work there he made the Birmingham Women's Hospital famous all over the world.

1872.

In August 1872, he began to remove the uterine appendages for chronic ovaritis, a proceeding which was afterwards known both in England and America as "Tait's Operation." Hegar, in Germany, however, had anticipated him; as he performed the same operation five days before Tait.

1873.

During the next year, 1873, he removed from 7 Waterloo Street, to 7 Great Charles Street, where he lived for nearly ten years. It is interesting to note that the Medical Faculty of the University now occupies this very house, though, of course, it has been reconstructed (Fig. X).

The annual meeting of the British Medical Association was held this year in Birmingham, and Tait was appointed secretary of the Obstetrical Section. At this same meeting he was awarded the Hastings gold medal for his essay on "Diseases of the Ovary."

In November of this year he advocated for the first time ligaturing and dropping the pedicle in ovariectomy, in place of the clamp—a very great advance in abdominal surgery.

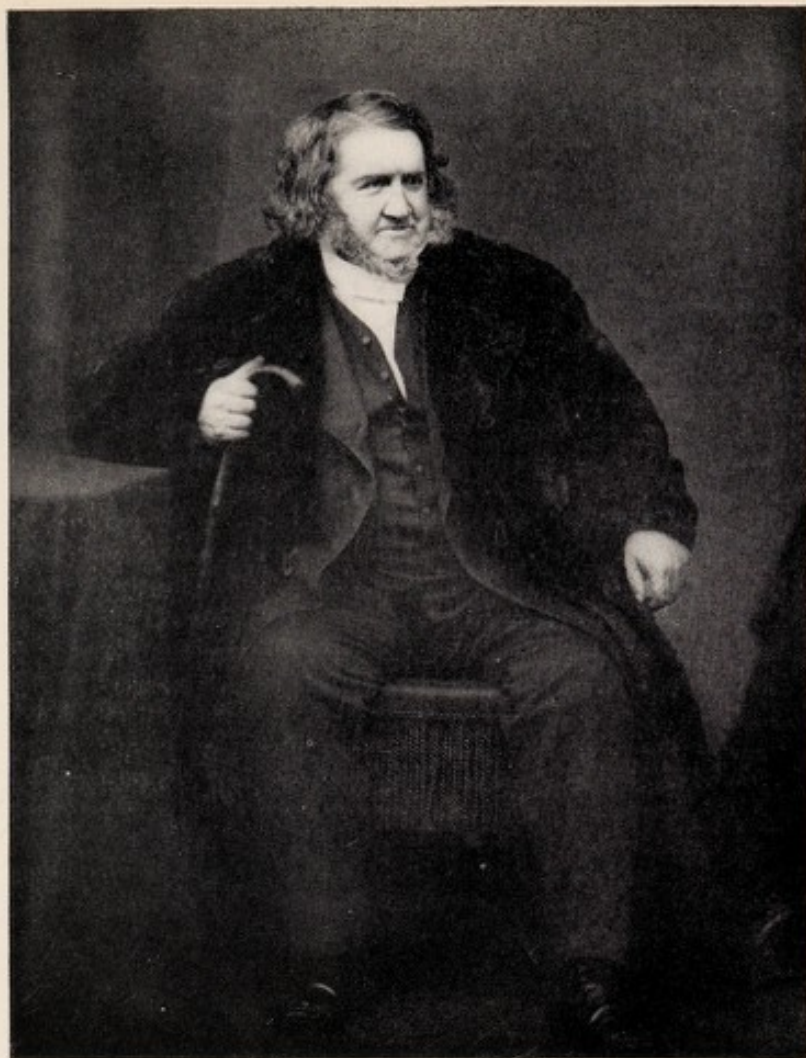


FIG. VI.

SIR JAMES YOUNG SIMPSON.



FIG. VII.

317 BURBURY STREET, LOZELLS, BIRMINGHAM,
WHERE TAIT WAS IN GENERAL PRACTICE IN 1870.

From this time onwards he made it his practice to bring himself prominently before the profession by attending medical meetings in London and elsewhere, propounding his unorthodox views and flouting, whenever he could, the leading London gynæcologists.

1875.

In 1875 he took a leading part in founding the Medical Institute ; and throughout his active career was one of its staunchest supporters and friends. During the following year he was appointed its honorary librarian.

1876.

In November 1876 he was elected to the Birmingham Town Council, and was made a member of the Health Committee, a post he held until April, 1885.

1877.

In 1877 he published a book entitled, "Hospital Mortality," based upon papers left to him by Sir J. Y. Simpson. In this he attacked the big hospitals (especially the General Hospital, Birmingham), calling attention to the fearful mortality attending their operations. In place of big hospitals, he advocated the construction of numerous small hospitals.

