

Biographical sketch of the late John Alexander Schetky / [Anon].

Contributors

MacLagan, David, 1785-1865.

Publication/Creation

Edinburgh : [publisher not identified], [1825]

Persistent URL

<https://wellcomecollection.org/works/hdch8hzz>

License and attribution

This work has been identified as being free of known restrictions under copyright law, including all related and neighbouring rights and is being made available under the Creative Commons, Public Domain Mark.

You can copy, modify, distribute and perform the work, even for commercial purposes, without asking permission.



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

83059

Presented by Sir J. M. G. G.
27th April 1833.

B.S. 2
(Schetty)

Medical



BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

OF THE LATE

JOHN ALEXANDER SCHETKY.

by Dr. MacLagan
Physician to the Forces

[Edinburgh. 1825.]



BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

OF THE LATE

JOHN ALEXANDER SCHETKY,

DEPUTY INSPECTOR OF ARMY HOSPITALS, AND FELLOW OF THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF
SURGEONS, EDINBURGH.

THIS excellent and distinguished medical officer, whose premature death at Sierra Leone excited so deep and general feelings of regret and sympathy in his own department, and among his numerous friends, was born at Edinburgh in March 1785.

Mr Schetky received his general and preliminary education at the High School and University of Edinburgh, and was early sent to cultivate drawing, at the Trustees' Academy under the late Mr John Graham, of whose instructions he spoke with much gratitude, where he had the good fortune to have as fellow-students his distinguished countrymen Wilkie and Allan, with whom he ever afterwards maintained habits of the greatest intimacy and friendship.

Mr Schetky commenced the study of medicine under the late Mr Thomas Wood, Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, with whom he served an apprenticeship. Having completed the usual course of medical study under the Professors in the University, and other teachers of medicine and surgery in Edinburgh, he obtained the diploma of Surgeon from the Royal College of Surgeons early in 1804; and, in March of that year, entered the medical department of the army as temporary hospital mate attached to the 3d Dragoon Guards, then in Ireland.

After passing the requisite examination before the Medical Board in Dublin, he was appointed assistant surgeon to the same regiment, and served with it in Ireland and England until April 1809, when he embarked with the regiment for Portugal; but from sickness, was reluctantly forced to return to England on leave of absence in the autumn.

With his characteristic zeal, Mr Schetky rejoined his regiment in December, and continued on active service with the 3d Dragoon Guards until August 1812, when he was promoted to the rank of surgeon to the Portuguese forces under Marshal Lord Beresford.

During the whole of Mr Schetky's services with the 3d Dragoon Guards, the active and unwearied discharge of his professional duties, the rectitude of his conduct, and the kindness of his disposition, procured for him the uniform confidence and support of his Colonel, Sir Granby Calcraft, the warm friendship of his brother officers, and the respect and attachment of all ranks; a result which, happily, such qualities rarely fail to command in the British service.

In the Portuguese service Mr Schetky did the field duty of a Brigade Surgeon of the Seventh Division, commanded by the Earl of Dalhousie, in the different actions in which that division had a share, until the termination of the war in 1814.

His meritorious conduct in this service obtained for Mr Schetky the warmest approbation of the Commander in Chief, and of all those with whom he served; and when, in consequence of the peace, a reduction in the number of the British medical officers attached to the Portuguese service took place, he was selected by Marshal Beresford as one of those whom his Lordship wished to retain in that service. Mr Schetky declined this appointment, from a natural desire, after a long absence spent in unceasing activity and turmoil, to revisit his native land, to enjoy for a time the society of his aged father and affectionate family, and to renew those liberal studies, both general and professional, of which he ever continued to be so ardent a follower.

Mr Schetky remained on half pay from 1814 till September 1819; and during this interval, engaged with his usual zeal in the study and practice of his profession in Edinburgh, and in the ardent cultivation of the arts of drawing and painting, to which he was deeply devoted.

