Outside Medicine

John Coakley Lettsom

C. NEWMAN

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Great reforms are seldom implemented in the face of adverse public opinion, but they are by a minority of those in power with the support of public opinion. For this reason the men who influence public opinion may be more important in the eye of history than the handful of enthusiasts who get the credit for the great reforms. For instance, Francis Place, who organized the agitation in favour of the Reform Bill of 1832, was more important than the better-known politicians, who would never have passed it through both Houses without the enormous pressure from outside Parliament.

Humanitarian Spirit

One of the greatest reforms in history was the rise of the general humanitarian spirit in the nineteenth century, which changed the brutality of preceding and succeeding centuries to a short-lived but wonderful era of civilization. This era of humanity, kindness, consideration, and fair play was not the result of the French Revolution, which was concerned only with Liberty in the nineteenth and with Equality in the twentieth centuries (we have not yet reached the horrors of Big Fraternity), because it all started before 1789, though both revolutions were essentially liberal, bourgeois movements and both contributed to each other. Both probably depended a good deal on material prosperity. Sir Raymond Crawford used to say, "Have you ever noticed how nice people become when they become prosperous?" And peoples follow the same rule as people.

The humanitarian movement produced masses of legislation, but always after the evil had been perceived by public opinion and agitated against by private societies. The change in public opinion was the work of many enthusiasts, who in the early days, from the 1750s to the 1820s, were largely linked to the reforming churches, especially the Quakers, with Dr. Fothergill in the van and his disciple Lettsom as his efficient follower.

Lettsom was born in the Tortola Islands of the West Indies, of slave-owning planters. They, like many such, treated their slaves well (they were valuable property). It was Fothergill who showed Lettsom the fundamental evil of slavery, though the Quakers had at the time no objection to the system in spite of George Fox himself having opposed it. When Lettsom returned from qualifying in England in 1767, after his father's death, to settle his affairs, he freed all his slaves, a dramatic and quixotic action at the time. That was the beginning of his and the Quakers' anti-slavery agitation, which spread to the Clapham Sect and throughout the community, establishing the impossibility of slavery in England (Somerset's case, 1771). It led on

to the abolition of the slave trade in the Dominions in 1809 and of the whole institution of slavery in 1833. Lettsom's action was bread cast on the waters, because just before he died his youngest son died in Tortula a month after his marriage to a wealthy widow, and two months later she died also and left her estate of £10 000 a year and a thousand slaves not to her relatives but to Lettsom himself.

Dr. J. C. Lettsom. Reproduced by permission of the Royal College of Physicians of London.

Tea versus Alcohol

On his return to Europe Lettsom became a doctor of medicine at Leiden with a thesis on the virtues of tea, which started him on the propaganda of tea as a substitute for alcohol, then at its height as a public menace. This was an early (1769) attempt to attack excessive drinking by the method which in the end succeeded. For a long while most of the attempts were by suppressive legislation. The alternative constructive attempts by the Quaker advocacy of cocoa, and the Drinking Fountain Association's provision of clean water everywhere for the thirsty (1859), failed to compete with the public house. The cigar divans of the end of the century provided comfort, coffee, and conversation for the richer, but it was the universal tea rooms which in an era of increasing alternative amusements stemmed universal over-drinking.

Lettsom's next act of philanthropy was the founding, with

Dr. Coggan and Dr. Hawes, of the Royal Humane Society for the resuscitation of the apparently drowned. The first successful effort had been published by Dr. Fothergill in 1744. A doctor in Scotland had done it by the "kiss of life" method about 300 years before his time. Lettson's society was formed in 1774, against opposition.

Another's of Lettson's recurring interests was the prevention of smallpox among the poor. Inoculation with real smallpox offered some hope for the rich, who could be isolated during the infection, but it was dangerous to the poor, who could not be isolated and risked actually starting epidemics. Lettson entered the bitter controversy about this, and after Jenner's success with cowpox weighed in as a champion of the new method, and did great work in ensuring its ultimate success. Lettson's interest was not so much that of a doctor preventing sickness as of a man helping his fellow men. It was all part of his constant effort to help anything which would benefit mankind at large.

