Medicine and Literature

On some medicoliterary alliances

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We study the past for its interest and in expectation of enlarging our understanding and increasing our powers of appreciation. Like all worthwhile achievement, appreciation requires practice. Long ago I wrote that some people were "in danger of arriving in paradise so unpractised in appreciation as to fail to recognise perfection." There is a great deal in the performance of doctors in the past and outside their own field of medicine to kindle our admiration and sharpen our appreciation. Doctors are well placed in the effort to restore sanity to our way of life, standing as they do at the focus of science and the humanities. In the modern way they exercise technical skills, employ knowledge of many branches of science, and manipulate elaborate and complex apparatus. At the same time, in traditional manner, they struggle to understand disease processes compounded of a tangled web of incitements and reactions while enjoying a privileged and highly personal acquaintance with the human predicament.

The harmonious association of art with science is an essential part of progress in understanding. We would make no headway if we had to rely solely on an aloof, impassive technology, for advance comes through flashes of artistic insight, which, when they impinge on prepared minds, may suddenly illuminate new corners of our understanding. A necessary part of progress is appreciation, recognition of the appropriate, the pertinent, the felicitous.

Historians who have tried to coerce the flowing sequence of events into defined systems and to persuade us of their periodicity in order to show pattern and meaning in the progress of human affairs have come up sharply against the wilful unpredictability of events and the capricious inconsequence of man. They are confronted by the irksome fact that history is about people and that the prodigality of genetic combination has seen to it that each one of us is unique. Thomas Carlyle said, "History is the essence of innumerable biographies." When we turn in appreciation to look at some unusual doctors from the past we can properly claim to be engaged in a study of history. Those of you who may have expressed regret for the loss of fine eccentrics from medicine, those unusual, strange, or even bizarre characters whom you knew in your youth, should hear what your own students have to say about you. That grand individual, Sir Clement Price Thomas, the 1961 Vicary lecturer, with whom for a while I so happily shared a joint consultation clinic, evoked the essence of medical education when he said to his registrar, "If you are not better than I am boy there is something wrong with both of us."

Today we are to consider some aspects of English literature by taking a brief look at just a few selected individuals, differing vastly

in nature and achievement, who shared our profession with that of letters. This small corner of our history and heritage is of special interest because medicine has produced more great writers than any other of what used to be called "the learned professions." The subject has been presented by many people, including Sir William Mitchell Banks in 1893,¹ Sampson Handley in 1913,² Thomas Monro in 1933,³ and A M Cooke in 1974.⁴ But perhaps the best known of these surveys was given by Lord Moynihan in his 1936 Linacre lecture, *Truants, The Story of Some who deserted Medicine yet Triumphed*, beautifully reproduced last year by the *British Medical Journal* under its new venture, the Keynes Press.⁵ Americans, more purposeful than we are in their pursuit of culture, have held a two day symposium at the University of Connecticut School of Medicine on physician writers, with 14 main speakers, four moderators, and 12 discussants. Permitted no such licence, I have had to restrain my enthusiasm, eliminate many of my favourite authors, and restrict my words of appreciation to short comments on a few examples chosen from the wealth of medicoliterary talent available.

The problem was to decide who to leave out. Foreign doctor writers had to go, even though it meant rejecting such figures as Paracelsus from Switzerland, François Rabelais from France, Axel Munthe from Sweden, Oliver Wendell Holmes from America, and Anton Chekhov from Russia. Chekhov's comment on his two professions, however, may be allowed to speak for many of the doctor writers for he said:

"Medicine is my lawful wife and literature my mistress. When I get tired of one I spend the night with the other. Though it's disorderly, it's not dull, and, besides neither of them loses anything from my infidelity. If I did not have my medical work it would be hard to give my thought and liberty of spirit to literature."

Even when the foreigners have gone, a host of possibilities remain from Sir Thomas Browne through many poets such as Mark Akenside, George Crabbe, and Robert Bridges to those who found other literary fame—for example, Conan Doyle, Austin Freeman, Somerset Maugham, or Helen Ashton. The medical best seller of them all, if we exclude St Luke, is Peter Mark Roget, whose *Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases* had sold over 21 million copies before the new edition found its way into the 1983 best sellers list. The last to be rejected were the living doctor writers, but I should remind you that the present chairman of the Poetry Society is a doctor, a doctor was the first to win the Graham Green Triple Award, and one of the most highly praised first novels published this year was written by a doctor.

