

In Memoriam John Playfair / [George A. Berry].

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In Memoriam

John Playfair

by Sir George A. Berry, M.D.

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In Memoriam

John Playfair

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OBITUARY

JOHN PLAYFAIR, M.D., F.R.C.P., F.R.C.S. Edin. (Hon.).

IN the fullness of years and in full possession of all his faculties and in harness to the last, John Playfair passed from amongst us, to the great regret of numerous friends and patients.

It is not vouchsafed to many to maintain a useful and successful activity for sixty years after having launched out on a professional career.

Playfair held many appointments. A Fellow and at one time President of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, and an honorary Fellow of the sister College, he may be said to have started his career as Assistant to the late Dr Angus Macdonald. For some time too, in his earlier days, he was Medical Officer to the New Town Dispensary, Edinburgh. Having given attention early to the disorders and diseases of children, he was soon appointed Assistant Physician to the Edinburgh Royal Hospital for Sick Children, afterwards becoming full Physician and retaining up to the time of his death, after retiring from the active staff, the title of Honorary Physician. He was also specially interested in obstetrics and became an active member of the Obstetrical Society of Edinburgh.

From the point of view of the family doctor, the practice and outlook of Medicine as a profession have altered very greatly in those sixty years. Whether, on the whole, the changes that have taken place in that period have been for the better, is a matter on which there may well be a diversity of opinion.

The introduction of panel practice is one change which has materially altered the outlook of the medical practitioner. The encroachment of surgery on the domain of internal medicine is another. And others that will occur to one are: the birth of, and advances in, biological chemistry, with the lines of contemporary treatment that have followed therefrom, the increase and refinement of means of diagnosis, the multiplication of, and perfection of synthetic and other drugs and accuracy of their dosage. These have all been factors that have contributed, more or less, to the sum total of changes, and their number might easily be added to.

In addition to such factors there is now a greater interest taken by the lay public in the nature and treatment of disease and ailments generally, which must alter the relationship between the doctor and his patient. The public interest, so far as surgical interference goes, even goes the length of people apparently courting operation as one of the distractions of modern life.

