Echoes of the Past.

INTRODUCTORY LECTURE DELIVERED TO THE CLASS OF MILITARY SURGERY IN THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH, MAY 1, 1855.

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AGAIN, Gentlemen, I enter, without assistance, on the duties of this Chair. At the commencement of my last course of lectures I expressed myself in such a way as led my friends very naturally, and very truly, to conclude that I was prepared to retire; and the general voice of his professional brethren in Edinburgh pointed to the late Dr. Mackenzie as my successor; and of his assistance I did indeed entertain the most sanguine expectation of being able to avail myself during the present course. It is your loss as well as mine, and it is the loss of the profession, that Providence has ordered it otherwise. A memoir of Dr. Mackenzie’s Life in the Edinburgh Medical Journals, both Monthly and Quarterly, as well as his private letters to me, and to other friends, show how speedily and correctly he fixed his eye on the points most essential to the health of an army—the position of encampments—the feeding of the troops—the prompt attention to the first symptoms of disease, and the cheering influence which the prospect of meeting the enemy has ever been found to exert on the health and spirits of a good soldier. He says, in a letter to me, in allusion to his own health, which had suffered before he left Varna,—“I have no doubt, however, that a day or two of the sea, and a sight of Sebastopol, will soon put us all to rights.” I shall not, Gentlemen, attempt to add anything to the encomiums which have so generally and so justly been paid by the public press to Dr. Mackenzie’s merits. It was to the 79th Regiment particularly that his services were devoted, in conjunction with his friend Dr. Scot, an old pupil of this class, and of whom he says (speaking of the comparative immunity of the 79th from cholera), “This, I have no hesitation in saying, is due to the energy and efficiency of Scot and his assistants. I have seen much that shows me more than I could have believed, the importance to a regiment of having an energetic and a good surgeon.” The manner in which my friend was cheered by the Highlanders on ascending the heights of the Alma, must have been, to a man like Mackenzie; who so rapidly imbibed the “esprit de corps” of a military surgeon, the most gratifying of all rewards for the services which he so largely and so disinterestedly gave. It was the cheers of the soldiery

1 From an old book kindly lent by the late Dr. George Ballingall, St. Leonards-on-Sea.
which warmed the heart of Ambrose Paré on the ramparts of Mentz—of
Percy on the banks of the Rhine—and of Larrey at the crossing of the
Beresina.

[The Professor here craved the indulgence of the numerous friends
who had been present on former occasions, while he laid before his pupils
a sketch of the lives and writings of the Military Surgeons of bygone
days; and after a short notice of the rise and progress of military surgery,
particularly in the French and English armies, proceeded as follows:—]

Let us now, Gentlemen, turn from the events of the last to those of
the present war—from the consequences of an autumnal campaign in
Walcheren to those of a winter campaign in the Crimea—from the disasters
of Flushing to the horrors of Scutari. But before going farther, I think
it right to say, that if any of you have happened to look into the Lancet
of Saturday last, 28th April, you will there have found a leading article on
the introduction of the "civil element" into the military hospitals; so
perfectly identical in spirit and in language with the views which I am
now about to lay before you on that point, that the coincidence can only
be explained in one way. That explanation I believe I am able, and I am
most willing to give. I communicated, at his own request, to a profes­
sional friend in London my sentiments upon this subject, a good many
weeks ago, and every sentiment in the paper to which I refer, I am prepared
to adopt. If my views are correct, they cannot be too often pressed upon
the profession and the Government; if otherwise, I must answer for
them; I alone am responsible; adsum qui feci in me convertite ferrum.

The sufferings of our army in the last campaign, 1854-55, have been
such as to throw those of 1809 into the shade. These sufferings are now,
by common consent, attributed to insufficient clothing and shelter, insalu­
brious or scanty diet, and, above all, to exposure and over-work in the
trenches—circumstances for which the Medical Department is surely
nowise responsible. An outcry, however, was raised against this depart­
ment very early in the day, for an alleged want of bandages and dressings
—a want which seems to have been nearly, if not altogether imaginary—a
want which I never could very well comprehend, seeing that there were
hundreds, nay thousands, of our own men and of the enemy, lying dead
upon the field, each with a shirt upon his back and another in his
knap sack.