Dr William Denton, 1605-91

Let me start with a genial seventeenth century gentleman, less well known than the others that I have chosen. Dr William Denton was surgeon to Charles I and Charles II. His portrait hangs in Claydon House, the home of the Verney family.

William Denton was a busy, successful London doctor of whom it was said that he was offered "a great deale of money to goe but 50 miles out of towne." Doctor Denton wrote on politics and religious toleration in an admirable prose style, but the best known of his writings today are his

A shortened version of the Thomas Vicary Lecture delivered on 31 October 1984 before the Royal College of Surgeons of England and the Worshipful Company of Barbers of London, and containing extracts from a forthcoming book, *This Idle Trade*.

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letters, preserved in the Verney family papers, which contain over 30 000 items. Some 10 000 of them are letters, forming a treasure house of intimate, private correspondence providing an unparalleled glimpse of the social scene in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Extracts from the Verney papers were first published in 1892 by Lady Verney who was the sister of Florence Nightingale. Their father, William

FIG 1—Dr William Denton. Reproduced by permission of Sir Ralph Verney.

Nightingale, a wealthy landowner with ideas on women's education in advance of his time, had taught his daughters Latin, Greek, Italian, philosophy, history, mathematics, and writing. The dear doctor's letters surpass all others in the Verney papers in vivacity and natural good humour. His last letter, written in 1691, was signed "Yours body and bones, Wm D." His comments on affairs over four reigns and the commonwealth are pungent, humorous, and revealing but, as so often happens with correspondence, being a personal affair addressed to an understanding audience of one, it is the writer, unaffected by any reason to dissemble, who comes to life. The doctor shows himself as a shrewd, bustling, infinitely kindhearted man to whom everyone turned in time of trouble for instant aid and comfort, and who was often so called on for indeed he lived in troubled times. I have only come across one occasion when he demurred, saying "I will not teach my grandam to shoe goslings."

Doctor Denton was the youngest son of Sir Thomas Denton of Hillesden in Buckinghamshire. There were 13 in the family, his mother Susan was a Temple from Stowe. So vast were their families and so tenacious of life that William Denton's grandmother, Lady Temple, lived to see 370 of her descendants. William's eldest sister, Margaret, married Sir Edmund Verney of Claydon House near by, uniting the two families. Their son Ralph, William Denton's nephew, became Sir Ralph Verney. He was only a few years younger than his uncle and they became lifelong friends.

The two great Buckinghamshire families of Dentons and Verneys were caught up in the Civil War. Ralph's father was soon to be killed at the battle of Edgehill carrying the Royal Standard. One of the attendants on the King that day was Dr William Harvey. In 1644 Doctor Denton's home at Hillesden was fortified under Colonel William Smith, but a large force of Oliver Cromwell's men appeared, the house was taken, 40 of the defenders were killed, the arsenal in the fine old church was captured, and the doctor's eldest brother, Sir Alexander Denton, sent to the tower where he died. Colonel Smith, who had married Sir Alexander's daughter, Margaret, was taken but escaped with the help of the Doctor's sister, Elizabeth Isham, and

Ralph Verney's sister, Susan. The doctor, commenting as usual, wrote, "Women were never soe useful as now."

In 1643 Ralph Verney was the only member of parliament to refuse to take the Covenant: the concessions made to the Scots were too much for him. Although he had never supported the Royalist cause, his estates were sequestered and he fled to exile in France. Ralph had four brothers living and six sisters to provide for until they could be married, so Dr Denton was left with serious problems to deal with out of his nephew's gravely diminished estate. He bustled about arranging the family's affairs and dealing with Ralph's brother Tom, the black sheep of the family who was "in danger of hanging in Paris and of the pillory in London." When one of the younger sisters became pregnant she was kept in secret in the doctor's house until the offending Robert Lloyd could be induced to marry her. This was one of the doctor's successes for the pair of them lived happily together until her death. With the help of Ralph's admirable wife, Mary, the doctor eventually secured the return of Ralph's inheritance.