About this time he began to remove diseased Fallopian tubes for acute and chronic inflammation, his first case being a patient of Dr. Freer of Stourbridge.

1878.

In the following year, 1878, he described a new method of treating chronic inversion of the uterus by continuous elastic pressure by means of a repositor which he had devised : an instrument which Dr. Aveling copied, and for which he took the credit !

1879.

The next year, 1879, was his "Annus Mirabilis." In it he performed his first chole-cystotomy, removed his first pyosalpinx, described his flap-splitting operation for repair of the perineum, and a new method of dilating the cervix by continuous elastic pressure.

His first chole-cystotomy was performed on August 23rd, when he successfully removed a big stone impacted in the cystic duct. This was the first operation in Europe ; though Dr. Bobbs, of Indiana, did the first successful case on record in 1867. It is,

however, acknowledged by all surgeons that to Tait belongs the credit of introducing chole-cystotomy into practice, and placing the surgery of the liver and gall bladder on a firm basis. During the next five years he recorded fourteen chole-cystotomies with one death.

His flap-splitting operation for repair of the perineum was a most ingenious one, and a great advance on the old methods. With slight modifications, it still holds the field as the best and simplest method of repairing a ruptured perineum.

Busy though he was with his surgical work, he found time to take an active part in the Birmingham Town Council. He also helped to found the Natural History Society, and read a paper on "The Structure of Pitcher Plants."

1880.

The next year, 1880, was chiefly noteworthy for his attacks on Listerism. He published a series of 100 cases of ovariectomy. In the first fifty, *with Listerism*, the mortality was 38 per cent; in the second fifty, *without Listerism*, it was 6 per cent. This improvement he attributed to his increasing skill and experience, and to the adoption of simple cleanliness in the place of antiseptic methods. But we now know that the main factor in his success was his abandonment of the extra-peritoneal clamp in favour of ligaturing and dropping the pedicle. From this time onwards he lost no opportunity of opposing and ridiculing Lister and all his works, and advocating instead simple soap-and-water cleanliness.

His methods may be thus briefly summarized :

- (1) Scrupulous soap-and-water cleansing of his hands.
- (2) Cleansing of the patient's abdomen with turpentine and soap and water.
- (3) Pouring boiling water on his instruments, silk ligatures and silk-worm gut sutures.
- (4) Careful cleansing of his sponges with repeated washing with soda, followed by soaking in carbolic lotion.
- (5) Absolutely dry dressings for the wound, with the application sometimes of a dry powder, such as boracic acid.

As McKay says, "We all know that Tait was wrong in his unwarranted attacks on Lister, who had given the world the key to all successful surgery by the prevention, by whatever method,



FIG. VIII.

[MRS. LAWSON TAIT,
SHORTLY BEFORE HER MARRIAGE 1871.



FIG. IX.

8 THE CRESCENT, BIRMINGHAM :
FROM 1871 TO 1878, THE WOMEN'S HOSPITAL
FROM 1882 TO 1895, TAIT'S NURSING HOME.
(Reproduced from Stewart McKay's "*Life of
Lawson Tait.*")



FIG. X.

NO. 7 GREAT CHARLES STREET, BIRMINGHAM,
WHERE TAIT LIVED FROM 1873 TO 1882 ; NOW PART OF THE MEDICAL SCHOOL.
(Photo taken 1931.)

of wound infection." But Tait's cleanliness, which was taught him by Professor Syme of Edinburgh, was undoubtedly the forerunner of our modern aseptic methods. This was long before the days of von Bergmann, Schimmelbusch and Lautenschlager.

About this time, he recorded three cases of "Axial Rotation of Ovarian Tumours," and was the first to suggest, as the cause of the rotation, the alternate filling and emptying of the rectum.

He continued to publish numerous cases of removal of the appendages for various inflammatory conditions. He also advocated, for the first time, removal of the appendages for myoma, recording fourteen cases with one death.

In August of the same year (1880) he performed his first hepatotomy for a huge hydatid cyst of the liver, with perfect success. Säger had done a similar operation in 1877; but it was owing to Tait that it became established as a recognized procedure amongst British surgeons. It is curious, however, that neither Moynihan nor the Mayos mention his name in connection with the operative treatment of hydatid cysts of the liver.

1881.

In August 1881, at the International Medical Congress, he read a paper embodying the recent advances he had made in abdominal surgery. He there described five entirely new surgical proceedings which he was the first to advocate and perform, and which have now become common every day operations.

