

## NoVA et VETERA.

### A MEDICAL DIPLOMATIST.

THE recent death of Florence Nightingale naturally reminded us of the Crimean War, and the terrible hardships endured by the allied armies during that disastrous campaign. Whilst fully recognizing the inestimable value of the noble work accomplished by the Lady with the Lamp and her devoted band of followers, it is fitting that we should recall the memory of Sir John McNeill, who did at least as much to lessen the sufferings of the sick and wounded. In striking contrast to the brave woman who was his firm friend and ardent admirer to the end, he received the usual reward of the reformer—ingratitude and non-recognition during life, and afterwards complete oblivion. Yet Sir John McNeill deserved a better return for his labours; even apart from his work in the Crimea, he has a claim on the gratitude of Englishmen. It might with truth be said of him that he devoted his life to the welfare of his country, for almost the whole of his long career was spent in unceasing toil on its behalf; and the man who later was to be set aside and see his work disregarded, endured years of constant hardships and anxiety, and the loss of child after child, and the ruin of his own health in his successful and unremitting endeavour to further British interests and uphold British prestige in the East. An account of his life has been published recently by his grand-daughter,<sup>1</sup> whose charmingly sympathetic account of her grandparents forms a fitting memorial to one who was not only an able and successful diplomat, but a devoted husband and father, an upright and honest gentleman, and an ornament to the medical profession of which he was a prominent member.

Sir John McNeill was born on the island of Colonsay, on August 12th, 1795. He was the third child of John McNeill, Laird of Colonsay, and came of an ancient Highland stock, which claimed descent from Torquill McNeill of Tainish, who was Keeper of the Castle of Sween in Argyllshire about the middle of the fifteenth century. In course of time the Keeper's descendants appear to have acquired considerable landed property, but it was not until the year 1701 that the islands of Colonsay and Oronsay came into the family by means of a "Disposition" from the Earl of Argyll. The story goes that the McNeills consolidated their new possessions by the simple if barbarous process of massacring the former owners, who belonged to another clan. John McNeill spent the first eleven years of his life in his island home, for which, throughout all his wanderings in after-life, he always cherished an intense affection. He was a delicate child, with a tendency to consumption, which seems to have been overcome by the healthy outdoor life he led during his boyhood, since he grew up a very strong and very active man. His mother, an extremely able woman, had charge of his education till he left home for the first time to be boarded, probably as a private pupil, with the Rev. George Jardine, M.A., Professor of Logic at the University of Glasgow. Thence he passed on to St. Andrews, where he won the good opinion of his teachers. In 1811 he proceeded to Edinburgh to study medicine. He received the degree of M.D. in 1814, at the age of 19; and in the same year he married, much against the wishes of his family, Innes, the fourth daughter of George Robinson of Gask and Clermiston, a girl three years his junior. This hasty marriage was followed by two years of poverty, but in 1816 his father obtained for him an appointment in the East India Company. Six months after his departure from Scotland the young husband was left a widower, and the next three years were spent on active service.

From an early period in his career McNeill seems to have extended his activity beyond the sphere of

<sup>1</sup> *Memoir of the Right Hon. Sir John McNeill, G.C.B., and of his second wife, Elizabeth Wilson.* By their Grand-daughter. Published by John Murray, Albemarle Street, London. 1910. (Pp. 417.)

purely medical work. His grand-daughter, quoting from a note made by himself, tells us that

during the campaign Mr. McNeill was employed in various duties—communicating with native chiefs, heads of villages, and others, and sometimes in negotiations with chiefs of tribes who had the power of giving annoyance or of interrupting communications. He was frequently directed to accompany detachments sent to a distance, in order to facilitate their intercourse with the native authorities, obtain information, procure trusty guides, get supplies, etc.