The doctor himself became a member of parliament for a while and when Ralph wrote expressing surprise that he had made a speech replied in his usual way, "Soft Sir Soft, It is not for Plebians to know why we made our learned speech in the House." The doctor's revealing comments continued into the new reigns. His writings about the plague and the fire are of special interest, and the *Verney memoirs* reported: "Dr Denton is much exercised, the city is a desert, the physicians who practised there are flocking westward, where they find so many more of their craft bereft of patients, that they fear they shall be reduced to bleeding one another."

The doctor died aged 86 and Ralph was with him at the end. He lies with his ancestors in Hillesden church, behind the old oak door still to be seen pitted with the bullets fired from the muskets of Cromwell's army.

Dr John Arbuthnot, 1667-1735

While a peaceful revolution was bringing William and Mary to the throne in 1689, a minister of the kirk in Scotland was losing his living for refusing to conform to the presbyterian system. One of his sons had fought for James II

FIG 2—John Arbuthnot by William Robinson. Reproduced by permission of the National Gallery of Scotland.

at Killiecrankie, that famous victory of no avail, and escaped to continue the Jacobite struggle as an influential banker in Rouen. The other son, John Arbuthnot, became a teacher of mathematics, wrote a book on the laws of chance, studied medicine in Aberdeen, went to London, became a fellow of the Royal Society, a friend of Isaac Newton and of Sir Christopher Wren,

was physician to Queen Anne, Harverian orator, and, as if that was not enough, helped Pope to write the text for Handel's oratorio, *Esther*.

John Arbuthnot was one of the Scriblerians, the famous group of satirists, which included Swift, Pope, Harley Earl of Oxford, Gay of *The Beggars' Opera*, and the poet, Parnell. It was Arbuthnot's allegory, *Law is a Bottomless Pit*, which introduced the character John Bull: an honest, choleric, bold, short tempered man, susceptible to flattery, who became the pattern Englishman. Arbuthnot wrote *The Art of Political Lying*, defined as "the art of convincing the people of salutary falsehoods for some good end." He discussed the question of whether a lie is best contradicted by truth or by another lie and favoured counteracting one lie with another holding the view that there was "a great propensity to believe lies in the generality of mankind."

When the College of Physicians applied to parliament to prevent the apothecaries dispensing without a prescription Arbuthnot wrote a satire on the special pleading to which we have become so accustomed today, representing the undertakers' opposition to the proposal. He urged that they would be seriously injured by the decrease in the number of deaths that would result.

The greatest of Pope's epistles was the one that he wrote to Arbuthnot. Pope's reputation has had its ups and downs but his elegance, perception, quotability, and style set a standard unsurpassed in his own transcendent manner. Perhaps no doctor has received such a well remembered, poetic tribute as Arbuthnot when Pope wrote:

"Friend to my life (which did not you prolong,
The World had wanted many an idle song.)"

John Arbuthnot died in February 1735 and was buried in St James's, Piccadilly, where a remarkable collection of famous doctors are interred: Thomas Sydenham, Mark Akenside, William Hunter, Sir Richard Croft, Richard Bright, and Sir William Bowman.

Dr Tobias Smollett, 1721-71

Tobias Smollett was born when Queen Anne was dead and George I was on the throne. He was not a great success as a doctor and applied for service in the navy. The account of his examination by the Barber Surgeons for naval medical service in 1739 is told in his novel *Roderick Random* and was presented, rather more accurately, in 1957 by Jessie Dobson, archivist to the Company of Barbers, curator of the Hunterian Museum, and 1963 Vicary lecturer.⁶ The examiners were Sir William Petty, the Master from the London Hospital, Claudius Amyard of St George's, and James Ferne and William Cheselden of St Thomas's. The story, for all its extravagance, has a vaguely familiar ring. A crowd of wild eyed, tremulous youths besieged each candidate as he emerged to hear what he had been asked and how he had answered. Then came Smollett's turn. Entering in terror he was promptly attacked by William Petty for his presumption in presenting himself to them with so little experience. Cheselden put him slightly more at ease by trying to find out what he knew, but then a joker asked him how he would treat a man who had had his head shot off. Smollett, gaining in confidence, replied, with a fine show of humility, that he had no knowledge of any cure being proposed for such a condition. The examiners then fell into an argument among themselves over the treatment of wounds of the intestine. The demand for naval surgeons was so great, however, that there was no chance that Smollett would fail. He sailed to the Caribbean as surgeon's mate, was present at the attack on Cartagena in 1741, married a creole beauty, and returned to translate Don Quixote, be imprisoned for libel, launch violent satirical attacks on men and government, and write a history of England and a series of remarkable novels.

