Middle Articles

MEDICAL HISTORY

Three Letters by Sir James Young Simpson

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One hundred years ago this month Sir James Young Simpson, the great shaggy lion of Scottish medicine, died at the age of 59. "One of our greatest men," said an obituary,¹ "has passed from amongst us: Simpson is dead."

His life had been vigorous and full, in the best Victorian tradition: his achievements quite extraordinary to the point of brilliance—in an age which teemed with brilliant achievements. Like Dickens, who died a month later and one year younger, he had aroused adulation and jealousy wherever he had passed; and, like Dickens, his memory was as secure as the grave into which he was put. His brain, it was reported, weighed 54 oz. (1.68 kg.).

In common with other medical libraries the Library of the Wellcome Institute will be mounting a special commemorative display of books, prints and manuscripts. Among the autographs will be three pieces of special interest, for not only do they illustrate Simpson's burning enthusiasm for his work but they have the added virtue of bringing into view four rather different but hardly less interesting personalities. An account of these items and people might not be thought out of place here.

Letter 1

The first letter is characteristically scrawled on the fly leaf of his *Notes on the Inhalation of sulphuric Ether in the Practice of Midwifery*, Edinburgh, 1847. It is addressed to Professor Siebold—that is, Eduard von Siebold, Professor of Midwifery at Göttingen—and reads:

28 Feb. Edinburgh

Dear Sir,

I will feel flattered by your kind acceptance of the following brief pamphlet.

During the last month I have etherized a number of ladies in private practice during natural labour. Some 20 or 30 years hence its use will I believe be general in midwifery. The more I see of it the more I feel convinced of this.

With much esteem and respect believe me,

Yours very truly,
J. Y. Simpson.

This enthusiastic message serves to confirm what we already know of Simpson's impassioned state of mind at the time when he had first, so to speak, come under the influence of ether. A few days after writing to Siebold he was to send a similar note to his friend Dr. J. B. Fleming at Secunderabad,² and there is no knowing on how many other occasions he expressed his excitement in similar terms. After all, it was still only one month since he had used ether for the first time on a midwifery case (19 January), and it is no cause for surprise that his mind should have remained almost totally occupied with the matter; shared though it undoubtedly was with pleasure at news of his appointment as Queen's Physician in Scotland.

Siebold had also been quick off the mark, starting his own

experiments with ether in February and reporting on them to a meeting of the Society of Sciences in Göttingen on 8 May. His paper,³ however betrays a much more critical attitude than that adopted by Simpson, and in fact he was to conclude and assert repeatedly that anaesthesia in obstetrics should be confined to operative cases.⁴

Letter 2

This note is also scrawled, in this case on the half-title of a proof of Simpson's first pamphlet on chloroform,⁵ addressed to Dr. Protheroe Smith of London for consideration and comments. It belongs to the London Medical Society and is

Sir James Young Simpson. From the Wellcome Institute Museum Collection.

deposited in the Wellcome Library along with much other property of that Society. It is bound with no fewer than ten other pamphlets by Simpson. The whole volume bears the inscription of Dr. Heywood Smith, Protheroe's son.

The message runs as follows:

My Dear Dr. Smith,

I send you a pamphlet which I am sure will interest you. Here we are all *wild* on the subject. I believe I state correctly at p. 13 that not *above* two or three of you in London have as yet used ether in labour. I have not heard of any besides yourself and Gardner. Should I change it—say more?

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As to your question on flooding—I would certainly say that I have not seen it more after ether than without it. There have been several deaths here this year from hemorrhage and I know elsewhere also in Scotland—none etherized.

Yours ever,
J.Y.S.

Simpson was thus seeking Smith's advice, and incidentally (as one would expect) proffering his own. Perhaps the most obvious features of this spontaneous greeting are Simpson's elation at his triumph and his anxiety not to understate the achievements of London's physicians. In fact his statement⁶ on this latter point remains unchanged in the definitive *Account*, and one assumes, therefore, that he either received a confirmatory letter from Smith or felt sure enough of his ground, after reflection, to proceed without one.