During this period Mr Schetky revived many connexions which had been interrupted by his long absence, and formed many that were new; and no one could be more happy than he was in enjoying the esteem and respect of his medical brethren, as well as of all those whose acquaintance he formed in society. Among others, he renewed his intercourse with one of his earliest teachers and friends, Dr Thomson, then Professor of Military Surgery, who was among those whose friendship he prized most highly, and for whom he always expressed the warmest respect and attachment. When a student, he had made for Dr Thomson several anatomical and pathological drawings; and now, in order to promote those objects in science, which he found Dr Thomson still zealously pursuing, he devoted his talents as a painter, partly to the delineation of external and internal pathology. His drawings and paintings of these subjects are distinguished above most others of the same kind, not only by the accuracy and distinctness with which the particular objects to be shown are delineated, but also by their spirit of design, their originality in style, and excellence as works of art; but we know that Dr Thomson now values those in his possession more peculiarly as memorials of one of his earliest pupils, for whom he felt a sincere affection and esteem, and in whose welfare he always took a deep interest.

At this time Mr Schetky became a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh; and, in conformity with the regulations of the College, published a Probationary Essay on Syphilis and Pseudo-Syphilis, which he inscribed to his friends Dr Thomson, and Dr Maclagan, physician to the forces. Between Dr Maclagan and Mr Schetky an intimate connexion had subsisted since their boyhood. They had been fellow-students in the same schools of instruction and service, and had now returned to a home where they had many ties and objects in common, after having been long employed in the same department, and engaged in the same scenes. This friendship was only terminated by Mr Schetky's premature death; in lamenting which, it is the anxious desire of the survivor to evince his respect for the memory of the companion of his youth, and the friend of his maturer years, by endeavouring in this slight, though sincere tribute, to record his excellence and his worth. }

In September 1819, Mr Schetky was gazetted to full-pay, and employed at the General Hospital at Fort Pitt, Chatham; where Sir James M'Grigor, by the establishment of a Museum of Morbid Anatomy, had lately added another claim to the gratitude of his department, and to the respect of the Medical Profession. Mr Schetky valued highly and justly the efforts of the head of the Medical Department of the army to promote the interests of medical science, and the honour of that department, as well as the kind interest he took in the individuals composing it. While in Edinburgh, Mr Schetky had occasionally sent delineations of such subjects as he considered valuable or interesting to the museum at Chatham, and now while he zealously performed the duties of the surgical department, he applied his talents in drawing and painting to the illustration of different subjects in pathology, which presented themselves in the hospital and in the preparations in the museum; and he was latterly occupied in finishing those lithographic engravings which form the Fasciculus of Morbid Anatomy, lately published under the authority of the Medical Board, and dedicated to His Royal Highness the Commander-in-Chief. This work must be regarded as a valuable addition to the illustrations of pathology, and had this intelligent medical officer and accomplished artist lived, it cannot be doubted that, from the stores of this valuable museum, as well as from other sources, he would still more materially have enriched this important branch of medical science.

Mr Schetky's services at Chatham were highly valued by Dr James Forbes, the able medical chief of the hospital at this period, as well as by his other colleagues. Of this, the following communication from one of his brother officers well qualified to estimate Mr Schetky's various merits, will be regarded as a gratifying proof.

"Having been on duty," (says Staff Surgeon Dease, now principal medical officer on the North British Staff), "at the General Hospital, Chatham, in 1819, where the late Deputy Inspector Schetky was also employed, I had ample opportunities of witnessing the great scope of his professional acquirements and general accom-

plishments as a gentleman and scholar. His operations were performed with great skill and neatness, and in the general arrangement of his duties, the same zeal and vigour of mind that gave a decided character to all his undertakings were ever visible.

"I have often witnessed with delight his powerful delineations of disease, of which there are lasting and valuable memorials in the museum at Fort Pitt, by which that collection has been considerably enriched.