A favourite Smollett story was told by his friend, Alexander Carlyle. They were together in a coffee house in Cockspur Street when the news of the crushing defeat of Prince Charles at Culloden came through to London. They set off for Smollett's home through a riotous mob celebrating the victory and letting off squibs. Careful not to speak to each other for fear that their accents would betray them as Scots, they put their wigs in their pockets, drew their swords, and walked by the narrow lanes to Smollett's consulting room in Downing Street. The news of Culloden caused a great stir in London and the picture of two doctors escaping from the mob, wig in pocket, sword in hand, in the year in which the Company of Surgeons separated from the Barber Surgeons, has the effect of bringing history suddenly to light. Smollett was, in fact, no Jacobite but he wrote, in horror, his best known poem, *The Tears of Scotland*, about the atrocities committed by "Butcher" Cumberland after Culloden.

"Yet, when the rage of battle ceas'd
The Victor's soul was not appeas'd;
The naked and forlorn must feel
Devouring flames, and murd'ring steel!"

Throughout his turbulent life his wife from the Caribbean was by his side and it is said that his last simple, reassuring words spoken to her were, "All is well, my dear."

FIG 3—Tobias Smollett. Reproduced by permission of the National Portrait Gallery.

Dr Oliver Goldsmith, 1730-74

Smollett was 9 years old when Oliver Goldsmith was born and died three years before him. Goldsmith was an oddity, hopelessly irresponsible but at the same time a most attractive character and an immensely talented artist. He was a failure as a doctor but after many struggles has remained down the years a glorious success as a writer. Thackeray wrote of him, "to be the most loved of English writers, what a title that is for a man." Oliver Gogarty called him "the gentle Irish virgil." Goldsmith was ugly and scarred by smallpox so he wore the brightest coloured clothes; he failed to shine in intellectual company so he became boastful; he was nearly always broke so he sponged on others; he had the sharpest insight into the virtues and vices of his friends and may well have seen through himself. One of the most revealing and woefully funny stories about Goldsmith is his reaction on being told that the new comedy by Hugh Kelly was doing better business in the theatre than his own play. Looking closely at himself in a mirror he was heard to say, "A handsomer fellow than Kelly however."

Goldsmith was one of the founder members of "The Club," with Samuel Johnson, Edmund Burke, David Garrick, Joshua Reynolds, and others, and was taking the chair when James Boswell was proposed for membership. He understood Johnson of whom he said, "If he were to write a fable of little fishes he would make them speak like great whales." More fortunately, Johnson understood Goldsmith's exaggerations and boastful manner in the wrong company and explained to his friends that he had to write to be fully appreciated. There is a pleasant tale about them told by Johnson but recounted inevitably in Boswell's words:

"I received one morning a message from poor Goldsmith that he was in great distress, and as it was not in his power to come to me, begging that I should come to him as soon as possible. I sent him a guinea, and promised to come to him directly. I accordingly went as soon as I was drest, and found that his landlady had arrested him for his rent, at which he was in a violent passion. I perceived that he had already changed my guinea and had got a bottle of Madeira and a glass before him. I put the cork in the bottle, desired he would be calm, and began to talk to him of the means by which he might

be extricated. He then told me that he had a novel ready for the press, which he produced to me. I looked into it, and having gone to a bookseller, sold it for sixty pounds. I brought Goldsmith the money, and he discharged his rent, not without rating his landlady in a high tone for having used him so ill."

Naturally, this delightful tale has become known as "the bottle of Madeira story," but it deserves a further title because it tells how Samuel Johnson was the first person to read and appreciate *The Vicar of Wakefield*.

FIG 4—Oliver Goldsmith. Engraved by W H Mote from a painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds.

Dr John Keats, 1795-1821

John Keats was born 21 years after Goldsmith's death, just over half way through the long reign of George III. Never more than a youth, he died at 26, having crammed into his brief adult life over five years of medical study and one of desperate illness as well as all the development and achievement of his literary career. We are bound to ponder on what we must have missed. I am going to refer only to the interesting possibility of his connection with this royal college and to his final illness.