This was not the first occasion on which these two men had communicated with one another, as can be seen from a letter signed by Smith and published many years ago. Dated 21 April, 1847, it informs Simpson of Smith's belief in the value of either in midwifery and of his intention to publish case histories in support of his thesis.⁷

Smith is in fact a much underrated figure in the history of British obstetrics and gynaecology to judge by the scant attention accorded him by the historians. Among his accomplishments must be mentioned (1) the invention of several instruments (chloroform inhaler, various specula); (2) pioneer work, paralleling Simpson's in Scotland, in the use of ether and chloroform in midwifery; and (3) the founding of the world's first gynaecological hospital in 1843.⁸ The latter is his most enduring monument. Originally sited in Red Lion Square, when it was known as the Hospital for Diseases of Women, it moved to Soho in 1851 where it continues to function (under the aegis of the Middlesex Hospital) to this day. Since 1845 its official title has been the Hospital for Women.

Smith, who also has the distinction of having performed a successful ovariectomy as early as 1842,⁹ was very probably the third man in England to follow Simpson's lead in applying ether to midwifery. Dr. Edward W. Murphy was first in the field when he reported a successful case to the Westminster Medical Society on 13 February 1847,¹⁰ to be followed by Dr. Lloyd on 27 March¹¹ and then by Smith himself on the very next day.¹² As for Dr. John Gardner,¹³ also mentioned in Simpson's message to Smith, there is no precise indication in print of whether or when he used ether to ease childbirth. The most we can say is that, by his own account, he had already administered ether vapour 63 times before 27 March.

No other proof copies of the *Notice*, apart from the one described here, are known to survive. There is, however, a copy of the published edition in the Osler Library at McGill University, and it is briefly commented on in that library's catalogue:¹⁴ to the effect that publication took place on 12 November—that is, only one week after the discovery had been made (4 November) and two days after its formal announcement to the Medico-Chirurgical Society of Edinburgh (10 November). We can assume, therefore, that the proof was sent off to London about 8 or 9 November. But this is of secondary importance to the fact that Simpson had already got the final version of his pamphlet into print by 15 November, which is quick work by any standards. In this he changed the first word of the title to read "*Account*," and added a postscript.

The proof copy in the Wellcome Library is incomplete, lacking the final page. It shows but slight differences from its successor, the *Account*, and these occur mainly in the footnotes. They are as follows:

(1) The *Notice* recommends a range of from 50 to 100 drops of chloroform against the *Account's* 100 to 120. The *Account* also has a warning about people's varying reactions to the anaesthetic.

(2) A note in the *Account* not present in the *Notice* advises the

surgeon to commence operations only *after* the full effects of the ether have been seen to take place. In this respect, says Simpson, chloroform offers "great and decided advantages in facility and efficiency over . . . ether."

(3) The *Account* contains an additional note recommending the best method of administration as upon a handkerchief.

Letter 3

This letter was at one time tipped into a presentation copy of Simpson's *Acupressure*, London 1864. Dr. John Moir,¹⁵ to whom the book once belonged and recipient of the letter, was a one-time colleague at the Royal Maternity Hospital, Edinburgh. An intensely religious man, he was best known for his work on the induction of premature labour. In his career of distinguished service to his profession he had helped to found both the Edinburgh Obstetrical Society and the Edinburgh Medical Missionary Society.

The text of the letter is as follows:

My Dear Sir,

Hans Christian Andersen the celebrated Danish poet and writer is here for a few days. He is to dine with me on Tuesday first at six o'clock. I would feel exceedingly happy if you could come and meet him. You will find him a most loveable being and a true child of nature. He is here on a visit to a patient of mine and has been lionizing in London for the last six weeks.

Yours very truly,
J. Y. Simpson.

52 Queen Street.
Sat. Morning.

Andersen, who was paying his first visit to England, had indeed been lionized—more to his own surprise than to anyone else's. Having arrived in London almost unannounced and at the invitation of William Jerdan, editor of the *Literary Gazette*, he had dropped into the social round as only a great celebrity could. And this, in many people's eyes, he was.

