

Middle Articles

MEDICAL HISTORY

Sir Victor Horsley, F.R.C.S., F.R.S., 1857-1916

J. B. LYONS,* M.D., F.R.C.P.I.

On 16 July 1916 Sir Victor Horsley died from hyperpyrexia complicating paratyphoid fever while on active service in Mesopotamia. The biography by Stephen Paget, published in 1919, has long been out of print, though a number of distinguished authors contributed reminiscences or appraisals in 1957 (Jefferson, MacNalty, and Sachs). A new biography is to be published this year, and during the course of preparing this his biographer, Dr. J. B. Lyons, came across the following letters to and from Horsley, which are now published for the first time.

Brit. med. J., 1966, 2, 164-166

Victor Horsley studied at University College Hospital, London, where, after qualifying M.R.C.S. in 1881, he obtained an appointment as house-surgeon to Mr. John Marshall. In the following year at the M.B., B.S. examination he was awarded a gold medal in surgery. Promotion came in due course, and while still surgical registrar he was appointed Professor-Superintendent of the Brown Animal Sanatory Institution, a post which placed at his disposal facilities for animal experiments that were then unrivalled in London. He was elected F.R.S. in 1886, and in the same year was appointed secretary of a local government board commission to study the method of anti-rabies inoculation introduced by Louis Pasteur.

The chairman of the commission, Sir James Paget, wrote to Horsley in connexion with a laboratory attendant bitten by a rabid cat.

Hôtel de France,
St. Sauveur,
Pyrénées.
Sept. 12, 1886.

Dear Horsley,

I never felt less like the Chairman of a Committee than I do now, writing in this lovely scenery, with open windows and doors in a really delicious cool air—But I had better pretend to be in my Chair and say that I think you have done quite right with the bitten man. I only wish that you could yourself have treated him: for one case inoculated by yourself in England would have had great persuasive power with some English people.

I hope we shall meet all well in October: I shall be very fit for work if I go on being refreshed as I have been to this time.

I am sincerely yours,
James Paget.

In the course of physiological experiments at the Brown Institution Horsley familiarized himself with the operative techniques necessary for the emerging specialty of neurosurgery. He was appointed assistant surgeon to the National Hospital, Queen Square, in 1886. The opportunity was immense, but the problems facing him were of equal magnitude; and not the least of his difficulties was poor nursing.

Horsley received a letter from Risien Russell, house-physician to the National Hospital, who was endeavouring to improve things.

* Visiting Physician, St. Michael's Hospital, Dun Laoghaire, and Mercer's Hospital, Dublin.

National Hospital
For the Paralysed and Epileptic.
(Albany Memorial)
Queen Square, Bloomsbury,
June 29th 1889.

Dear Mr. Horsley,

From what the Matron said to me this morning Mr. Rawlings has heard that you are not satisfied with the nursing of the operation cases, and Mr. R. is going to ask you about it when he next sees you I believe.

I have arranged that the one Sister is to take all the operations, as I saw the muddle at last operation, and saw that you were put out by it. As I consider the Sister who was then in charge a most incapable woman, I have asked



Sir Victor Horsley (1857-1916). From an original photograph in the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum and Library. (By courtesy of The Wellcome Trustees.)

the other Sister to take charge of the cases, and hope that you will be kind enough to back me up in this step.

The present night nurse is leaving the operation ward, and Miss East proposes to put a nurse in her place who has had no hospital experience other than that which she has gained here during the last 12 months that she has been in this place. I hope you will insist on having nurses who have been trained as Surgical nurses elsewhere, as that is the position I have taken up in the matter. It is no use, arguing with the Matron on such matters, as she displays most lamentable ignorance and uses most absurd arguments in support of her plans. Further, as you may remember my telling you some time ago, the Matron is influenced by the Sister who was at the last operation, a woman who does not seem to have any idea of how to speak the truth and is constantly misrepresenting things. There is a small nest of women here who can get on with the said Sister, otherwise there is nothing but discontentment, and bad as the present system of nursing is in the place I don't know what it will come to if things are allowed to go on as they are doing.

With apologies for troubling you in this way,

Yours very faithfully,

J. S. Risien Russell.

London University did not admit women to examinations in the medical faculty until 1896 (Garrison, 1929). Individual teachers, evidently, were more progressive, and among these was Dr. (later Sir Rupert) Boyce, a Londoner of Irish parentage. And when Horsley, who held a professorship in pathology at University College, received a letter from J. M. Horsburgh, it cannot be imagined that his sympathy lay other than with the lady.

University College, London,
Gower Street, W.C.
Jan. 15, 1894.

My Dear Horsley,

I am to inform you that Mr. Boyce admitted a woman to his class in Bacteriology last term, and personally received her fee, contrary to the rules of the College. Mr. Boyce handed the fee to me, which by direction of the Council I have returned to the lady, Mrs. Berry.