In it he recorded :

- (1) The first successful chole-cystotomy in Europe.
- (2) His method of treating pelvic abscess by abdominal section.
- (3) Five cases of ectopic pregnancy at term.
- (4) A series of operations for tubal disease.
- (5) His method of removal of the appendages for myoma.

It was in this year that Dr. Hallwright called him into consultation in a case of ruptured tubal pregnancy, and made the bold suggestion that he should open the abdomen and remove it. Tait, however, refused; and the woman died. But he always generously gave Hallwright the credit for first suggesting the operation.

1882.

In 1878 the Women's Hospital was transferred from The Crescent to a building in Sparkhill, and the out-patient department to premises specially built in the Upper Priory. This old hospital at Sparkhill lasted from 1878 to 1905, when it was replaced by the present fine modern building (Figs. XI and XII).

The premises in The Crescent remained unoccupied until 1882, when Mr. Tait acquired them for his private residence and nursing home. He himself lived in No. 7 The Crescent; whilst Nos. 8, 9, and 10 The Crescent were thrown into one, and reconstructed as his private hospital. Here he had twenty separate rooms for patients, and a staff of twelve nurses (Figs. XIII and XIV).

During this year he was busy showing specimens and writing papers on acute and chronic disease of the ovaries and tubes. In July, for instance, at the Pathological Society in London, he showed no less than fourteen specimens of hydro-salpinx and pyosalpinx. This was his answer to Sir Spencer Wells' sneer, "He (S.W.) never saw these cases: he supposed they all went to Birmingham." It is certainly extraordinary that after Sir Spencer Wells had done 1,000 abdominal sections, he should still refuse to admit even the existence of chronic tubal disease. "*Tantaene animis coelestibus irae?*"

1883.

In this year he published his book on "The Pathology and Treatment of Diseases of the Ovaries."

In January 1883 he operated on his first case of ruptured tubal pregnancy, a patient of Dr. Spackman of Wolverhampton. The woman, however, was pulseless at the time of the operation, and died immediately afterwards. In March the same year, he operated on his second case, a patient of Dr. Page of Solihull. She made a good recovery; and this was the first successful case on record. During the next five years he operated on forty other cases with only one death.

1884.

In May 1884 he published a paper on his first 1,000 abdominal sections.

During the summer he visited Canada and the United States, and on his return recorded his experiences in a paper in the *Birmingham Medical Review* entitled "American Notes." His



FIG. XI.

THE WOMEN'S HOSPITAL, SPARKHILL, BIRMINGHAM,
FROM 1878 TO 1905.

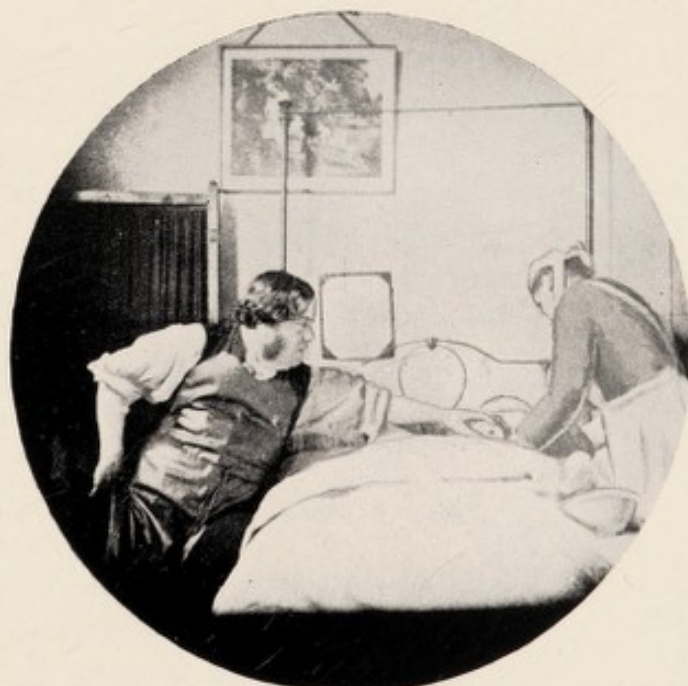


FIG. XII.

TAIT AT WORK IN THE WOMEN'S HOSPITAL :
A SNAPSHOT TAKEN IN 1891.

visit to America led to a great development of abdominal surgery in that country, and induced many of the leading American gynaecologists (including Emmett, Vander Veer, Mundé, Kelly, and Cushing) to come to Birmingham and see his work. They flocked over in such numbers, however, that he finally refused to take them, except as pupils for six months at a fee of one hundred guineas each.

1885.