It is clear that, even at this early period, the young doctor was giving striking proofs of his exceptional capacity for diplomacy, and his appointment as Assistant Surgeon to the British Mission at Teheran towards the end of the year 1820 gave him full opportunities of perfecting himself in the rules of that art. He did not neglect to profit by them, and it was not long before the new assistant surgeon became a man of mark in the little English colony. Thanks to his absolute integrity, and to his never-failing tact and good judgement, McNeill was soon the right-hand man of his superior officers, and during the fourteen years of his sojourn at the Court of Persia he was always "in the confidence of, and a great assistance to, three successive Envoys. He knew far more about Persian politics than any living Briton, and his diplomatic talents seemed to fit him especially for the first position himself." Small wonder, therefore, when he returned home in 1834, "the poor and little known Medical Assistant had developed into a prominent diplomat, whose opinions were listened to with attention, and whose rôle it would be in future to confer favours rather than to receive them."

It must not be imagined, however, that McNeill's interest in Eastern politics absorbed his whole attention to the detriment of his own profession. We learn that, more particularly during the first years of his appointment at Teheran, he did his utmost to encourage vaccination, and devoted much of his leisure to the study of cholera, at that time but recently introduced into Persia. But there can have been no doubt in the minds of those who knew him that his real vocation was diplomacy; and when he returned to the East, in June, 1836, it was as "Minister Plenipotentiary and Envoy Extraordinary from the Court of St. James's to the Shah of Persia." Two little incidents which took place on the voyage out, when his honours were new upon him, deserve mention for the characteristic picture they afford of the man himself:

As he was embarking at Dover he heard some guns firing, and criticized the irregularity of their practice, but quite forgetting that they were the usual salute to one of His Majesty's Ministers leaving the country, and were therefore fired in his honour. The first act on reaching Boulogne was to "ferret out" an old Indian friend who was living there after being ruined by bank failures, and for whom he had been making efforts in London.

This is hardly the proper place to discuss at any length McNeill's career as British Envoy. It may be fitly summed up in the words of his biographer:

When Mr. McNeill left England in June, 1836, his hope had been to carry out the instructions given him regarding the Commercial Treaty, etc., and to have left Persia for good in two years, feeling that British prestige was restored there. He was now leaving it after two and a half years of great anxiety and a seeming failure, his hair whitened, his health broken, but with the knowledge that he had done his best, and with the satisfaction of knowing that Lord Palmerston considered he had done the best possible.

"His best" included the saving of the city of Herat, after a nine months' siege, by means of which he successfully again put off the day when Britain should acknowledge Russia as the paramount Power in Persia.

In 1842 Sir John McNeill, G.C.B., as he now was, was compelled by the state of his health to leave Persia for good, but it was only to devote himself to fresh work at home. With the same zeal that he had displayed in his political duties he now gave himself up to work of another and more philanthropic nature. He became Chairman of Her Majesty's new Poor Law Department, the Board of Supervision for Scotland, and was appointed head

of the Highland Emigration Society. Sir Henry Rawlinson, whose words are quoted here, says of him that "it was partly owing to his (McNeill's) admirable management that the famine of 1847, which decimated Ireland, was so little felt in the sister island."

But Sir John McNeill's great work was yet to come. The terrible mismanagement in the Crimea during the first months of the war, and the frightful sufferings it entailed upon our hapless soldiers, aroused a storm of indignation throughout the United Kingdom; and on February 12th, 1855, a Cabinet meeting was held, at which it was decided, amongst other resolutions, that "A Commission of which Sir John McNeill is to be head, is to be sent out (to the seat of war) to inquire into the working of the Commissariat in all its branches of supply and issue, and every other detail."

Sir John McNeill (says his grand-daughter) was at this time in his sixtieth year, and a man who was not in robust health; twenty-three years in the East and many hardships while there having left their mark upon his constitution. Yet he did not hesitate a moment. Summoned to London by telegraph, not knowing for what purpose, he was requested to undertake the proposed inquiry. At great personal inconvenience, he accepted. Two days afterwards he learned that Colonel Tulloch was to be his colleague, and in three days more they were on their way.

It was no pleasant or easy task that the two Commissioners had before them. Their instructions from the Government were extremely vague, and, though sent expressly to rectify abuses and to indicate to the authorities at home the proper course to pursue with regard to supplies, care of the sick, etc., they were, in reality, "armed with no powers beyond the taking of evidence and of making suggestions, and were in the disagreeable position of being civil Commissioners examining military men."