Nothing was known of the family of Keats's father, Thomas, except that a relation called Elizabeth Keats took over the temporary management of his children at a time of crisis. In later life members of the family and friends remembered hearing that Thomas Keats had come from the west country, possibly Cornwall or Devon. Robert Gittings, in his admirable biography, reported some interesting research. No baptismal record of a Thomas Keats in 1773 or 1774 could be found in any parish in Cornwall or Devon. Interest was aroused, however, by the family of Dr William Keate born in 1708 or 1709 who practised in Wells in Somerset, retired to Reading, and died there in 1790. No strict distinction was drawn between the family names with or without the final "s," one changed readily into the other by carelessness or the addition of the possessive. Dr Keate's son, Thomas, who was trained at St George's and who was Master of the Company of Surgeons in 1802, 1809, and 1818, was described as a small, quick tempered man, with reddish hair, a long straight nose and a long upper lip, a description that might well be of John Keats himself. Thomas's nephew, Robert Keate, was president of the Royal College of Surgeons in 1831 and 1839, a square, compact, quick tempered man whose brother John was the diminutive headmaster of Eton with reddish hair who once flogged 80 boys at a session. The Reading connection aroused a special interest because a record was found there of a Thomas Keats, the son of Thomas and Elizabeth, baptised in 1773, the only Thomas Keats known to have been born in the right year and with a close relative named Elizabeth. There seemed to be some confirmation of a

possible relationship in the strong temperamental and physical resemblance between John Keats, his father Thomas, and the medical family of Keate from Somerset, which might possibly have had an influence on John Keats's choice of profession and on the special treatment he received when starting at Guy's Hospital.

The story of Keats's death in Rome has often been told, but Lord Brock wrote of the occasion with special interest and with a fine perception of the role played by Joseph Severn, the painter, who went with him at great personal sacrifice.⁷ Keats died in Rome in a house at the bottom of the Spanish Steps, where rooms had been secured for him by Dr (later Sir) James Clark, Queen Victoria's physician.

Joseph Severn wrote when Keats was dying:

"I have nothing to break this dreadful solitude but letters. Day after day, night after night, here I am by our poor dying friend. My spirits, my intellect, and my health are breaking down. I can get no one to change with me—no one to relieve me. All run away, and even if they did not Keats would not do without me."

Keats had contracted pulmonary tuberculosis while nursing his dying brother, Tom, and, to remind us that reaction and resistance to infection form half the story of tuberculosis, Joseph Severn lived on to be 86. Severn returned to Rome as British consul and died there, being buried in the old Protestant cemetery beside Keats to whom he had been devoted friend and death bed companion 58 years before.

FIG 5—John Keats by Joseph Severn.

Dr Charles Lever, 1806-72; Dr William Wilde, 1815-76; and Dr Oliver Gogarty, 1878-1957

There is a particular felicity in the way in which the Irish use language; the word plays a most important part in their culture. The Irish buy more books per head of the population than occurs in any other English speaking country. The three Irish doctor writers I have chosen are Charles Lever, William Wilde, and Oliver St John Gogarty.

Lever and Wilde were lifelong friends. Lever wrote more than 30 novels in 35 years from *The Confessions of Harry Lorrequer* to *Lord Kilgobbin*. He practised medicine in Ireland with distinction through a cholera epidemic, and then in Brussels where he attended aristocrats and diplomats, was acquainted with King Leopold, and charged five times the fees of the local practitioners. As a student in Germany he had been an attendant at a duel. In Canada he had become a member of a Red Indian tribe and escaped death by tomahawk for desertion when he wished to leave, arriving in

Quebec in moccasins and head feathers. In his early days he wrote Dublin ballads and sang them in the street for ha'pence. One of these ended:

"Wid charmin' pisintry upon a fruitful sod,
Fightin' like devils for conciliation,
An' hating' each other for the love of God."

Lever perpetrated elaborate hoaxes, was a notable raconteur, a graceful dancer, a proficient fencer, and a great lover of horses. He tried to explain Ireland to Garibaldi. He married the sweetheart of his schooldays and lived happily with her until his death; they had made their home in Florence for more than 20 years. To help his finances he was made consul in Trieste. When appointing him Lord Derby said "Here is £600 a year for doing nothing and you, Lever, are the very man to do it."