Faithfully yours,

J. M. Horsburgh.

A dispute between the staff and governors of the National Hospital came to a head at the turn of the century, and Horsley was asked to consider becoming a staff representative.

74, Grosvenor Street, W.
July 16, 1899.

Dear Mr. Horsley,

In the event of direct representation of the Hon. Staff on the Board of Management of the Hospital being accorded may I ask you unofficially whether, if elected, you would be able to serve as a representative of the Surgical Staff?

Yours truly,

Thomas Buzzard.

But he declined the office:

16 July, 1899.

Dear Dr. Buzzard,

Many thanks for your kind letter but really I have at present so much public work to do especially in connection with the G.M.C. that with the best wish and intention to serve the Hospital and my colleagues I could not find the time to adequately fulfil the duties of a representative. I feel this more especially as it is evident that the representatives would have to devote much time and thought to the pressing affairs of the Hospital.

With kind regards,

Yours sincerely,

Victor Horsley.

Having acted in the field of medical politics as a Direct Representative on the G.M.C. (1896–1907) and first chairman of the B.M.A.'s Representative Body (1903–7), Sir Victor con-

sented to stand as Liberal candidate for London University in 1910. Among his canvassers was Sir William Osler.

From the Regius Professor of Medicine, Oxford.

Dear Horsley,

I am writing today a personal letter to all the men on the list just received putting your claims on medical grounds in view of the important legislation impending in health matters. I am an Ulster Home Ruler but I could not induce Gotch to take my view of your claims on the profession.

Yours sincerely,

Wm. Osler.

A petition on behalf of the hunger-striking suffragettes was signed by many medical practitioners, but other doctors repudiated it, among them Stephen Paget.

21 Ladbroke Square, W.

June 30, 1913.

Dear Madam,

Sir Victor Horsley has sent me the enclosed petition: but I fear I must return it to you unsigned. My wife and I believe that the Government is doing its best to do the right thing in this very difficult matter: and we can't assent to regarding the persons tried by Sir Walter Phillimore as "political prisoners."

Believe me, yours faithfully,

Stephen Paget.

A different viewpoint was expressed in unequivocal terms by Mrs. Alice M. Waller in a letter to the brain-surgeon:

"My Husband asked me to say from us both how strongly we sympathise with your indignation in your very temperate letter about Miss Lenton.

"My husband also wishes to say that he would gladly find time to take an active part in checking the murderous stupidity of the authorities.

"Our daughter is not a militant suffragette but if she were as she well might and if she were subjected to the treatment Miss Lenton has received my Husband says he would shoot the Home Secretary at sight. . . ."

Stephen Paget wrote two letters concerning an odd subject.

57 Wimpole Street, W.

October 26.

My Dear Horsley,

Thank you for the pleasure of this afternoon.

Do you remember talking about the things one hears when half asleep, just dropping off over a book? I have noted some over the page: they come to me always with a most special distinctness, not as sounds but as intellectual perceptions: yet as sudden and vivid as if someone were speaking in my ears. They generally wake me from my doze. I used to have them by day, wide awake, but I think these have stopped.

Ever your true friend,

Stephen Paget.

1. We told him that certainly . . . I didn't like to give him any doctrine to touch. (This I heard at 9 p.m. on Sept. 14th while dropping asleep over Holmes's System of Surgery.)

2. For St. Paul saith, he was not known unto the Jews. (Sept. 16, 9.50 p.m. while dozing over Lund's Hunterian Lectures.)

3. There's an air of getting behind your patient . . . going behind yourself. (Sept. 18th at 10.15 p.m. while letter writing.)

4. You should drop it . . . So I think, and straight-away they were. . . . (Oct. 11th at 11.15 p.m. while reading Billroth.)

5. Believe in this by me, it does deserve. . . . / There's Fate invisible in the air to me Invisible. . . . (Yesterday night while reading Heath on Tumours of the Jaws.)

Aren't these funny! Please observe the blank verse in 5, like Prince Bulbo in the Rose and the Ring: I had been reading Shakespeare much the night before. Perhaps the theological tone of 1 and 2 is due to the daily pressure of my own want of agreement in religious belief with my people. For the rest, I think it is worthless: and I wish I could give you something better. It was delightful this afternoon.

S. P.

57 Wimpole Street, W.
Friday.

Dear Victor,

I send you some more of those sentences that come so vividly into my mind's ears when I drop asleep over a book. Don't trouble to acknowledge them—for indeed I can't imagine anything more worthless than they.

Ever yours,
Stephen Paget.

- Now when he heals like that, you know, I think they knock him out.
 - But you stuck to it with the suggestion about Germany.
 - The nature of a common England, idolatrous nature.
 - Because he can tell the distance from the noose.
 - By the nose we do not, brettersn. Israel proved to us that by making us a judge—
- The last one is too funny. It took some time to collect them: though I drop asleep over books with terrible ease, half from idleness, half from dyspepsia.