Prison Reform

Lettson was largely responsible for the ultimate reform of prisons. The trouble was that prisons were run, not by the community but by the jailers, who had to recoup themselves from the prisoners by extracting fees for admission and discharge, rent for rooms, and payment for everything. The results were appalling. The rich could get in prison any luxury they wanted, but the poor shivered and starved. John Howard had been working for prison reform from 1773 to his death in 1790, but though he persuaded the authorities to pass Acts abolishing jailers' fees the public did not see why they should pay for malefactors, and the law was generally evaded until public opinion could be brought to bear. Success was ultimately due to the propaganda of others, especially Lettson and James Neild. Lettson was involved because as physician to the Aldersgate Street Dispensary the Wood Street Compter came under his observation, and he attended Lord George Gordon in 1793 when he was imprisoned (in 1788), not over the Gordon riots—he had been acquitted for that—but for libelling Marie Antoinette. He was insane and a pauper, and dying of typhus;

it must have been an impressive combination of horrors. Neild was an inveterate prison reformer, more active possibly than Lettson, Howard, or Elizabeth Fry, but a very unpleasant man. His and Lettson's "Seventy-seven Letters" to the *Gentleman's Magazine*, the proprietor of which was one of Lettson's best friends, had a wide dissemination (Johnson said it had a sale of ten thousand copies) and an eager and interested public. It was these letters which first roused public feeling.

Lettson suffered a good deal of ridicule over the mangel-wurzel, which he found would produce 50 lb of root per square yard and would solve the problem of the winter food supply for cattle. He characteristically gave away seed to anyone in return for a subscription to the Royal Humane Society or the Society for Prisoners with Small Debts, but there was little demand. When Coke of Norfolk was converted, the world took notice.

Sunshine and Air

The foundation of the Royal Sea-Bathing Hospital in 1791 was an attempt to make the new ideas of Dr. Russell of Brighton available to the poor, and was primarily a medical matter. But though the open-air treatment of tuberculosis became very popular (though it had no effect on the overall mortality of the disease) the effect of the movement was ultimately to promulgate the fashion for sea bathing, sun bathing, fresh air outdoors and indoors, looser and lighter clothes, and a whole new attitude in society which has made the modern world so different from the stuffy world of our great-grandfathers—a considerable contribution to modern amenities in general.

Everything Lettson was concerned with seems to have been with philanthropy in view, and this is confirmed by the correspondence preserved at the Medical Society of London. It is astonishing how much of it is about charitable objects. And he was the willing victim of pestilential "do-gooders" of every kind, never failing to do his best for the most tiresome and outrageous of pleas. There is no need to detail them here: they are shortly to be published by the society, but it would be hard to find anyone on record who so devoted his whole life, with sound and lasting effects, to what he could do himself, and stimulate public opinion to do, for the good of his fellow men.

Letter from . . . Chicago

Foreign Visitors

GEORGE DUNEA

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Last year a kangaroo unexpectedly appeared in several Chicago suburbs, apparently in direct view of reliable observers, some of them policemen. Soon afterwards the animal turned up at a Bears's football team practice ninety miles to the east in Indiana. At that time it was said that it had travelled by leaping on to the back of an eastbound Illinois Central train.

For two weeks the leaping marsupial seems to have been lost, but the story picks up again at Christmas time, when a fisherman saw a kangaroo swimming in the ocean three kilometres off the southeast coast of Australia. Hauled aboard the fisherman's boat, the kangaroo promptly fell asleep, obviously tired out by a long journey. The story attracted attention in Chicago and it was soon postulated that the kangaroo had been brought to this country illegally, and that it was on its way home for Christmas, having escaped from its owner after growing to adulthood.

The saga of the wandering marsupial might have died there, but on the second day of Christmas the kangaroo was reported back in Chicago sitting in a snowmobile and waiting for a take off, except there was no snow. Doubting Thomases notwithstanding, the story of the kangaroo has become immortal, and

Cook County Hospital, Chicago, Illinois, U.S.A.
GEORGE DUNEA, M.B., M.R.C.P., Consultant Physician