Lever, Dickens, Trollope, and George Eliot, with Thackeray some way behind, were the most popular novelists of their day. Dickens and Lever shared Hablôt Brown, better known as "Phiz," as their illustrator. The court scene in Lever's *Tom Burke of Ours*, in which the cunning old Darby McKeon in the witness chair turns the whole court in Tom's favour as he is examined by the prosecuting counsel, was written before, and has much in common with, the memorable Dickens's scene in which Sam Weller, at Mr Pickwick's trial, deals with Sergeant Buzfuz. The "Phiz" drawings of these two court scenes by famous contemporary writers make a delightful pair. Lever's first school in Dublin was kept by Mr Ford who regularly flogged his pupils until one day an enraged father turned on him, as Nicholas Nickleby was to turn on Wackford Squeers a few years later, and beat him with such violence that he fled yelling into the street.

Wilde's successes and problems

William Wilde was far more famous as a doctor than Charles Lever. He had a good schooling and the advantage of some further education from one Paddy Walsh who, with one leg shorter than the other, was a fiddler, singer, fisherman, expert shot, and "understood distillin." Wilde's distinguished surgical career is well known, he created St Mark's Ophthalmic Hospital in Dublin on the lines of Moorfields, ran the country's medical census, was a notable antiquarian, and a writer of books on archaeology and the beauties of the countryside as well as *Aural Surgery*. Students came to his hospital from all over the world. He married Jane Francesca Elgee who wrote poetry under the name of Speranza and fiercely nationalistic articles for *The Nation* under the name of John Fenshaw Ellis.

Wilde's joy, or if you prefer, Wilde's problem, was women. He had three illegitimate children before his marriage and three legitimate children after it. His two illegitimate daughters died tragically at a ball aged 21 and 23 when the crinoline of one caught the fire as she danced round and the other was enveloped in flames as she tried to save her. Wilde's tragedy came through Mary Travers, the neurotic daughter of the professor of medical jurisprudence, who came to him as a patient aged 19. She became his mistress, but when he tried to discard her she took her revenge, creating a public scandal and forcing him to take action against her in the courts where she claimed that she had been seduced, first charging him with using chloroform, then changing her accusation to nearly choking her—a dramatic, variable, improbable story, which was not really believed but still won her the case, though she was only awarded a farthing damages. Wilde never recovered. Henry Wilson, his illegitimate son, also a surgeon, took over St Mark's Hospital and Wilde spent much of his time at his country house writing.

When Wilde lay dying in 1876 he was visited each day by a mysterious woman, dressed in black and closely veiled, who mounted to his room, unhindered by his wife, to sit at the end of the bed without speaking and without raising her veil. At his funeral all was forgiven; the great concourse that followed the cortège included the president and members of the council of the Royal Irish Academy.

Sir William Wilde never knew much about his famous son's triumphs and disasters. Oscar was but 22 when his father died,

which was two years before he won the Newdigate Prize for poetry at Oxford. One of the saddest commentaries on Oscar's tragedy is the story of his two boys sent to school under an assumed name, bullied and afraid, who found to their horror that their secret might be betrayed by their old name tapes, still sewn to their white flannels. What would their famous grandfather, Sir William, have thought had he known that one day his grandsons would be found in uncomprehending shame, frantically hacking away with a penknife to remove from their clothing the illustrious name of Wilde?

The third Irish medical writer chosen for this review is Oliver Gogarty, surgeon, author, aviator, master of repartee, writer of some lovely poetry, friend and supporter of Arthur Griffith and of

FIG 6—Sir William Wilde. A lithograph by James Henry Lynch from a daguerrotype by L. Glukman.

Michael Collins, painted by Augustus John, Sir William Orpen, and Gerald Brockhurst. Our medical authors were certainly not dull or ordinary men. Gogarty, as a wild young man, shared a brief period of dissipation with James Joyce who used him as a model for Buck Mulligan in *Ulysses*. He was, however, to become an eminent surgeon and an Irish senator. Gogarty protected Michael Collins, only temporarily as it happened, when members of the Irish Republican Army came to his house looking for him, by covering him with a sheet and abusing the intruders for disturbing a surgeon at work on an operation. When he himself was kidnapped by armed men he escaped by a ruse in which he persuaded them to hold his overcoat while he dived into the freezing River Liffey under a hail of bullets. Gogarty vowed that he would give a present to the Liffey for saving his life and at a ceremony, duly photographed and attended by Yeats, he liberated a pair of swans on the river. He called a collection of his poems published in 1923 *An Offering of Swans*. Gogarty left Ireland in sadness, practised in London for a while, and settled in New York.