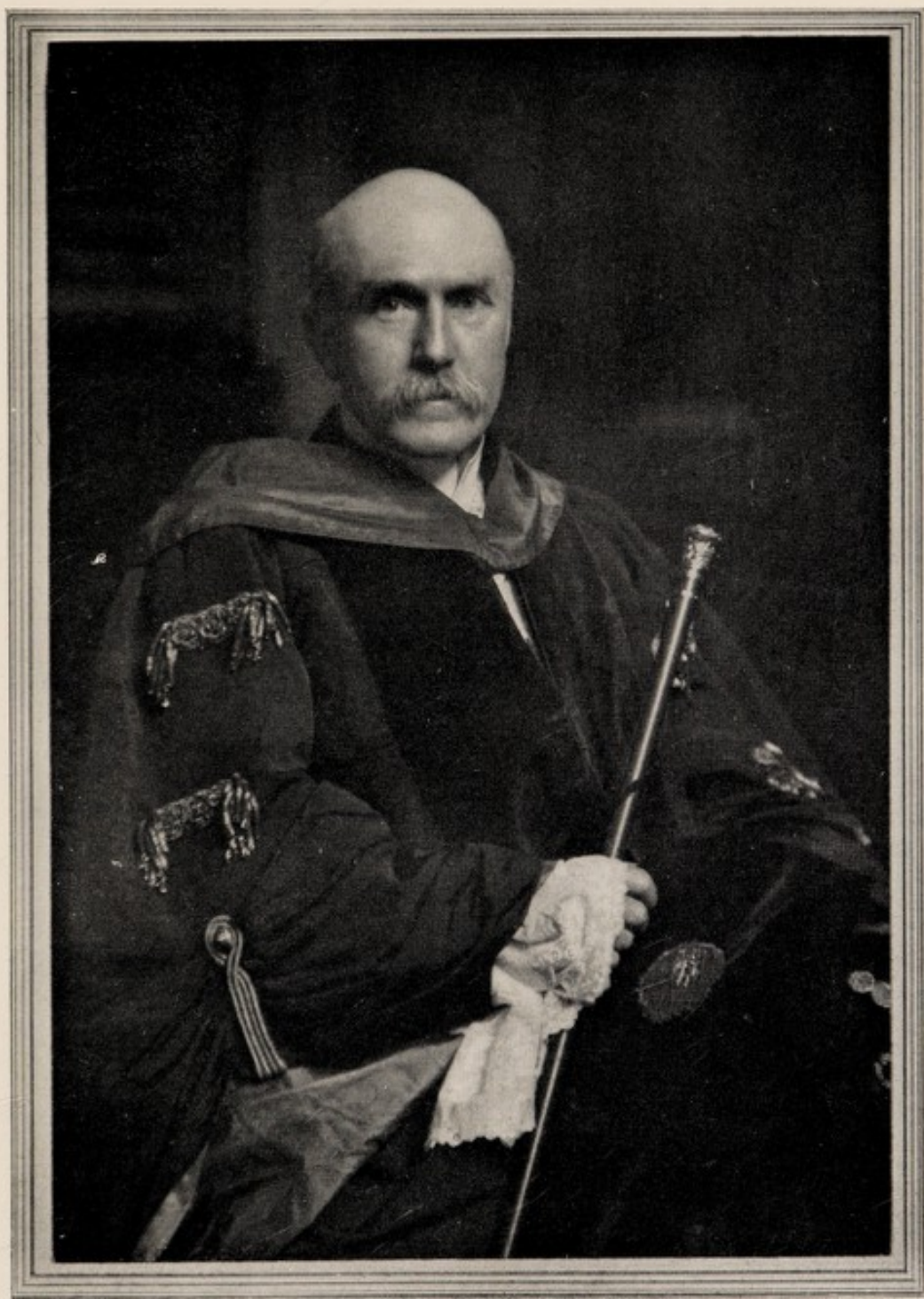


Photo by]

[Edward Drummond Young, Edinburgh

JOHN PLAYFAIR



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Now, Playfair pursued the daily practice of his profession uninterruptedly during the time that all these various changes were going on. It is interesting therefore to consider what appears to have been his attitude towards them all. Because it would seem that the type of family physician which he represented at its best is disappearing.

With panel practice he never had any connection. And, with regard to other changes that have been referred to or indicated, it may confidently be said that he neither despised or scoffed at them nor neglected to keep abreast of them, at all times. He never allowed himself to fall behind, as the daily routine of practice leads many to do. By reading, and as much by discussions with his colleagues, he obtained the information which enabled him to form his own opinions. Though he made use, in his practice, of many of the modern manufactures in the shape of drugs, in tabloid and compressed forms, etc., he was in the habit, in the main, of writing out his own prescriptions, and these, it may be said, were models of neatness, elegant in form and devoid of incompatibility in their ingredients. Playfair was indeed well equipped for understanding, and in consequence was intelligently interested in, all scientific and other advances in medicine, without laying any claim to be called a scientist in a stricter sense. His patients reaped the full benefit of an attitude, which, withal, placed the greatest reliance on bedside experience. And it was this and a real love of, and interest in, his work—an interest which was clearly more human and ministering than merely scientific—that made him so successful a practitioner. Never a faddist, self-reliant without being dogmatic, thorough and conscientious, always willing if necessary to call in the aid of specialists, his care and treatment were devoted to his patients' interests alone. And they knew this, and loved him. They knew that they were safe in his hands. His unfailing kindness and sympathy made him for them "the beloved physician."

In addition to his large family practice Playfair turned his attention to Life Insurance. He was for a long time Medical Officer to the North British and Mercantile Company. This post he retained up to the time of his death. The subject of Life Insurance was a favourite one of his. It was work for which his long experience of a first-class practice and his sound judgment made him specially fitted, and one to which he devoted most conscientious care. It will probably not be easy in future to find physicians of his type to fill such posts. As, notwithstanding the multiplication and greater trustworthiness of modern statistics and the greater possible degree of accuracy of diagnosis of the present day, a shrewd prognosis must be based greatly on the valuable personal experience of the doctor

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who has been in the habit of observing the individual and not the disease alone.

But, although it may be said that Playfair's profession was, and remained to the end, his chief interest in life, and with him it was a very human interest, it is not only as a physician that his memory will live in many hearts. He will be remembered beyond all as a most loyal and sympathetic friend. Of a hospitable and generous nature, unaffected and unassuming, fond of temperate conviviality, he made many friends and no enemies. His death removes from the Æsculapian Club its oldest member.

Playfair was also a thorough and most unselfish sportsman. As with his profession so it was with his sporting. Fishing and shooting he carried on to the end.

And, withal, he was a man of the highest principles and of deep religious conviction, though in that respect, as, indeed, in all others, entirely free from ostentation. In short, he exhibited the truly Christian and manly virtues of broad-mindedness, kindly consideration and tolerance.

G. A. B.

Sir George Andrews



