

Dublin Masters of Clinical Expression

I.—JOHN CHEYNE (1777-1836)

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"In a greatly celebrated university, in which the examination for a fellowship requires a length and closeness of application which is sufficient to impair the power of most minds, it has been observed that many of the fellows, after their election have lost all their original relish for learning and have become men of little performance, although originally of great promise."

John Cheyne, the son of a doctor was born in 1777 in Leith. His mother was according to her son, "an ambitious woman of honourable principles, constantly stimulating her children to exertion, and intently occupied with their advancement in life." Cheyne spent his early boyhood at the Grammar School in Leith and went to the High School of Edinburgh in his tenth year, where he tells us he was very unhappy, being unable to keep up with his classmates, and where the head master "would flog a whole form till he became pale and breathless and unable to proceed," the paroxysm ending in "a conviction that he was the most learned, wise, and virtuous man of his age." After leaving school he was placed under the care of a clergyman of the Episcopal Church of Scotland, who although a good scholar was according to his pupil "an idle and dissipated man." In his thirteenth year Cheyne began attending his father's poor patients, his role being to see "that they were supplied with medicines, to bleed them, to dress their wounds, and report upon their condition." He entered the University of Edinburgh to attend medical lectures at the early age of 15 but although this was below the minimum age he tells us that in "this premature commencement . . . there was nothing apparently incongruous as I had then attained full growth and had the appearance of a young man of eighteen or nineteen." He graduated with an M.D. in 1795 at the age of 18 years.

His first appointment was that of assistant surgeon of the Royal Regiment of Artillery at

Woolwich, with which he served in various parts of England until the end of 1797. He then accompanied a brigade of horse artillery to Ireland and was present at the abortive insurrection at Vinegar Hill in 1798. Cheyne did not regard his career in the army as satisfactory; he tells us that his time "was spent in shooting, playing billiards, reading such books as the circulating library supplied, and in complete dissipation of time." In fact, so successful was he in the pursuit of pleasure that he "learned nothing but ease and propriety of behaviour." At last, he decided that a move was necessary and in 1799 he returned to Scotland, where he was given charge of a small hospital and once again assisted his father in practice. He became friendly with Charles Bell, whose especial interest was pathology and under his guidance Cheyne performed autopsies and studied pathology. Determined to succeed, Cheyne turned his attention to successful members of the profession so that he might "become acquainted with the characters of those who moved in the highest rank in the profession, and to discover the causes of their success"; and he ascertained that, "although a man might acquire popularity by various means, he could not reckon upon preserving public favour unless he possessed the respect of his own profession." He was constantly seeking an opening where he would have the opportunity of distinguishing himself rather than "securing a large income" and in 1809 we find him "as a candidate for public favour in Dublin . . . neither expecting nor indeed wish-

ing for rapid advancement; what is easily acquired is little valued and not infrequently soon lost . . .”

He was married at this time but we know nothing of his family. Practice was slow at first and his friends urged him to move amongst the elite and to entertain extravagantly, but neither ploy was successful and he resolved never “to repeat the injudicious experiment.” In 1811, he was appointed Physician to the Meath Hospital and two years later he became Professor of Physic at the College of Surgeons. His lectures were concerned mainly with military disease and were very popular with those attached to the army in Ireland. In 1815 he was appointed Physician to the House of Industry, where by virtue of “experienced and well-trained sick-nurses, who allowed nothing to escape their observation,” he was able to complete his daily visit in “little more than an hour.”

Cheyne’s interest was diseases of childhood and many of his publications deal with paediatric topics. He published a number of papers on croup and respiratory disease in children. In 1819 he published a monograph entitled *Essays on Hydrocephalus Acutus: or Water on the Brain* in which he reviews the literature on the subject and presents twenty cases with pathological details. He concludes that hydrocephalus “appears to consist in a diseased action of a peculiar kind, but of what kind we can as little explain as we can the nature of the scrofulous or syphilitic action. Our object, therefore, here, as in these diseases, is to register and arrange every essential fact and never to relax in our inquiry, until by this induction we shall arrive at a successful method of practice.” In such reasoning lay the success of the great nineteenth century physicians. The therapeutic possibilities were limited, the mainstay of treatment being bronchotomy, bleeding from the jugular vein and the use of emetics and calomel. In 1821 he published an *Account of the Rise, Progress and Decline of the Fever lately Epidemical in Ireland*; this consisted of reports on fever from different physicians in the country.