In August 1914 Sir Victor, a Territorial since his student days, reported for duty. No post was available for him—outspoken men are unwelcome in military circles. Eventually he was posted to Egypt, from where he volunteered for service in Mesopotamia.

However blind he was to the folly of his last crusade—for this venture cannot now be seen as other than a crusade on behalf of the British private soldier—that he appreciated how the talents of others were being wasted in this abominable marshland is shown by a letter from Carey Coombs.

Officers' Hospital,
Basra,
11-vi-1916.

Dear Sir Victor,

My departure from Amarah was so sudden that I didn't get a chance of saying Goodbye and of thanking you for your kindness to me. I owe you a great debt for helping me to make up my mind to go home. One hates to let go of a task, particularly if it is distasteful, until one is sure that one's duty lies elsewhere.

Major Turner, R.A.M.C. (Grey Turner of Newcastle) came to see me yesterday. We came out together in charge of the Surgical and Medical Divisions of No. 32 General Hospital, until that unit was broken up. He is doing no surgery here. If he were at home he would be doing war surgery at No. 1 Northern General Hospital, and would also be treating cases of accident in the Newcastle munition factories. Don't you think he could be sent home? I know he would refuse to apply for exchange to his old unit, but it does seem to me an awful pity to waste him out here, particularly when the Flanders fighting seems to be likely to make the English hospitals busy. I told him I would write to you. He rather demurred, but I know he thinks of writing to you about it.

Once more I am very grateful to you. I expect to go off to India today or tomorrow, and so home to health and work. Probably I shall be in time for the declaration of peace.

With kind regards, I am,
Yours sincerely,
C. F. Coombs.

On the same day Major C. M. Goodbody, Commanding Officer of the 61st Indian Stationary Hospital, wrote to Horsley from Sheikh Saad:

... The hospital looks very much better than when you were here, it really is quite comfortable now. I think you will hardly recognise it when you come back. . . . I am still getting a lot of scurvy cases I have about 70 in hospital now and some very bad ones—I have collected them all together and got some goats and we have a soup parade morning and evening. The cows we bought have been invaluable for them as we have had no fresh meat or vegetables for some time. I am doing the dysenteries, scurvies and convalescents myself about 500 in all! . . . Barker is better but not fit for much yet, although he is hard at it all day. He says you paid too much for your messing. This was news to me. I hoped you would do us the honour of being our Guests. He is going to refund you something I don't know how much as soon as he gets the account done—of course you will both stay with us when you come and please ask Thurston to bring a few vegetables and potatoes. . . .

Sir Victor intended to leave Mesopotamia for India in August, but he was taken ill in Amarah on 15 July 1916 and died on the following day. Writing to Lady Horsley, Colonel H. H. Willcox expressed himself thus:

"I have been out here for 3 months as Consulting Physician to the Force and had often seen Sir Victor. . . . He was in very good health and was most energetic doing a lot of good work.

"The climate out here is most trying and the Sun's rays most powerful. To be out walking in the daytime is really dangerous, but one has to take these risks if one is to do one's work, and your dear Husband was the last to be idle . . . It can be truly said that he gave his life for his duty."

These letters are published by kind permission of Mrs. Pamela Robinson, Sir Victor Horsley's daughter.

REFERENCES

- Jefferson, G. (1957). *Brit. med. J.*, 1, 903.
Lyons, J. B. (1966). *The Citizen Surgeon*. Peter Dawnay, London.
In press.
MacNalty, A. (1957). *Brit. med. J.*, 1, 910.
Paget, S. (1919). *Sir Victor Horsley*. Constable, London.
Sachs, E. (1957). *Brit. med. J.*, 1, 916.

Journal of Anatomy, 1866-1966

The centenary volume of the *Journal of Anatomy* is being published this year, and on 13 July the Anatomical Society of Great Britain and Ireland was due to celebrate this with a conversazione at the Senate House of the University of London. The journal thus antedates the *Journal of Physiology* by 12 years, the Physiological Society being founded in 1876—though the Anatomical Society was not founded until 1887. Nevertheless, from its inception the Anatomical Society has been closely associated with the journal, and since 1936 has appointed its editor and a supporting editorial board.

The idea of founding the journal came from G. M. Humphry, then Professor of Anatomy at Cambridge, and William Turner, then senior demonstrator at Edinburgh—and both of them remained on the editorial board until their death. The earlier volumes of the journal were called *The Journal of Anatomy and Physiology*, and subsequently the words *Normal and Pathological*, and *Human and Comparative* were added to the title on separate occasions; in 1940 the journal reverted to the original title and soon after to its present one. Contributors to the earlier edition included T. H. Huxley, Austin Flint, Langley, Gaskell, and Sidney Ringer. At present the journal is published quarterly, and one-quarter to one-third of the contributions come from overseas, the journal itself being sold in nearly 80 countries. The number of copies printed has risen steadily from 350 in 1918 to 1,800 in 1966.