At the end of the London season Andersen travelled up to Scotland as the guest of Baron Joseph Hambro (Simpson's patient) at Lixmount House, Trinity, Leith. This gave him more intense pleasure than almost any other event, excepting perhaps his subsequent stay with Dickens. Scotland, for him, was the country of his great idol Sir Walter Scott. In a letter to Henriette Wulf dated 12 August 1847, he wrote: "I am in Scotland, in Walter Scott's native land. . . . I am also much read in Scotland, and they say I am called 'the Danish Walter Scott'; it is all a dream to me"¹⁶; while elsewhere he exults (in a letter to the Grand-Duke of Weimar from Frankfurt, dated 4 September 1847): "in England and Scotland I have received so much appreciation . . . that it turns my head to think of it. . . . My readers in England and Scotland are more numerous than I could have believed. Everyone has shown me much friendliness."¹⁷

No one could have been friendlier than Simpson. It was he who showed Andersen round Edinburgh ("from the artistic point of view on a level with Constantinople and Stockholm"), introducing him to Holyrood (with which he was not impressed) and Heriot's Hospital, where the Dane was greatly touched by the reverence shown towards him by a porter. "What, so young as that! Why, I've read him often and often, and got my lads to read him too. It is a remarkable thing to live to see such men; as a rule they are either old or dead before anyone hears anything about them."

Andersen stayed in Scotland for three weeks, travelling around with Hambro to Stirling Castle, Dumbarton, the Trossachs, Loch Lomond, and Glasgow, finally carrying away with him a sad impression of a typical Scottish Sabbath. "Everything is then at rest, even the railway trains dare not run. All the houses are closed, and the people sit inside and read their Bibles or drink themselves blind drunk . . . such Sunday

piety cannot, as a general rule, be sincere."¹⁸...

Was the dinner with Simpson and his friends at 52 Queen Street a sober occasion? Physically speaking, perhaps; intellectually it could hardly be. How one would like to re-create the scene! Simpson in charge, large and amiable, spreading his girth and his presence around him;¹⁹ and Andersen the honoured guest, tall and thin, supported on his huge feet, dressed in an odd combination of wide trousers and high, starched collar; childlike and charming withal. Two minds of a totally different cast, but in harmony and alight.

REFERENCES

- 1 Obituary, *Medical Times and Gazette*, 1870, 1, 530.
- 2 Duns, J., *Memoir of Sir James Y. Simpson, Bart.*, p. 204. Edinburgh, Edmonstone & Douglas, 1873.
- 3 Siebold, E. von, *Abhandlungen K. Gesellschaft für Wissenschaften*, 1845-7, 3, 116-140.
- 4 Siebold, E. von, *Neue Zeitschrift für Geburtskunde*, 1848 onwards, passim.
- 5 Simpson, Sir James Young, *Notice of a new anaesthetic Agent, as a Substitute for sulphuric Ether in Surgery and Midwifery*. Edinburgh, Sutherland & Knox; London, S. Highley, 1847.
- 6 "I am told that the London physicians, with two or three exceptions only, have never yet employed ether-inhalation in their Midwifery practice. Three weeks ago, I was informed in a letter from Professor Montgomery of Dublin, that he believed that in that city, up to that date, it had not been used in a single case of labour." *Notice*, p. 13.
- 7 This letter is published in J. Duns' *Memoir of Sir James Y. Simpson, Bart.*, p. 208. Edinburgh, Edmonstone & Douglas, 1873. Smith was the first person in England to use chloroform in midwifery, (see his "On the Use of Chloroform in Midwifery Practice," *Lancet*, 1847, 2, 572).
- 8 The best, indeed the only, account of this hospital is in W. R. Winterton's "The Story of the London gynaecological Hospitals," *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 1961, 54, 191. The author of this article quite rightly regrets the lack of recognition for Smith and his pioneer hospital. An interesting dispute in the affairs of the Hospital, in which Protheroe Smith clashed with the staff, is reported in the *Medical Times and Gazette*, 1874, 1, 374, 438, and in the *British Medical Journal*, 1874, 1, 284, 325, 330, 497, 688, 726.
- 9 Obituary, *Lancet*, 1889, 1, 770.
- 10 Snow, J., *Lancet*, 1847, 1, 228.
- 11 Latham, E., *Medical Times and Gazette*, 1847, 16, 96.
- 12 Smith, P., *Lancet*, 1847, 1, 452.
- 13 Gardner, J. (1804-80) translated and edited J. von Liebig's *Familiar Letters on Chemistry*, London, Taylor & Walton, 1843-4, and was a prime figure in the founding of the Royal College of Chemistry in 1844. He wrote several times on ether, in particular an article entitled "On ether-vapour, its medical and surgical uses," *Lancet*, 1847, 1, 349, 431.
- 14 Osler, Sir W., *Bibliotheca Osleriana*, p. 149. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1929.
- 15 Obituary, *British Medical Journal*, 1899, 1, 1311.
- 16 Munksgaard, E., Ed. *Hans Christian Andersen's Visits to Charles Dickens as described in his Letters*. Copenhagen, Munksgaard, 1937.
- 17 Crawford, F., Ed. *Hans Christian Andersen's Correspondence with the late Grand-Duke of Saxe-Weimar, Charles Dickens, etc.* London, Dean & Son, 1891.
- 18 I am indebted for these bare details of Andersen's stay in Scotland to a short article by W. M. Parker contributed to the *Evening Dispatch* of 8 September 1943. ("The amiable Dane: Hans Andersen's Visit to Scotland".) This appears to be all that is written on the subject. It was discovered for me by Miss M. Deas of the National Library of Scotland. A readable biography of Andersen is S. Torvig's *Life of Hans Christian Andersen* published by Macmillan, London, in 1933.
- 19 Simpson's style at table was well calculated to thaw the chilliest of guests and to inspire camaraderie where none previously existed: "Lords and Commons rub shoulders at his table; the salt of the earth sit down side by side with the savourless; tweed jostles broadcloth; the town-bred Briton looks askance at his country-bred compatriot, and both unconsciously shudder at the Briton with no breeding at all. In one room are assembled together the American of bluest blood; the Yankee bagman; the slave-owning Southerner, and even the man of colour hateful to both alike. . . . In a few minutes, under the genial influence of his presence, all tongues are set a-wagging". (see H. L. Gordon's *Sir James Young Simpson and Chloroform (1811-70)*, p. 82. London, T. Fisher Unwin, 1897.