In 1885 he continued the same busy life. Though up to the ears in work, being called to all parts of the country to operate, he still found time to write papers on "Uterine Myoma," "Chronic Tubal Disease," "The Doctrine of Evolution," and other subjects.

1886.

The year 1886 was remarkable for his paper recording "139 consecutive ovariectomies without a death." You will remember that Tait lost nineteen out of his first fifty ovariectomies (38 per cent) and three out of his second fifty (6 per cent). When Spencer Wells gave up the clamp and dropped the pedicle, his mortality fell from 24 per cent to 10 per cent; but he never came anywhere near Tait's marvellous record.

1887.

In January he was elected President of the newly-formed British Gynaecological Society. In September he delivered the Ingleby lecture on "Pelvic Hæmatocele."

Many British surgeons, including Greig Smith of Bristol, Mayo Robson of Leeds, and Smyly of Dublin, now came to him to watch his work.

In this year he tried to enter Parliament, and contested the Bordesley Division of Birmingham as a Gladstonian Liberal; but was heavily defeated by Mr. Jesse Collings.

1888.

He was now elected the first Professor of Gynaecology in the Medical Faculty of Queen's College (afterwards transferred to Mason College), a post he held till 1893. In this year he delivered the Ingleby lecture on "Ectopic Pregnancy"; in which he lucidly

expounded its pathology, clinical features, and treatment. The views he there taught have now been accepted by all gynæcologists (except on two minor points, viz., the occurrence of tubal abortion and the occurrence of ovarian pregnancy—the existence of which he denied).

He helped to revive and reconstruct the Medical Defence Union, and was elected President, a post he held till 1892.

1889.

In 1889 he published the first volume of his text-book on "The Diseases of Women and Abdominal Surgery"—a most original and interesting book—which embodied much of his pioneer work. The second volume, alas ! was never finished.

It was in the July of this year that I came to Mr. Tait as a pupil, and in November he made me his private assistant.

1890.

In January he read a paper on "Four Cases of Axial Rotation of Ovarian Tumours"; and further developed his theory that rotation from left to right was due to the rectum, and from right to left to the coecum, alternately filling and emptying, behind the tumour.

In August, at the annual meeting of the British Medical Association in Birmingham, he gave the "Address in Surgery," an address which will ever be memorable. As Stewart McKay says in his interesting "Life of Lawson Tait": "This was the high water mark of his career."

In March, at Southampton, he read a paper on "The Surgical Treatment of Impacted Labour," in which he lucidly described his simple method of doing Porro's operation.

In September he gave an address on "The Present Aspect of Antiseptic Surgery," again criticizing and deriding Lister's teachings.

1891.

Throughout this year he continued the same busy life, operating both in hospital and private, making frequent journeys all over the country, acting as President of the Medical Institute, as President of the Gynæcological Society, and President of the Medical Defence Union, etc. He also found time to write and read papers before various societies on "Exploratory Incisions," "Ovarian Pregnancy," "Tubal Abortion," and "A Case of Full-time



FIG. XIII.

CHARLES MARTIN. LAWSON TAIT. CHRISTOPHER MARTIN.
TAIT'S STAFF IN HIS NURSING HOME: PHOTO TAKEN 1892.

Ectopic Pregnancy." He also wrote papers to the Medical Press on "Corpus Luteum," "Vivisection," "Treatment of Peritonitis," and "How to Perform an Abdominal Section."

At the Nottingham meeting of the British Medical Association he read a paper recording twenty-one exploratory laparotomies with four deaths, eighteen hepatotomies with two deaths, and seventy-one chole-cystotomies with four deaths.

1892.

In the early part of this year he took a leading part in getting the Medical Faculty of Queen's College transferred to Mason College; and thus paved the way for the conversion of the latter into the University of Birmingham.

We now come to an event which was the beginning of his downfall, viz., the libel action brought against him at the Manchester Assizes by Dr. Denholm. This action arose out of an unguarded letter, hastily written to the husband of a patient, who had just died after hysterectomy for myoma. In this letter he threw the blame for the death on the previous electrical treatment. It was an unfortunate case for Tait, as, though the action ended in a compromise and neither side won, it damaged him greatly in the eyes of the profession. It also led to his rupture with the Medical Defence Union, which had taken up his defence, but expected him to pay the heavy costs—which he naturally refused to do.

Towards the end of the year he was offered a baronetcy; but he declined the honour.

1893.

In the spring of 1893 his practice rapidly declined. This was owing to a combination of causes—the libel action in Manchester, the quarrel with the Medical Defence Union, and the harm done by a slanderous story which was widely spread abroad concerning his private character. Whether this story was false or true, there can be no doubt that it did him a tremendous amount of harm.