When sickness succeeded to accidents, when dysentery took the place
of wounds, a clamour was again raised about the want of drugs. Looking
to the quantity of medical stores despatched from this country, I should,
were I entitled to express an opinion, say that there was rather an excess
than a deficiency. On occasions of this kind, nothing can be more impor­
tant than economizing our space, and diminishing the weight and bulk of
articles to be carried; and care should be taken that medicines of acknow­
ledged power are not overlaid by those of an indifferent or questionable
character, or buried, wholesale, under stores of clothing and ammunition.
When carrying on war at a distance from our own shores, and in communication with a friendly power, it is not unnatural, nor is it improper, that we should lean upon the products of the country, and no medical man in our service would dream that the means of purchasing these would be either wanting or withheld. Had an officer pledged his personal credit upon such an occasion, and been thrown into prison for the debt, the country would have speedily come to the rescue. It is a remark of some of the older writers on physic, that almost every country is found to produce remedies for the diseases prevalent in it; and it so happens that Turkey is a principal mart for some of the articles most essential in the treatment of diarrhoea and dysentery. Opium, rhubarb, and, I believe, castor oil, are there in abundance; and, if to these we add calomel, tartar emetic, and quinine (none of them bulky articles), we have almost every remedy of established efficacy in the treatment of fever and of dysentery, which have ever been the scourges of armies. I have always held an extensive knowledge of the materia medica to be of essential consequence to a military surgeon, and this not for the purpose of drenching his patients with drugs, but with the view that, when, upon foreign service, if deficient in the supply of one article, he should be able to substitute another of kindred properties—that he should, in short, be like a noted character in one of the old novels, Zachary Caudle, whose great merit consisted in his being a clever hand at a succedaneum.

Under the pressure of such sickness as that which has prevailed at Balaklava and at Scutari, I should be little disposed to indulge young surgeons in exercising their fancy, or experimenting with a variety of drugs. The administration of medicine, however necessary it may be to alleviate pain, or to aid in the cure of disease, is but little calculated to ameliorate the air of a crowded hospital, or to promote that cleanliness which, in such circumstances, is, of all medicaments, the most indispensable. I am not given to homeopathy, nor am I prepared to subscribe to the doctrine of the late Mr. Knight, the Inspector-General of hospitals at the time I entered the service, who said to a surgeon, whom he thought a little too fond of drugging, that "he would carry as much physic in his breeches pocket as would serve him and his regiment for six months; and that soldiers wanted nothing but tartar emetic, and a big stick." The value of the tartar emetic I am quite ready to admit; and as to the big stick, the cases which suggested its use have greatly diminished since those days. Never was it less necessary than in the army of the Crimea; never was an army imbued with a better spirit; never were men more reluctant to give in, nor more patient under sufferings and privations.

One is entitled to learn wisdom from experience, and I cannot help thinking that, under a recurrence of similar circumstances to those with which the department has had to contend, the services of an assistant-surgeon, or, if you will, an apothecary to the forces, would be well bestowed, in despatching him as a sort of super-cargo with every supply of
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medical stores, seeing them embarked, knowing where they were stowed, and keeping his eye upon them, until delivered to the authority destined to receive them. Were a cargo of such articles as I have pointed at, with a supply of splints and bandages, despatched successively in different transports, little could be wanting. But, above all, let no selfish, jobbing, or ignorant druggist be permitted to occupy space, and waste the public money, in supplying extract of liquorice (Scotice, black-sugar), instead of salts and senna. Of the former, I once saw boxes innumerable landing on the beach at Madras—a very potent remedy you will admit for sick soldiers, dying of fever, dysentery, or abscess in the liver.