"Mr Schetky latterly had charge of the Asylum at Fort Clarence, fitted up for the reception of those of the army and navy labouring under mental affections. This most interesting charge could not have been confided to one more competent to fulfil so delicate a trust. From his manly firmness of character, and at the same time his naturally gentle and amiable disposition, he was peculiarly adapted to watch over and provide for the sufferings of his unhappy patients, and his management of that institution procured to him the high approbation both of his immediate superior officers and of the Director-General. He was ever gay, frank, and affable, and we never saw his temper ruffled even for an instant. It is not therefore wonderful that such a man was adored by his brother officers, among whom he was ever happy; for though an economist of his time, no one enjoyed society more than he did. By his death science has been deprived of an ardent votary, the service of an able and zealous officer, and the department that had the honour of claiming him of one of its greatest ornaments. His memory will be ever dear to his brother officers, and to no one more than myself, who had the happiness to share his friendship and his confidence."

Mr Schetky's services at Chatham, were no less highly appreciated by Sir James M'Grigor, who says, that to Mr Schetky the museum at Chatham owes much indeed, and the Fasciculus of engravings every thing, and has conjoined with this honourable testimony the warmest approbation of Mr Schetky's general services, the expression of deep regret for his death, and of respect for his memory.

During this period of his service, Mr Schetky was enabled to make a few visits to his home, to which his family and friends now look back with a melancholy satisfaction. But we mention these at present, in order to notice one of them as highly characteristic of the kindness and warmth of his disposition, and of the disinterested zeal by which he was always actuated. He had learnt that his immediate presence in Edinburgh might be of essential importance to the interests of a valued and attached friend; when unsolicited, and regardless of the fatigue or of the serious inconvenience to which he knew this journey must subject him, he, after obtaining a short leave of absence, immediately set out for Edinburgh, where he had the satisfaction to arrive in time to assist his friend in obtaining the object he had in view. The surprise occasioned by his unexpected presence on this occasion, was only equalled by the pleasure and gratitude his friend experienced, and by the admiration he felt of so generous a proof

of the friendship of one for whom he had the highest esteem and regard.

In August 1823, Mr Schetky was promoted to the rank of Deputy Inspector of Hospitals, for service on the coast of Africa; an appointment which, prompted by an honourable ambition of advancement, an ardent spirit of inquiry and observation, and no unnatural confidence in the strength of a vigorous constitution, he had long been desirous to obtain.

He embarked for Sierra Leone in December 1823, and arrived there on the 5th of February 1824. He immediately devoted himself with great energy to the duties of his new station, which, by the removal from Sierra Leone of the rest of the medical staff, in consequence of the war with the Ashantees, had become doubly arduous. He was also soon after his arrival appointed a member of the Colonial Council, which involved additional occupation.

In all his letters he manifested the most lively sympathy in the state of this colony, of which the various tribes, with their habits and customs, the richness and picturesque nature of the scenery, and the objects of Natural History, of which he was forming a museum, afforded him the greatest interest and pleasure. During the time he was at Sierra Leone, nearly six months, the uniform good health he enjoyed seemed to justify his own confidence, and to encourage the hopes of his family and friends that he would be able to resist the baneful influence of the climate; but unhappily these too soon proved delusive.

In proceeding on official duty to Cape Coast Castle, in August 1824, he was attacked, a few days after embarkation, by the fever of the country, which proved fatal on the 5th of September, the day the vessel arrived at Cape Coast Castle.

Thus died, at an early age, in the full career of honour and usefulness, this excellent and amiable medical officer, deeply lamented in that colony to which his services had already given the promise of so much benefit, and by that department of which he was so valuable and respected a member; but leaving a still deeper blank in the hearts of a family worthy of such a brother, and in many a circle of friends, to whom his gentle and generous nature, sincerity, and single-heartedness, had deservedly endeared him.