He now resigned his position as President of the Medical Defence Union, as Surgeon to the Women's Hospital, as Professor of Gynecology in the Medical School, as Bailiff and Trustee of Mason College, and as President of the Medical Institute.

He also lost heavily financially; for he had to sell his beautiful country house in the New Forest, the house-boat and steam launch he had on the Severn, the yacht he had on the Solent, and his valuable

collection of curios. He cut down his nursing staff to about a third, and went to live in his bungalow at Yardley Wood. He dissolved his partnership with myself, and parted with his secretary, my brother Charles.

Later on he gave up the house in The Crescent entirely, and moved his consulting rooms to 195 Newhall Street, Birmingham.

1897-1899.

In 1897 he bought a house on the Conway side of the Great Orme, Llandudno, where he resided most of the time, only coming to Birmingham twice a week to see patients (Fig. XV).

Though the volcano had lost much of its fire, it was not yet extinct. He continued to write numerous articles in the medical and lay Press on such varied subjects as: "The New Criminal Law Amendment Act," "The Germ Theory of Disease," "The Treatment of the Broad Ligament Pedicle," "The Treatment of Myoma" (in which he disparaged the intra-peritoneal method of doing hysterectomy, which I myself had helped to introduce), "The Evolution of the Aseptic Method of Surgery," and "Bedsteads."

In May 1897 he published in the *Birmingham Medical Review* a paper entitled, "Was Robert Houston, of Glasgow, the first Ovariotomist?" In this paper, which should be of special interest to our American brethren, he maintained that the credit for performing the first ovariectomy should be given, not to Ephraim McDowell of Kentucky, but to Tait's fellow countryman, Robert Houston. The latter, in 1701, over a hundred years before McDowell's operation (1809), deliberately opened the abdomen of a woman named Margaret Millar, and took away what was evidently a ruptured colloid cyst, removing a large quantity (over nine quarts) of gelatinous fluid. He makes no mention of tying a pedicle: possibly there was none. He kept the lower end of the wound open for five days, by means of a small tent, for drainage purposes. The patient recovered. As Tait says, "Houston's operation was not only an ovariectomy, but a successful one, and the first of its kind on record."

His last important article was published on February 11th 1899 on "The Treatment of Unavoidable Hæmorrhage by Removal of the Uterus." This suggestion of his was ridiculed at the time; but it has led to surgeons doing Cæsarean section as the best treatment in suitable cases for this dangerous complication.



FIG. XIV.

7 AND 8 THE CRESCENT, BIRMINGHAM,
IN THEIR PRESENT STATE (1931).



FIG. XV.

TAIT'S HOUSE ON THE GREAT ORME, LLANDUDNO,
WHERE HE DIED IN 1899.

On June 3rd 1899 he attended a public luncheon at Droitwich on the occasion of the opening of the new railway station. Replying to the toast of the visitors, he got up and said : " I came to Droitwich last night, and I was then quite well. I had a bath and to-day I am better ! " ; and resumed his seat. He little knew how near his end was. Shortly afterwards he was attacked with renal colic. Suppression of urine set in, and he died at Llandudno (Fig. XV) on June 13th. No post mortem was performed ; but I think there can be little doubt that he suffered from renal calculus. On the death certificate, the cause of death was given as " Nephritis and Uræmia (10 days)."

His body was cremated in Liverpool and the urn containing the ashes buried in Gogarth's cave near his house at Llandudno. Later on Mrs. Tait had the urn buried in Warriston Cemetery, Edinburgh, and there erected a beautiful Celtic cross to his memory (Fig. XVI). In 1909 she herself died of cerebral hæmorrhage, and was laid beside him in the same grave.

On the cross is inscribed :

In Memoriam.

LAWSON TAIT, F.R.C.S.

Born at Edinburgh, 1st May 1845.

Died at St. Petrock's, Llandudno, 13th June 1899.

and

SIBYL ANNE his wife.

Daughter of William and Anne Stewart.

Born at Horbury, 16th April 1844.

Died at Exmouth, 27th August 1909.

" She hath done what she could."

II.—PERSONAL REMINISCENCES.

Having given you this outline of his life and the chief contributions he made to surgery, let me now tell you something of the man himself as I knew him.

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

I came to Birmingham from Edinburgh, in July 1889, with an introduction from Sir A. R. Simpson (whose house surgeon I had been), and became one of Tait's pupils. Within a week of my arrival I was down with scarlet fever, and was in hospital for six weeks. When convalescent, Mr. Tait kindly took me to his beautiful house, "Buskett Fletchwood," in the New Forest, to recuperate. He used to go there most week-ends; and so we got better acquainted (Figs. XVII and XVIII).