Gogarty's particular brand of humour has a special appeal. His bawdy limericks are classics of their kind, but he was a poet of real consequence of whom his friend Yeats said, "I think him one of the great lyric poets of our age." Yeats has been accused of overvaluing Gogarty's poetry, he included 17 of his verses in *The Oxford Book of*

Modern Verse, but one should be chary of dismissing Yeats's poetic judgment. One of Gogarty's poems ends like this:

"Beauty never comes on earth
But an equal Grief is born;
Hidden, maybe, in the dearth
Of the hours ere the morn;
Or that in her core are strife,
Gain of Love and loss of Life.

This is nothing new at all;
We have heard it all before;
Beauty one side of the Wall,
On the other side, the War.
Love and Death; and no denying
These things do not end by dying."

James Stephens told Gogarty that it was unlikely that he would be recognised as a poet as he should be until 50 years after he was dead. There are still 27 years to go. When young he had a great facility for light verse and parody, produced in profusion, scattered through his letters, and published wherever he could use them to raise some money. That he did not achieve more praise for his later work may be due to the oddity that people who become famous for their wit seldom acquire the highest regard of their contemporaries whether in art, administration, or scholarship. Sidney Smith asserted that he had sunk through his own levity whereas his theologian brother had risen by his gravity.

Those Gogarty sayings that stick in the mind have a little Irish twist to them such as, "There is nothing more sinister than the

humility of the mean." Of Sir Thornley-Stoker he said that he "always spoke of his fee as his 'honorarium' for who can pay a doctor all he owes?" Of Browning's obscurities Gogarty wrote, "When I read his translation of Aeschylus I find it very useful to have the Greek beside me so that I may find out what the English means." His comment on a man coming out of a pub consulting a compass (where else but in Dublin?) is typical, "He goes home by compass! He cannot trust the ebbing town." Let me close with one last quotation from this unusual surgeon whose prose as well as whose poetry is not as well known as it deserves to be. It takes an Irishman to have written:

"To be as magical as Life itself, and as irresponsible; to be lunatic enough to take the hard edge from knowledge, to be irrational enough to temper Justice with Mercy, and to be able to adjust oneself to the changes in intensity which the waxings and wanings of reality assume in the shimmerings of its cloud—this would be an ideal adjustment and a poetic opposition to outrageous Fortune."

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Quest for Quasimodo

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Perhaps the best known character in the whole of French literature is Quasimodo, the hunchback of Notre Dame. Even those who have never read Victor Hugo's book *Notre-Dame de Paris* must be familiar with the many famous cinematic portrayals of the character (fig 1). In his book Victor Hugo gives an unforgettable portrait of the misshapen bell ringer and his physical deformities: "that tetrahedral nose, that horseshoe mouth, of the tiny left eye, obstructed by a bushy red eyebrow, while the right eye had vanished entirely beneath an enormous wen, of those irregular teeth, notched here and there like castle battlements, of that horny lip on which a tooth encroached like an elephant's tusk, of that cleft chin . . . a huge head sprouting red hair; between the two shoulders an enormous hump, the repercussions of which were evident from the front; a system of thighs and legs so strangely warped that they met only at the knees and looked, from the front, like two scythe blades joined at the handle; broad feet and monstrous hands; and somehow, along with such deformity, an appearance of formidable energy, agility and courage."¹ This was the portrait Hugo painted of Quasimodo at the age of 19, during the election of the fools' pope. Elsewhere in the book he gives a description of Quasimodo as a 4 year old child: "a sort of hideous little monster, lame, one-eyed and misshapen, was dragging itself across the floor squealing."² Finally Victor Hugo describes his skeleton: "they noticed that its spinal column was

curved, that its head was between the shoulder blades and that one leg was shorter than the other."³

Von Recklinghausen's neurofibromatosis

Although *Notre-Dame de Paris* is a work of fiction, this careful and extensive description of both soft tissue and skeletal abnormalities

FIG 1—Lon Chaney as Quasimodo in silent film in 1923 of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.

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