McNeill's first impressions in the Crimea were not unfavourable. Writing of the hospitals at Scutari, he says: "I have never seen the sick of an army in the field so well cared for"; and in a letter to Lord Panmure he writes that "it seems as if the worst were already past and everything mending."

The worst was past; but things were still in a state of confusion. The Commissioners' first act was to supply the urgent need of the army for soft bread and fresh meat. And then came a far more difficult and unpleasant task—the inquiry into the cause of mismanagement. The two Commissioners

sat, sometimes on board the steam-transport *Gothenburg*, and sometimes in a hut at the camp, for fifty-five days, taking evidence, and patiently recording and collating it. They examined, either separately or collectively, the Commanding Officer, the Surgeon, and the Quartermaster of every Corps in the Crimea; also officers commanding brigades and divisions; principal medical officers and commissariat officers attached to brigades and divisions; and, finally, the Quartermaster-General, the Senior Assistant Quartermaster-General, the Commissary-General, and the two Deputy Commissaries-General—over 200 officers in all.

Though McNeill did all that lay in his power to make this cross-examination as little offensive as possible, it aroused furious resentment on the part of the officers interrogated. In a letter to his wife, Sir John tells us that the principle upon which he worked was

to keep in the background myself, and privately to push on the Commissariat, and let them do everything as if on their own movement. In this way I get hearty co-operation instead of opposition, and what I want is to have the thing done without seeking to have the credit of doing it.

The result of the inquiry was embodied in two reports—one finished in June, 1855, and the other in January of the following year—which were drawn up with infinite care by McNeill and Tulloch, before being sent home to be laid before Parliament.

Every fact stated in it was verified, a reference in the margin in each case being made to the evidence of the officers, which was printed at the end, and the returns were given in an appendix separately. The evidence was given in the words of the officers themselves, was revised and corrected by them at their leisure, in their own quarters, and attested by their signatures.

There was a good deal of delay before the reports appeared, but when they did they caused a tremendous sensation. Though the tone throughout both was

studiously moderate and impartial the evidence of the officers themselves made it impossible not to implicate several of those who had been in command during the war, and who were naturally incensed at the charges brought against them. The public, on the other hand, were full of indignation, which found expression in the House of Commons, at the alleged carelessness and incompetence on the part of these officers, whilst the Queen and Prince Consort were alarmed lest the army should in consequence of these revelations be placed under the control of Parliament instead of the Crown. The situation of the Cabinet, between those conflicting interests, was an extremely awkward one.

The choice was forced upon them of upholding their own Commissioners by assuming an attitude hostile to the army and displeasing to the Crown, or of denouncing the Report of their own Commission, facing hostile motions in the House of Commons, while satisfying "those in high places" and the army.

In these circumstances it was considered advisable to hold an inquiry on the reports themselves, and a "Board of General Officers" was formed for the purpose. No intimation of these proceedings was given to the two men most intimately concerned with them.

Up to this time not one line of official approval of their work had been sent to the Commissioners, nor had one word of public approval been spoken, yet Sir John McNeill . . . in spite of newspaper notices regarding the appointment of the Board of General Officers, and the curt refusal of Lord Panmure to reward his colleague, believed it impossible that the Government would not see that justice was done. . . . Still no communication was made to the Commissioners; they were left to gather what was being done from the newspapers, along with the rest of the public.

Colonel Tulloch, roused to fury by this underhand treatment, at once rushed into the fray; but McNeill, in spite of the urgings of his friends, resolutely declined to take any steps to vindicate his position. Throughout the whole sordid business he remained proudly aloof, refusing even to leave his home in Edinburgh, lest his presence in London should prove embarrassing to the Government, which he still trusted implicitly. His advice to Tulloch to follow his example was of course disregarded; the gallant Colonel appeared before the Board of General Officers, called and cross-examined witnesses, and soon landed himself in the "inextricable maze" predicted by McNeill.