About this time he quarrelled with his assistant, Mr. Teichelmann, and offered me his post, which I was only too glad to accept. In May 1890 a vacancy occurred on the staff of the Women's Hospital, and I was appointed, largely through his influence.

In 1891 he took me into partnership (though I was only twenty-four years old), and the same year my brother Charles joined him as his private assistant and secretary. So much for the way I became acquainted with him.

He has now been dead over thirty years, and therefore most of the present generation of doctors never saw him. 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. Some one described him as "a man with the body of Bacchus and the head of Jove." He had a small, finely-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 (Figs. XIX, XX, XXI, and XXII).

He was a man of great force of character, and by his personal magnetism dominated those with whom he came in contact—certainly all in his service. They worshipped him and would do anything for him. In this respect, as in many others, he resembled Napoleon. He had many interests—inside and outside the profession



FIG. XVI.

TAIT'S GRAVE IN WARRISTON CEMETERY, EDINBURGH.



FIG. XVII.

"BUSKETT FLETCHWOOD," TAIT'S HOUSE AT LYNDBURST ROAD
IN THE NEW FOREST.

—many irons in the fire at once. He never spent an idle moment, 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 light breakfast in bed of tea and bread and butter, and was usually down about 8 a.m. He ran rapidly through his letters, and dictated replies to his secretary. About 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 drawn by two grey horses—picked up his assistants, and drove up to the Women's Hospital at Sparkhill. There he would do several operations, and be back at The Crescent about 11 a.m. Here there would be more operations; and then between 12 and 1 p.m. he had his lunch.

From 12-30 to 4 o'clock he saw patients at home; and I need not tell you how thronged his consulting rooms were. His methods were speedy; he quickly grasped 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, and his vaginal examination was just as rapid. He had then made up his mind as to the diagnosis—right or wrong. He wasted few words on his patients. He told them briefly and abruptly what he thought was the matter and what should 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 very generous to poor patients. He took scores of poor women into his private hospital 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 council meeting at Mason College, or the Medical Institute. Then maybe 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 compose 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 nearly two years, and was often successful in toning down some of his fiery letters. Mr. Tait would burst into the library, fling down a letter and say, "Write to that man and tell him I will

see him damned before I do what he wants." The letter, when typed, would perhaps read, " Mr. Lawson Tait deeply regrets that he is unable to accede to Mr. —'s request." " But this 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 a straw what people thought or said about him. In his own house he usually wore a velvet lounge coat. Out of doors he often wore a soft felt hat. On one occasion a doctor, who was a stickler for appearances, called him out to see a county lady. Tait turned up in a lounge coat and soft hat, and the doctor remarked on his unprofessional garb. Tait got very angry and growled, " Do you want to consult my hat or my brains ? " On the other hand, he always insisted that I should be dressed *de rigueur* in frock coat and silk hat. One day I had the temerity to ask him why I could not also wear a soft felt hat in public like himself ; and he replied, " Because *I* am Lawson Tait, and *you* are only Christopher Martin."

He was a curious mixture of generosity and Scotch parsimony. While, on the one hand, he spent money lavishly on his pleasures or the pursuit of his hobbies, he was scrupulously careful over trifles. For example, when he read his letters, he always tore off the blank sheets of note-paper and stacked them in a pile on his writing-table. One day, soon after I joined him, he told me to go to a patient's room and take notes of her case. I did so, using a sheet of his best stamped note-paper. When I brought this down to him, he was very angry, scolded me for my extravagance, and told me if I wanted any paper for notes always to take one off the pile.

The same evening he took me to the theatre ; and, of course, paid for my seat. Whilst driving home, I ventured to point out that that price of my theatre ticket would have paid for over one hundred sheets of note-paper. He at once replied, " There is all the difference between business and pleasure. If I were not careful over trifles like note-paper I couldn't afford to take you to the theatre."

He was a rapid and illegible writer, and the task of his secretary, who had to type his manuscripts, was no light one. On Fig. XXIII, which is taken from Stewart McKay's " Life of Lawson Tait," I reproduce one of his letters—which, as a matter of fact, is fairly legible. His signature was often indecipherable. On one occasion he sent a telegram to his wife from a railway telegraph office. It



FIG. XVIII.

TAIT AND MRS. TAIT, FROM A SNAPSHOT TAKEN AT
"BUSKETT FLETCHWOOD," 1891.



FIG. XIX.

TAIT IN 1879 IN HIS ANNUS MIRABILIS.