It is, Gentlemen, in the hope of being able to suggest a few hints for your guidance that I have hazarded these remarks; and it is in the same spirit that I would, with great deference, advert to what, so far as I can see, appears to have been the only defect of the Medical Department—an excess of good nature, in mixing itself, or permitting itself to be mixed, with the duties, and saddled with the responsibilities of another department.

There is all the difference between the duties of a purveyor and of a surgeon, that there is between food and physic, and it would be well that these were kept as distinct in their supply as in their exhibition. There are, indeed, some articles termed "medical comforts," such as wine and sago, brandy and arrow-root, which occupy a sort of neutral ground; and if the medical officer is ordered to furnish these, he has nothing to do but, like a good soldier, to obey; but even of these I should be glad to see him enabled to wash his hands. I do not see why he should, of necessity, be compelled to be a taster of wine or a connoisseur in brandy. If these articles are found to be faulty, there is always a means of redress through the orderly-officer, who visits the hospital daily, for the very purpose of hearing complaints, and who (with all respect be it spoken) may be quite as good a judge of port wine as the doctor. Of this I am quite sure, that in the old war there were ten captains in my regiment better judges of this matter than I was. I have lived to see much in the medical department of the army—I have lived to see this department a second time declared unequal to its duties; but I trust that neither you nor I will live to see the Chief of the Medical Staff again reduced to the necessity of repelling offensive insinuations as to a missing cargo of wine.

It was my fortune to serve for some time in a quarter of the world where the purveyor, or commissary of the sick, and the surgeon were, until a recent period, combined in the same person—a combination most peculiarly favourable to the pocket of the surgeon, but not equally so to the health of his regiment. This is now happily abolished in all quarters of the world, and I am sure that no honourable or high-minded man will wish to see it revived. How far it ever was from meeting with my approbation, the following passage from my "Outlines," first penned some forty years ago, will serve to show you:—"It may be very possible for a surgeon when
lying quietly in garrison or cantonment to furnish provisions for his sick without much additional trouble; but whenever his regiment comes to be employed in active operations against an enemy, all his talents and exertions are then required in his proper capacity, and he has his hands abundantly full without having the complicated concerns of a victualling department to attend to. It by no means follows, that because a man is a good surgeon he should be a good commissary also, and it is obvious that whatever tends to withdraw his attention from the study and practice of his professional duties must ultimately prove injurious to the service. I have said much more on this subject in the passage from which I quote, but enough to show, that my opinions are not made for the occasion; and I will only add, that I see little that the surgeon has to do with the purveyor, except to demand from him the necessary supplies for the sick; and to report him to the General if they are not forthcoming.

It was not, however, with the differences between the purveyors and the medical officers in the hospitals on the Bosphorus that the difficulties of the medical department began. At the very commencement of this hitherto unfortunate war, long before a single shot was fired, it would appear that the most urgent representations were made by the Head of the Medical Department, and this, too, upon points of paramount importance to the health of the army—the clothing of the soldier—the formation of a numerous hospital corps—the appropriation of ships for hospital purposes, or for carrying disabled men to England, or to some intermediate station, so as to relieve the crowded hospitals at the seat of war.

How these very proper representations came to be so signally disregarded, it is not for me to explain. It may be only a part of that multiplication of office, and subdivision of responsibility of which the nation seems now so heartily sick, and which tends to render even a Commander-in-Chief in a great measure powerless. No man is better aware than I am of the evils which have arisen, and must arise, from a limited authority to the medical officers of the British army, but this would seem to have progressively increased since my time, and has now risen to a height which has placed the department not only in a false, but in a helpless and undignified position. It has risen to a height which calls aloud for a remedy, if the British soldier is hereafter to receive that assistance from the skill of the surgeon to which he has so nobly entitled himself—that assistance which I am sure it is the desire of the nation that he should receive.