The Royal Warrant appointing the Board of General Officers was dated 25th February; they had a preliminary meeting 3rd April. At first it was intended to have held these meetings with closed doors, but the indignation in the House of Commons was so great that the Government were obliged to yield, though it was much against the Queen's wish. Eventually the first twenty-three meetings were open; during these witnesses were examined. The last twenty-three meetings were closed, and the Report was issued on 4th July, 1856. The record of the public proceedings of the Board exhibit a very great contrast in spirit to that which animated the Commissioners. . . . From the first, base motives were attributed, personal recriminations were allowed, and unfair advantages taken, and unworthy inferences were drawn. In their final Report the General Officers made deductions not borne out by the evidence, and, very obviously, were intent only upon clearing the officers of all blame at the expense of the Commissioners or of the Treasury.

The result of the inquiry into the Crimean Report was such as might have been anticipated from the first under these conditions. To put it plainly, the Government threw over the two men whose only fault consisted in a faithful discharge of an unpleasant duty, and the blame which should have been accorded to others was shifted on to the shoulders of the "damned doctors," whilst every possible means were taken to belittle and call down scorn upon them, their profession, and the work they had carried out with such signal success. Popular feeling, however, was on the side of the Commissioners, and ran very high. Moreover,

Questions regarding matters connected with the Crimean Report continued to be asked in the House of Commons; whenever any allusion was made to the Commissioners, as frequently happened, it was received with cheers; but the Government steadily resisted making any sign of approbation or mention of reward.

When at length an acknowledgement of their services was made, it was in the insulting form of £1,000 to each Commissioner, which, it is hardly necessary to add, was indignantly refused by both. Their supporters, however, continued to agitate for justice, and in the end obtained it. Though Lord Palmerston referred to the Crimean Report as "an old story of what happened two years ago," and doubted if "their (the Commissioners') services were of such a peculiar nature as to require any extraordinary recognition," the tide of public opinion had risen so high that the Ministry, for very fear, were obliged to give way before it. In March, 1857, McNeill was given his choice between a baronetcy and a Privy Councillorship, and chose the latter; whilst his colleague became Sir Alexander Tulloch, K.C.B. A letter of McNeill's regarding his own reward is worth quoting, inasmuch as it shows the attitude he adopted during the whole of this disgraceful episode. He writes:

"If they feel the necessity of doing what is right, let them act like men and gentlemen. It is beneath both their position and mine to be chaffering and huckstering like Jew old-clothes men about such matters. If they do not feel that they have made a mistake, let them keep their honours and rewards. I can live without them. I do not choose to be bid for at auction. I have not put myself up for sale.

Sir John McNeill lived to enjoy for many years the honours so reluctantly accorded to him by an ungrateful Government; and much of this time was devoted to active and useful work among his poorer countrymen. He died at Cannes on May 17th, 1883, at the age of 88, having preserved his mental faculties and his interest in public affairs almost to the end.

So far little or nothing has been said of the nature and extent of the work accomplished by McNeill during the Crimean war, a work of which it is almost impossible to over-estimate the importance. Briefly, he found the Crimea a wilderness of disease and death and unnecessary suffering, where men lay dying within a few miles of the food and medicine which would have saved them; and he and his companion left it with the hospitals, the commissariat, and the transport system in perfect working order. It was McNeill who first obtained fresh meat for the starving soldiers by the simple process of having it sent from the southern side of the Black Sea, a country well known to him.

He made use of the British Consuls there, asking them to have tenders sent in to the Commissariat officials, who had hitherto made no use of this rich district so near the seat of war, and capable of supplying fresh meat, forage, fuel, and vegetables, in quantities sufficient for a much larger army than that which lay before Sevastopol.

The scurvy-stricken men, whose diseased gums rendered impossible for them to eat the hard biscuit which formed part of their daily rations, were supplied with soft bread from the field bakeries immediately erected by the Commissioners, an obvious solution of the difficulty which seems never to have occurred to those in command. It was McNeill, too, who was the first to discover "incidentally that the supply of quinine which should have been in Balaklava was practically non-existent. As the warmer weather approached, cases of malarial fever became frequent, and but for his 'timely discovery' and for 'the steps he had taken to call attention to it,' as Lord Raglan said in his letter of thanks, the troops would have been without this valuable drug."

Perhaps the result of the Commissioners' joint labours is best described in the words of one who had been an eye-witness of the state of things both before and after their inquiry.