FIG. XX.

TAIT IN 1884, AFTER HIS AMERICAN VISIT.

was delivered to her signed "Damson Tart"! At the top of his note-paper he had a picture of a crescent moon with seven stars in the hollow of the curve. This was to represent his address, 7 The Crescent. But he sometimes got letters addressed to "The Half-moon Inn," or "The Moon and Stars Public House."

He never played cards, billiards, or golf. He enjoyed the good things of life; but he was neither a gourmand nor a drunkard. He was, however, a heavy smoker, and consumed innumerable strong cigars. He was fond of the theatre, and numbered amongst his intimate friends many of the leading actors, such as Irving and Toole.

He was as clean in his mind as in his person: I never saw him reading an immoral book, nor heard him tell a dirty story.

He had many hobbies and took a keen pleasure in pursuing them. His house was full of valuable curios, especially Chinese and Japanese. He also possessed many rare and beautiful Catholic pictures, triptychs and crucifixes. He was brought up as a Catholic; and, though in adult life he ceased to attend the services (as he no longer accepted its doctrines), he never lost his affection for the Roman Church.

After he came to Birmingham he became intimate with the Rev. George Dawson, and, on one occasion, delivered a sermon in the Church of the Saviour on "The Image of Baal." In this sermon his own religious views were boldly expressed. From it we gather they were those of a Unitarian, but certainly not an atheist.

He was passionately fond of animals and possessed a large number of cats, mostly blue Persians. His love of animals led him to take up a hostile attitude to vivisection, which he denounced in no measured terms. He abominated every form of sport that involved cruelty, such as fox hunting, pigeon shooting, and grouse shooting. But he did not object to fishing; and for a time had a fishing cottage at King's Bromley, a thatched half-timbered bungalow, where he often went for the week-end (Fig. XXIV).

He was very fond of the country and, whenever he could, got out of Birmingham. He had, in addition to his cottage at King's Bromley and his country house in the New Forest, a bungalow out at Yardley Wood, a house at Crothorne called "The Den," a yacht on the Solent, and a steam launch and houseboat on the Severn. Here some of his happiest hours were spent; and he was never merrier than when entertaining his friends and especially in cooking for them. He once took a party, including Dr. Crowe of Worcester,

and the late Dr. Saundby of Birmingham, up the Severn. 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 our lunch in a frying pan, a weird mixture of eggs, bacon, 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 our lunch spoilt. Mr. Tait called us a pack of damned fools, seized the tiller, and got us safely to shore. We 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 before the Midland Medical Society ; and after it there was a rather heated discussion. Saundby and Tait flatly contradicted each other. 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." It was the pot calling the kettle black ! And yet it did not interfere with their friendship ; they went out arm in arm and had supper together.

He was an able and convincing speaker, ready in retort, quick to see the weak points in his opponent's arguments, and clever in concealing his own. In 1895 he read a paper on " The Germ Theory of Disease " before the Birmingham Branch of the British Medical Association. He had the cream of the local surgical talent against him—Jordan Lloyd, Priestley Smith, Gilbert Barling, Leedham Green, all refuting his arguments. But he was a match for the lot of them, and came out of the debate with flying colours ; though we all knew that they were right and he was wrong.

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 sometimes also inaccurate in his facts and figures.

He hated hypocrites, humbugs, and cowards ; but rather liked those who had the courage to stand up to him. I remember once he went to 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 am damned if I know, Sir," she calmly answered. This soft answer turned away his wrath and rather pleased him.



FIG. XXI.

TAIT IN 1885.



FIG. XXII.

TAIT IN A TRUCULENT MOOD :
A PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN IN 1890.

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 ever spent were at his dinner table, where he entertained all sorts of guests—Kropotkin the Russian Nihilist, John Stuart Blackie of Edinburgh, Alfred Hayes the poet, Toole the actor, Hugh Fraser the diplomatist, Canon O'Sullivan of Solihull, and others. It was a treat to listen to them, with their wit and repartee and 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 his hands on her, tore down the instrument from the wall and jumped on it. Needless to say, his blind rage cost him much inconvenience.

He was a man of tremendous energy, both physical 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 went down to operate in Southampton; and next day, as soon as he got back, had to go to Inverness. He would sleep nearly all the time in the train, and arrive after a long journey as fresh as a daisy. I have seen him finish an operation, sit down, and fall sound asleep whilst the second case was being anæsthetised.