The Eternal Triangle

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I have been struck so often lately by the eagerness with which many of my nursing colleagues in hospital look forward to their retirement that I began to wonder why this is so. This eagerness to lay down arms seems to me to be a new development—it is not so long since I was listening to my seniors describing their dread of retirement and wondering how they would occupy their time. What forces have wrought such changes in senior nurses? Surely the very same ones which, directly or indirectly, create such havoc in the ranks of their juniors and which are demonstrated by high wastage rates and steadily diminishing numbers of new recruits. And these forces are fatigue, frustration, disappointment, disillusionment, and despair. Fatigue from long working hours combined with the frustration of knowing that patients are often inadequately cared for and student nurses inadequately taught; the disappointment and disillusionment which comes from lack of support from colleagues; and, finally, despair of finding a remedy for the ills which beset our profession at the present time.

We are agreed, I think, that our sorest and most serious affliction is, quite simply and in most situations, too much work for too few hands. Hard work well done is enjoyable if in the doing the patient receives the care he deserves and the student or pupil nurse the teaching she requires, but all too often these objectives are out of our reach because of chronic and insurmountable staff shortage.

Deterioration in Relationships

But there is another reason for our despair, which, surprisingly enough, is never listed among the causes of dissatisfaction with nursing as a profession, and that is the change that has taken place in our relationships with doctors and with hospital administrators. This change is clearly demonstrated by the fact that the recent "Raise the Roof" campaign for improved salaries for nurses was very poorly supported by doctors, and by administrators not at all. The fact is that we no longer enjoy the support of our fellow workers in medicine and in administration, and all too often we get the impression that not only do they lack appreciation of our difficulties but they just do not want to know.

A consultant surgeon once told me he "couldn't understand this staff shortage" and that, moreover, he was "tired of hearing about it." But he will have to understand it, and he will have to hear about it, and, what is more, he will have to help us to do something about it if his patients are to receive adequate nursing care in the future. I have also been told, by an administrator, "I cannot pour any more money into nursing," yet what does pouring money into nursing represent if not adequate day-to-day care for the sick of this country?

What has happened to those vital relationships with doctors and administrators without which we ourselves cannot function either effectively or happily? It is as if our "marriage" had failed and mutual trust, mutual respect, and mutual confidence had flown out of the window. Unfortunately, as in all

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