The work by which his name is now remembered appeared in the Dublin Hospital Reports of 1818—*A case of Apoplexy, in which the fleshy part of the Heart was converted into Fat*. In essence this is a case report of a sixty year old man “of a sanguine temperament, circular chest, and full habit of body, [who] for years

had lived a very sedentary life while he indulged habitually in the luxuries of the table.” He developed dyspnoea and chest pain and on one occasion following a severe fit of coughing, “fell from his chair insensible”, but the following day “his understanding was unimpaired, his recollection restored”. Cheyne notes that at all times the “pulse was extremely irregular and unequal.” In the last period of his illness the only peculiarity was “in the state of the respiration; for several days his breathing was irregular; it would entirely cease for a quarter of a minute, then it would become perceptible, though very low, then by degrees it became heaving and quick, and then it would gradu-



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ally cease again; this revolution in the state of his breathing occupied about a minute, during which there were about thirty acts of respiration.” Post-mortem examination revealed extreme fatty changes in the heart. This was the first concise account of the peculiar breathing which Stokes was later to describe in greater detail and now known as *Cheyne-Stokes respiration*. The condition had, however, been recognised by Hippocrates — “respiration throughout like that of a man recollecting himself, and rare, and large . . .”. It is interesting that Cheyne’s patient also had syncopal attacks and although the pulse rate is not specifically mentioned, it was irregular, presumably because of atrial fibrillation and one

wonders if Cheyne's patient did not have intermittent heart block, a view that would appear to have been supported by the later papers of Adams and Stokes when referring to their well known syndrome.

It was not long before Cheyne had a flourishing practice and the principles which originally motivated him to leave the army and seek a more rewarding career appear to have suffered a reverse so that—"I therefore felt it necessary to resign my professorship at the College of Surgeons, as well as my charge of the Meath Hospital, that my private practice, which in 1816 yielded me £1,710 might not suffer by the extent of my official duties". Cheyne now applied for the post of Physician-General to the Army but such was the calibre of the applicants that the Lord Lieutenant diplomatically appointed a compromise candidate—a Dr. Percival—who had not even applied for the post. Percival accepted on the condition that Cheyne be appointed as his assistant and then promptly resigned, whereupon Cheyne was appointed his successor. Having thus achieved the highest medical rank in Ireland, Cheyne considered that he had reached the pinnacle of success—"as my practice yielded £5,000, which was about its annual average during the next ten years, I felt that I had fully attained the object of my ambition . . . I am convinced had my health permitted me, that I could have added £1,500 a year to my income."

Cheyne adhered to a number of rules in the conduct of practice, one of which was punctuality—"not much practised in Ireland." He never acquainted anyone, not even members of his family, with the names of his patients and he felt that "physicians are oftener deprived of the good-will of their patients by paying what are deemed unnecessary visits than by neglect." On the treatment of depression, he had this to say—"A popular physician with a composed yet decided and rather unyielding manner, to such a patient appears almost like a ministering angel. The most obvious directions appear like words of inspiration; the merest placebo that ever was struck upon an apothecary's file is a panacea, or is combined with consummate skill and restores health and enjoyment of life."

In 1825 his health began to deteriorate and he developed what he called "a species of nervous fever . . . a climateric disease". He became weak, depressed and anxious; he suffered from insomnia and in an attempt to

obtain repose, he developed the rather eccentric habit of moving from one bed to another during the course of a night, there being several beds in his room for this purpose. His sufferings were made the more intolerable by failing vision due to cataracts, which ultimately resulted in blindness.

In 1831 he retired to the village of Sherrington in England but "being of the opinion of those who think it better to wear out than to rust out," he undertook medical work among the villagers and wrote articles for the *Cyclo pedia of Practical Medicine*. He developed an intense and almost fanatical interest in religion. He wrote a book, which fortunately also contains his biography, entitled *Essays on Partial Derangement of the Mind*. Introducing the autobiographical sketch he modestly suggests that "a succinct account such as I am about to give of the life of a physician who, without much literary or general scientific information, attained confidence and consideration, may suggest useful hints to the junior members of the medical profession. . . ." He goes on in the book proper to discuss the relationship of madness to organic disease, religion and the Satanic influence, and his deep interest in religion—a preoccupation which increasingly dominated his later years—is readily apparent.

Cheyne died in 1836 and left instructions for his burial, which included the erection of a monument "for the benefit of the living, and not in honour of the dead"; this bore many quotations from the scripture and a number of exhortations to passers-by, all reflecting his later religious zeal—"Reader! the name, profession and age of him whose body lies beneath, are of little importance; but it may be of great importance to you to know that by the grace of God, he was brought to look to the Lord Jesus as the only Saviour of sinners and that this 'looking into Jesus' gave peace to his soul."

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