In former days I have known a successful representation to issue from the weakest voice in the department. I have known an assistant-surgeon of three years' standing to bring down the censure of the Government upon the medical storekeeper at one of the presidencies of India, for hesitating to supply him, at once, with the articles he required. The young man's requisition was sent back to him for amendment, but instead of doing this, he stated the facts to his commanding officer, saying that the requisition
should stand upon record, and if the storekeeper was unable or unwilling to comply with it, it was for him to say so, and to state "the reason why." The Colonel who, at the time, commanded a large army about to take the field, galloped off with the correspondence to the Governor, by whom the storekeeper was reprimanded, and the medicines were in camp in less than twenty-four hours.

I have known a young surgeon to bring his commanding officer to book, and to carry his point, by merely hinting at the proper statement in the proper quarter. The case was this—the regiment was stationed at Nottingham, partly accommodated in barracks and partly billeted in the town. Amongst those in billets were, as often happens in similar cases, a number of men with trifling ailments, who would soon be restored to their duty, by putting them under restraint and proper treatment. For this purpose the surgeon had repeatedly applied to the commanding officer for a room to confine these men, but having been repeatedly put off, he added a memorandum of the circumstance to his monthly return, and showed it to the colonel. The latter begged of him to cancel it, the quarter-master was sent for, and the room was given up to the surgeon before the sun went down. All this was done without an angry word, and the colonel was very soon made to see the good effects of putting his men on hospital stoppages and low diet; instead of permitting them to stroll about the town, to enjoy a full meal, and to regale themselves in the evening with pipes and Nottingham ale.

This, Gentlemen, is comparing small things with great, but it is illustrative of a principle from which I would advise you never to depart; to make a concise and distinct statement to the superior authority, whether military or medical, to emit no uncertain sound, to have no paltering, nor to make any compromise with those throwing obstacles in the way of the public service.

It is not, however, with military men, that the difficulties of the department have heretofore generally arisen, but with the underlings in those numerous collateral offices which have so long been permitted to impair the energies and exhaust the strength of a War Department in this country. A man who will not hesitate to storm a breach, or to head a charge of cavalry, such as that of the light brigade at Balaklava, will think twice before he opposes the opinions, or impedes the operations of an intelligent and experienced surgeon. Nay, such a man will be the very first to listen to any respectful and reasonable suggestion touching the health of his men. If such things as I have cursorily noticed can be done by a regimental medical officer,—who, if he knows his duty, and chooses to do it, may be a very independent man,—if such things can be done by a regimental surgeon, what ought to be the influence of a man of energy, experience, and decision at the head of the department?

I have already hinted that the trammelling of the medical department has been a growing evil, although spoken of by many as something new.
Sir George Ballingall

The limited powers and want of independent action, has been more or less a standing and a just cause of complaint ever since I knew anything of the service; but in spite of this, we have often had the duties of the department carried on with success, and we have had men amongst us, more than one, who, if an independent action was not conceded to them, did not hesitate to take it.

Amongst these, I am tempted to mention a name which will probably be new to most of you—the name of my late friend Mr. Young—and I do this the more willingly, because he is little beholden to posthumous fame, in consequence of never, so far as I know, having written anything for publication. This gentleman, in his regimental days, was a predecessor of mine in the Royals, where his name was long held in respect, and he spent the evening of a long and laborious life in this neighbourhood, at Rosetta, near Peebles, where he had built himself a residence, and borrowed its name from the scene of his former labours in Egypt. He was at the head of the medical staff upon two memorable occasions, and it was said to his praise, that "the worst calamities of war had no place either amidst the swamps of Holland, or on the burning sands of Egypt." And it was said some four-and-fifty years ago, with reference to his conduct, and to the point of independent action, that, "in what concerns the health of an army, the praise or blame must peculiarly and distinctly belong to the medical superintendent; because the events then, whether prosperous or adverse, must depend upon causes of which professional skill alone is competent to take cognizance. The hospitals, of course, must be just as much under the Inspector-General as the arrangements of the field are under the Commander-in-Chief, and consequently, any peculiarity of success in the recovery of the sick and wounded is as much to the appropriate praise of the former, as the wise array of a battle or a siege is to the distinct honour of the latter."