Whenever he fell asleep he snored, and snored loudly. One Sunday afternoon we were returning home via Lichfield, and he took me into the Cathedral. The evening service was just beginning. When it came to the "Magnificat" and "Nunc Dimittis" he stood up and sang lustily in Latin (he remembered the words from his Catholic boyhood); but during the prayers and lessons he promptly fell asleep and snored. I kept nudging him to waken him, till he finally growled, "Let's go out"; and very glad I was to do so.

He was not often ill; but when he was, he was most difficult to manage. On one occasion Mr. Gilbert Barling (as he was then) had to remove a calculus from his urethra. Mr. Tait took the anæsthetic badly, went black in the face and nearly died. Immediately after the operation Mr. Barling went away for his holiday and left him in my charge. Needless to say, I told him to keep to a bland milky diet and stay absolutely in bed. Next day, however, a friend (Dr. Donovan of Erdington) called and found him sitting in an armchair by the fire in his dressing-gown, with a Tam-o-Shanter on his head, a big cigar in his mouth, and a pint of champagne at his

elbow. "Hallo," 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, he made a good recovery. On the fifth day he got up and, though it was bitterly cold weather, insisted on driving out to his bungalow at Yardley Wood—against Mrs. Tait's entreaties and my protests. After his arrival he sent me this defiant telegram, "Arrived safely, temperature normal, had beef and pickles for dinner."

As an operator he was wonderful. He worked without the least appearance of haste and yet with marvellous rapidity and dexterity. He was seen at his best doing a bad pyosalpinx, a hysterectomy for myoma, or a Porro's operation. I have seen him do a Porro, from start to finish, in less than ten minutes; whilst he seldom took more than five minutes to repair a perineum.

In conclusion, let me sum up his main contributions to surgery:

- (1) He greatly reduced the mortality of ovariectomy by discarding the clamp, and simply ligaturing and dropping the pedicle.
- (2) He introduced the operations of chole-cystotomy for gall stones, and hepatotomy for hydatid cyst of the liver.
- (3) He was the first to operate for ruptured tubal pregnancy.
- (4) He was the first to remove the uterine appendages for myoma and for tubal disease.
- (5) He devised a simple and speedy method for repairing the perineum.
- (6) He introduced washing out and draining the peritoneum for suppurative peritonitis.
- (7) He was the first to advocate the Porro-Cæsarean operation for placenta prævia.

He was the greatest surgeon who ever lived in our midst; and yet we have erected no memorial to him. There is no statue in our streets, no ward in our hospitals, no bust or tablet in the University, not even a scholarship in our medical school, to perpetuate his name.

That he made mistakes and had many failings I do not deny. But who is perfect? "Let him that is without sin cast the first stone." Let us, rather, cherish the memory of the good he did, of his pioneer work in surgery, and of the incalculable services he rendered to mankind.

"He was a man, take him for all in all,

We shall not look upon his like again."

At Home.

Mr. Lawson Tait. 12 Hill 2.
Mr. Christopher Martin. 11 Hill 2.



May 23

BIRMINGHAM.

My dear Mackay,

I am not in
the least surprised. I
don't think you are
bound to give any
reasons & it will be
wiser not to do so,
through the temptation
is great—Yours ever
Lawson Tait

FIG. XXIII.

SPECIMEN OF TAIT'S HANDWRITING.

(Reproduced from Dr. Stewart McKay's "Life of Lawson Tait."
(Baillière, Tindall and Cox.)



FIG. XXIV.

TAIT'S BUNGALOW AT KING'S BROMLEY.

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INSTRUMENTS AND APPLIANCES.

Lawson Tait hated complicated methods. In the course of his surgical career, he devised only a comparatively small number of instruments and appliances; and these were remarkable alike for their simplicity and ingenuity. I append a list of the most important.

- (1) Apparatus for administering warm ether vapour.
- (2) Apparatus for ventilating and warming rooms by gas.
- (3) Ovariectomy trocar.
- (4) Glass drainage tube for abdominal sections.
- (5) Glass suction apparatus for ditto.
- (6) Rope tourniquet for use in hysterectomy for big fibroids.
- (7) Myoma screw—a kind of corkscrew, for delivering impacted fibroids in abdominal hysterectomy.
- (8) Wire serre-nœud for extra peritoneal hysterectomy.
- (9) Artery forceps—a modification of Kocher's.
- (10) Angular scissors for perineorrhaphy.
- (11) Gall stone forceps.
- (12) Gall stone scoop.
- (13) Ovum forceps.
- (14) Conical vulcanite dilators for dilating the cervix.
- (15) Vulcanite cup and stem repositor for replacing the inverted uterus.
- (16) Electric cautery-clamp for searing the ovarian pedicle.
- (17) The "Lawson Tait" bedstead.