Mr Schetky's character was of no ordinary cast. He was remarkable for his early habits of study—even while a boy, reading, and drawing, with an ardent and observant admiration of the beauties of natural scenery, constituting his chief amusement. In the midst of his various occupations, he cultivated painting with that enthusiasm for the art, and that powerful perception of the beauties and sublimities of nature so essential to excellence, and which so strongly mark his numerous sketches and paintings of the scenery of the Peninsula, and of his native country.

The writer of this notice is too imperfectly qualified to hazard the expression of his own opinions as to the particular character and merits of Mr Schetky as a landscape-painter; but he is hap-

pily enabled to give those of a highly-gifted individual, himself an acknowledged master both of the theory and practice of this delightful art, which will confer on this slight memorial a much higher value than it otherwise possesses.

“ Mr Schetky, as a landscape-painter, was distinguished by a style which seemed to borrow little from that of any other master; and to a decided character of originality, it united ample evidence of an inventive, romantic, and poetical imagination. The subjects of wild grandeur which he often represented, made up of an endless variety of objects and of incidents, if they exhibit not the pleasing and popular charms of harmony and repose—possess, in an eminent degree, those rarer qualities which are calculated to excite and surprise. It is no uncommon occurrence to meet with pictures which please by their general effect, but which fail to sustain protracted interest, by reason of their barrenness in respect of matter and episode. The reverse of this is the character of Mr Schetky's style. But if it be thus chargeable with some deficiency in the external graces which recommend on a first introduction—this is compensated by the inexhaustible treasures of information, and the sallies of a vigorous and playful fancy, which pour forth on more intimate acquaintance.

“ The time which could be spared from professional duties, when in the Peninsula, Mr Schetky devoted to the delineation of those romantic scenes of grandeur with which the mountainous districts abound. Amongst these his fervent genius found its natural food; and his taste acquired a corresponding and permanent cast. He generally selected those wide and far-extended prospects which are seldom to be commanded but from an elevated point of view; and he endeavourud not only to preserve the general character, but also to detail, with elaborate precision, the various subordinate features of his subject. Accordingly, his pencil-drawings done on the spot, are strongly marked by this peculiarity, that they consist not of a few sentences or passages of nature, but may rather be compared to ample volumes, each filled with curious, interesting, and condensed narration.

“ There is, perhaps, nothing which addresses itself to the eye or the imagination with a more fascinating influence, than the mysterious objects which bound the remote distance of a grand and far-extended scene. Among these delightful regions the poetical fancy of our lamented friend seemed to dwell with peculiar fondness; and in many of those beautiful transcripts which he has left in mere outline, there is much to awaken that class of peculiar emotions, which in every susceptible mind, is so forcibly excited by the happy vision of corresponding realities in nature. The successful execution of such undertakings necessarily requires a clearness and flexibility of line which few have patience to acquire, and still fewer to practise. Whatever Mr Schetky meant to express, was always expressed with decided character, and free from ambiguity. Besides his distant mountains—his vast interminable forests receding from the eye, amidst the wind-

ings of the valley—or climbing the sides of the nearer hills—his precipices adorned by the picturesque Moorish towers and castles, with the beautiful accompaniments of falling waters, and all the variety of objects which supplied the materials of his compositions—all are delineated with so much delicacy, discrimination, and spirit, that he who examines with an eye of intelligence the mere outlines of such scenes, will often experience a gratification which may be sought for in vain in highly finished pictures.

“Of these masterly designs, as filled up by the hand of their author, the public have had an opportunity of judging from the pictures and water-colour drawings which, from time to time, Mr Schetky contributed to the exhibition of the Royal Academy of London. In these it is natural to look for a fuller development of power, as comprehending *chiaro-scuro* and colouring. The same set of objects in nature may appear under a thousand various effects. In the vast latitude thus authorized by nature, it becomes the province of judgment and right taste to select out of the many, the one which is best suited to the character of the scene. And here, while an ambition of originality, and love of what is daring, and out of the common tract—has often betrayed great minds into error—and led them to offer representations contradictory to the *possibilities* of nature—it will be admitted, that the error of Mr Schetky's style rather consisted in making choice of effects and accidents, of light and shadow, of too rare occurrence in nature to be readily recognised by common observers.