Mr. Young, Gentlemen, was a man of the stamp of Larrey, to whom he was well known in Egypt, and who inquired most kindly for him, when he visited this city. He was a man who saw no obstacles in his way, who stuck at nothing for the benefit of the sick, and who suffered no inroad on the rights of his department. When chief of the staff in the West Indies, a young doctor was sent out to him as Physician to the forces, with the King's commission and an Oxford or Cambridge degree in his pocket, the only one then qualifying for that rank. Mr. Young declined to receive him, telling him that he could not allow those gentlemen who had been toiling under him as staff and regimental surgeons to be superseded by one who had never before seen a sick soldier. The young man, seeing that there was no room for him in that quarter, requested the Inspector to give him an order on the paymaster for some money, and on the agent of transports to carry him home. The reply was, "I will not acknowledge you by any official act whatever." But, said Mr. Young, I happen to have some money at my credit in the paymaster's books, and whatever you want I will most willingly give you.
The gentleman found his way back to England, and Mr. Young soon after followed. He was ordered to repair to the Medical Board, and there he found the physician-general and the surgeon-general (neither of whom had any previous service to lean upon), in great indignation at this insult to their authority, and the former remarked upon Mr. Young's courtesy to the physicians to the forces, to which he calmly replied, that if the thing was to do over again he would just do as he had done. The surgeon-general then showed his temper, and observed that they had not made up their minds whether they would not bring the whole proceeding before a court-martial, to which Mr. Young, taking up his hat, and making his bow, said, "the sooner the better." The court-martial, however, was no more heard of; they knew that he had the feeling of the service with him, and that he had Sir Ralph Abercromby at his back. I appealed for the truth of this anecdote to Mr. Young himself, stating it to him as I had heard it, and as I now repeat it to you. He quietly observed that it "was very near the truth."

This leads me naturally to say a word on the introduction of the "civil element" into the military hospitals. It will not be supposed that I who lived and practised so long in harmony with my professional brethren in this distinguished seat of medical erudition—who have now been so long an atom in this "civil element"—who, amongst those who have closed a brilliant career, have been often in consultation with such men as Gregory, Abercrombie, and Liston—who have had the honour to rank amongst my colleagues in the University, such men as Thomson and Charles Bell, will be found wanting in respect for the civil branch of my profession. The civil members of the profession have evinced a most generous spirit in the way in which they have espoused the cause of the assistant-surgeons of the Navy; and I am sure they will sympathize with those men who have been spending toilsome days and sleepless nights under canvas in the Crimea, and are now made the scapegoats for errors committed at home. It grieves me to think that these men should find themselves, at the close of a campaign, supplanted by others who have not borne the "burden and heat of the day." Could I believe that this was for the good of the public service, I would speedily be reconciled to it. But is it to be supposed, that men who have, like myself, been accustomed to see their hospitals broken up soon after midnight, to make a march of twelve or fifteen miles, and to have their hospitals again in operation by the time they sat down to breakfast, and this from day to day for weeks in succession—is it, I say, to be supposed that men conversant with such duties as this, are less competent to the organization of new hospitals than those who have passed perhaps an hour a day in the simple duty of prescription?

I have all along maintained that there never was a want in the army of the Crimea of men equal to the higher duties of the department; but instead of seeing those men promoted to a higher rank, which they have so well earned, and appointed to what would have been to many of them an easy
duty, they are superseded by men who, whatever may be their merits in other respects—and these I have no desire to question—have never hitherto had an opportunity of giving an opinion on the position, construction, or economy of an hospital—and all this at an increased expense to the nation. How far this is calculated to attract talent to the public service, to encourage merit, or to benefit the sick soldier, it is for the Government to judge.