General Sir De Lacy Evans, who had commanded a division during the war—and was for that reason, at the Queen's express wish, excluded from the Board of General Officers—defended the Crimean Report in Parliament, and testified in vigorous terms to the beneficial changes which its authors had effected during the short time they were at the seat of war:

I must say that the comment of the hon. gentleman the Under-Secretary of State for War, as the representative of Government, as well as the conduct of the noble Lord the

War Minister, towards these Commissioners is the most ungrateful and unjust that I ever heard of. . . . The noble Lord at the head of the War Department said: "See what a vast superiority there is in the material state of the army in the present year as compared with last year!" He carefully omitted saying how it was brought about. . . . I now most distinctly say that it has been mainly brought about by those Commissioners whom the hon. gentleman has this night been instructed to deprecate and disgrace. . . . Who was it also that caused fresh provisions to be sent for along the various coasts of the Black Sea and the Bosphorus? Why, the Commissioners! There were fifteen hundred miles of coast along the Black Sea, and upwards of a thousand along the Bosphorus, covered with cattle and provisions; there never was an army in the world that had such vast means of transport at its command: we had unlimited command of the sea and an enormous amount of vessels at our disposal, and although these things were known, it was the Commissioners who have been disparaged to-night who first convinced the Government of the facts. I speak therefore of the Commissioners with gratitude because of the material benefits which they conferred upon the troops. . . . I rejoice that the Government have committed the gross blunder, injustice, and inconsistency that they have upon this occasion by publishing those Reports, because, independently of the proceedings of the Commissioners having saved the lives of some thousands during the last six or eight months, and having immensely contributed to the efficiency of the troops, the Reports of the Commissioners . . . will remain on record, as a menace to Governments who may be willing to place favourites instead of competent men in high stations, and will point to the staff, commissariat, and military of other armies, and perhaps of other ages, what ought to be done to protect the lives and health of an army in the field.

One who had even a better right than General De Lacy Evans to speak with authority on this subject did not hesitate to call the work of the two Commissioners "one of the noblest labours ever done on earth." In the same letter in which she pays this generous tribute of admiration, Florence Nightingale adds:

I saw how Sir John McNeill's and Sir A. Tulloch's reporting was the salvation of the Army in the Crimea. Without them everything that happened would have been considered "all right."

Sir John McNeill was a man of fine presence—tall and dignified, with a beautiful head of long grey hair. Sir James Paget said to his grand-daughter: "He was the handsomest young man and the handsomest old man I have ever seen." His portrait was painted by G. F. Watts; and a writer in the *Scotsman* said that the painter had "found a rare type in one who was considered the handsomest man of his day."

We cannot conclude this account of Sir John McNeill's career without mentioning a curious incident which occurred long after he himself had been laid to rest. Twenty years after his death, the Christian Scientists in America paid the old diplomatist the doubtful honour of adding to the number of his descendants the leader and originator of their creed. They declared, and Mrs. Eddy herself supported the claim, that she was his great-granddaughter, in the face of the fact that Mrs. Eddy having been born in 1821, and McNeill in 1795, her alleged great-grandfather was but 26 years her senior. In an article which appeared in an American magazine, *The Ladies' Home Journal*, of November, 1903, is the following remarkable statement:

Among Mrs. Eddy's ancestors was Sir John MacNeil, a Scottish Knight, prominent in British politics, and Ambassador to Persia. Her great-grandfather was the Right Honourable Sir John MacNeil, of Edinburgh, Scotland.

Called upon to rectify this amazing misstatement, Mrs. Eddy contented herself with a very qualified denial in the *Christian Science Sentinel* for March 12th, 1904. It is there stated that Mrs. Eddy had had the matter carefully investigated, and having obtained no positive proof that the Right Honourable Sir John McNeill was her ancestor, she requests that all others writing upon her biography shall in future observe this correction. One would like to know what is Mrs. Eddy's notion of "positive proof." This might enable us better to estimate the value of the evidence on the claims of Christian Science in regard to the healing of disease. The impudence with which an absolutely baseless statement, so easily disproved, is made is a measure at once of the Priestess's regard for truth and of the credulity of her disciples.