“The multiplicity of objects which he introduced in his sketches, and which in them were one source of that interest they possessed, would have required all the advantages of a skilful generalization to fit them for appearing with advantage in a regular picture. In his efforts to do justice to the parts, the effect of the composition as a whole was often suffered to assume too complex an aspect to be easily taken in by the eye at once. But, with all the disadvantages which accompanies this defect, it is impossible to withhold from his pictures the praise of high poetical and romantic feeling, and exquisite detail in the various parts. They uniformly possess elevation of sentiment far above ordinary appearances and ordinary incidents. They may fail to invite a particular scrutiny, but they will never fail to reward it : that redundancy of matter which interferes with general simplicity, when carefully and separately viewed, becomes food for curiosity, and an incentive to closer investigation.”

Mr Schetky had scarcely less enjoyment, and no mean knowledge in the sister art of music, in which all his family have been singularly accomplished, and in whom it would seem to be an hereditary endowment.

To these Mr Schetky added a love of literature, which his facility of acquiring languages enabled him the more readily to indulge, an enthusiastic admiration of the efforts of genius in every department of human excellence, an ardent pursuit of all that was honourable and useful in his profession ; and, though possessing a high relish for social enjoyment, he never permitted his private pleasures to in-

terfere with the discharge of his public duties, or with the offices of humanity or friendship. He began life without the advantages of interest or connexion; but his talents and industry, joined with the integrity, active benevolence, kindly warmth, openness and simplicity of his conduct, secured to him not only the deep affection of his family, and the warm attachment of his friends, but the confidence and support of his superiors in the army, and that professional character so honourable to his memory. His whole conduct was indeed a practical illustration of the purity of those moral and religious principles which he had imbibed in early life, and which he cherished to its latest period. In his affectionate correspondence with his family, he often dwells on the value and importance of these early principles with peculiar earnestness. They were his guide and support throughout the vicissitudes of life, and are now the best consolation of that family, who, by his untimely death, have been deprived of so invaluable a brother.

Since this sketch was sent to the press, the writer has had an opportunity of visiting the Army Medical Establishment at Chatham, and cannot refrain from expressing his admiration of it as an hospital for the reception of the diseased and worn-out soldier in body or in mind, and as a school of instruction for the Medical Department of the Army, and indeed for the members of the medical profession at large, to whom, on proper application, it is open. This establishment, of which a more detailed account it is hoped may be afterwards given, comprises a General Hospital for Medical and Surgical cases, chiefly of diseases contracted on foreign stations, and more particularly those of warm and tropical climates, an Ophthalmic Hospital, and an Asylum for officers and soldiers labouring under mental derangement. With these are conjoined a Medical Library, and a Museum of Morbid Anatomy, already containing numerous and excellent preparations of organic disease, daily increasing in extent and value, and which wants only additional accommodation to render it still more useful. In the Museum, which is more particularly under the charge of Mr Miller, an able anatomist, there are preserved many very striking and useful illustrations of external and internal pathology, chiefly in paintings—the works of the lamented medical officer who forms the subject of the preceding short memoir, and which are much and deservedly valued. The Reports by the Medical officers of the Establishment at Chatham, which the writer had an opportunity of perusing in the valuable and accessible Record-office of the Medical Board, under the charge of his friend Dr Theodore Gordon, afford ample evidence of the zeal and abilities of Dr Skey, the present Director of the Establishment, and of the officers in charge of its different departments; and the high respect these intelligent officers express for the memory of their late Colleague Mr Schetky, must be regarded among the most honourable and gratifying tributes to his talents and to his virtues.