It is quite clear that a sufficient number of hands (to use a seaman's phrase) could not be spared from the Crimea, to man these auxiliary hospitals, but, with the diminished numbers and improved health of our army in that quarter, occasion might have been found for the promotion of some half-dozen of staff-surgeons, to be placed at the head of them; and I make no doubt that many of the young gentlemen who have volunteered for the duties of those hospitals would have preferred serving under men of rank, standing, and experience in the army. What is it, I should be glad to know, that is required from the civil hospitals? is it those limited powers often imposed upon physicians and surgeons by a close-fisted treasurer? is it those delays and impediments to improvements occurring from the necessity of a reference to the governors? is it that vexatious interference on professional points sometimes exercised by a philosophic manager? or is it that divided and imperfect responsibility under which medical men have sometimes been enabled to shelter themselves when decidedly in the wrong?

The military hospitals, in my younger days, were looked to as patterns for imitation in the organization of similar establishments for the purposes of civil life. I have now had some experience of both, and I say advisedly, that although the military hospitals are not in all respects what they might be, there is, in these hospitals, much of that arrangement, promptitude, and self-reliance, which ought to characterize all military proceedings. The quantity of superfluous writing in the medical department has, I am glad to see, been well exposed by my friend Dr. Dumbreck, in his evidence before Mr. Roeck's Committee, and I fear that this department has to answer for a large share of the £70,000 worth of stationery said to have been sent out with the army of the Crimea.

The absurd system of checks and counter-checks, so forcibly exposed by the late Secretary-at-War, would still seem to be in full operation. Of this I recollect a very ludicrous instance, and was in some degree a party to it, when a very young man. The hospital expenditure account was "returned for correction," and the surgeon, the hospital-sergeant, and myself, set our wits to work, and mustered all our joint stock of arithmetic to discover the error, but being unsuccessful, the account was sent back to the Medical Board, and was twice again "returned for correction." As if to make the thing more ridiculous, an orderly dragoon was kept galloping backwards and forwards between the head-quarters of the district and the village where we were quartered, with this precious despatch, and the
mighty error turned out to be "an ounce of oatmeal overcharged." Had
the clerks in the Medical Board, who at that time checked the returns,
condescended to mark, by a cross on the margin or otherwise, where the
error lay, it would have saved a considerable loss of time and temper, to
say nothing of the wear and tear of man and horse.

This, however, chiefly concerns the public; but there are some cases
in which I fear the medical department has assisted in forging its own
fetters. I should be glad to know what has become of all those portly
folios which have been accumulating in our regimental hospitals for a long
series of years, at a great expense to the nation, great labour to the
surgeons, and little edification to the profession. It is no doubt an object
of great importance, particularly when men are brought forward to be
invalided, to have an authentic record to refer to, showing how often a
man has been in hospital, and for what particular complaints; but surely
all this might be accomplished without allotting a page or two of those
huge folios to every man admitted, compelling the surgeon to spin his
brains to give a graphic description of a sprained wrist, or an ulcerated leg,
or to detail with equal prolixity the case of one man with a virulent
gonorrhoea, and another with a malignant typhus fever.

I know no good that comes of this compulsory writing; but there is
another description of writing which I should wish to see encouraged. I
know not at this precise moment what are the regulations, or what is the
practice of the French army, but I know, that from the medical officers of
that army have emanated more than sixty volumes of the "Recueil de
Memoires de Medicine de Chirurgie et de Pharmacie Militaires." This
published under the authority, and at the expense of the Government, and
containing many valuable papers on subjects all important to the health
of the troops. In this, I think we would do well to imitate them.

In addition to all other professional competitions open to the military surgeons
as well as to others, I should like to see a competition instituted within
the department itself. Who will show himself most conversant with the
diseases of soldiers and seamen, and with those injuries to which they are
exposed in the battle-field, and on the ship's deck? Who will give us the
best papers on the medical topography of our many foreign stations, and
on the best sites for camps, cantonments, barracks, and hospitals at home
and abroad? Who, in short, will evince the most perfect knowledge of all
the juvantia et laedantia of a military life? A selection of such papers by
an impartial committee, and published by the Government, would give
encouragement to the department, and health to the army.

(To be continued.)