

Smith & J. D.

EULOGIUM

ON THE LATE

WRIGHT POST, M.D.

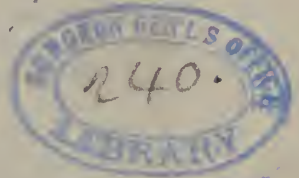
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MEDICAL SOCIETY

OF THE CITY AND COUNTY OF

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ON WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 8, 1828.

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PREFACE.

IN compliance with the request of the Medical Society, the following discourse was prepared and delivered. Unfortunately, however, it accorded so little in sentiment with those at whose desire it was pronounced, that at a recent meeting of the Society, instead of the proceedings which are customary on such occasions, a vote (in effect) of censure upon the author was proposed.*

The reader probably, the unprofessional reader certainly, will be at a loss to discover any thing in the author's performance to account for so unusual a circumstance. To that gentleman himself the event was not altogether unexpected, he having witnessed for some days the excitement which he had produced among his brethren of the profession. The first burst of that excitement, indeed, had placed the author precisely in the situation of a child, into whose hand a lighted torch having been incautiously put, he had thrust it into a heap of gunpowder—so unexpected was the result, and still so inexplicable was the occurrence of the explosion. The author in truth appears to himself devoid of some sixth sense with which others are endowed, so incapable is he of comprehending the emotions which he has roused. Entirely incapable, then, himself of divining the causes of the feelings which he had so unsuspectingly elicited, the author waited until the first ebullition had subsided, and then applied to those gentlemen with whom he almost uniformly acts and thinks to know wherein he had so egregiously erred. The following are all the particulars which were specified that are deserving of notice :

1st. The statement that surgery was in a more improved condition than medicine.

2d. The allegation that the surgeons had observed more strictly than the physicians the rules of philosophising in their attempts to advance their profession.

3d. The extravagance of the commendations bestowed upon Dr. Post.

Lastly, the doctrines now put forth being but a continua-

* It was not carried, being superseded by an adjournment.

tion of offensive opinions first announced at the opening of the College of Physicians in November last.*

Now nothing, the author is persuaded, would be easier than to show that in every thing which he has stated *the facts are with him*. He forbears, however, all argument on the subject, well knowing that, in the situation in which he is placed, time, and not logic, is the great and efficient power to confirm what is right, and reform what is wrong. To time, accordingly, he trusts, with the single remark, that in according to the wishes of the Medical Society to deliver an Eulogium upon Dr. Post his primary object was to oblige them, and he has only to lament that efforts thus intended should have been so signally frustrated.

In taking his final leave of this subject, the author would hint, but in all charity and good humor, that a proneness to seize and apply to ourselves allusions which in their nature are general, and an impatient sensitiveness of every thing which savors, however distantly, of reflection or reproach, will never be considered by mankind as the surest evidence of our own thorough conviction of the soundness of our principles and the justness of our pretensions. For himself, the author is so perfectly at his ease with respect to the intrinsic deserts of his profession, that he is ever ready to acknowledge what is wrong, nay, to laugh at what may be ridiculous, being well convinced that there is, in medicine and many of its practitioners, a redeeming power competent at all times to secure the esteem of the good—the confidence of the wise.

S PARK PLACE, Oct. 16, 1828.

* These "opinions" may be found in the New York Medical and Physical Journal, New Series, No. 2, p. 168. They are not, however, equally unpalatable to all the profession, as the following extract of a letter which was yesterday received from a distinguished professor of anatomy in our country will show :

"I beg you to accept my thanks for your excellent lecture published in the last number of the New York Medical and Physical Journal. I scarcely know how to express the pleasure I derived from the perusal of it. The reasoning is not only clear and conclusive, but overwhelming. To a visionary and loose thinker in medicine, its effect must be confounding. * * * I am circulating the lecture among my private class, some of whom are tinctured with BROUSSAISISM."

This letter is so complimentary, that it never should have been published but for the particular conjuncture at which it was received. J. A. S.

EULOGIUM

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It has not often happened, Mr. President, and Gentlemen of the Medical Society, that surviving friendship has been called upon to commemorate departed worth that was modest, quiet, and unobtrusive. For, in every age and in every country, the exalted in rank, and the daring in action, have exclusively received, whether living or dead, the admiration and applause of their fellow mortals. At particular times, indeed, and under extraordinary circumstances, some exceptions to the absolute universality of this remark may have occurred. Thus, during that most wonderful era of Grecian history which is destined, I apprehend, to stand for ever unrivalled in the annals of our race, philosophy and philosophers enjoyed a distinction which in no time to come can they again command. And at later periods, men who were willing to shed, or who did actually shed their blood for the faith

which they professed, obtained from their adherents the applauses which they so justly merited. But it was from their own immediate followers that these martyrs derived their honors; the mass of mankind still reserving their plaudits for kings, statesmen, and, above all, warriors.* Why these last should enjoy this preeminence would form a curious and, as far as my reading extends, an untouched subject of philosophical inquiry. But this is not the occasion for entering into such disquisitions. The fact is all that at present concerns us, and that I conceive to be as unquestionable as the sentiment on which it is founded is illusory, in the extravagance at least to which it is apt to be carried. That a just and frequently a very high reward should be extended to a successful military leader, is right and proper; but that a false and most mischievous importance

* Time, however, does speedy justice to those who have nothing but political eminence to distinguish them; the fame of such persons being as evanescent as it is undeserved. With the really great among writers, philosophers, and patriots, the case is reversed—the lapse of ages but extending and brightening their reputation. The number of these immortals, to be sure, is but small; mere rank, however, will not confer a seat among them; the names of emperors, &c., though chronicled, only slumbering in our books. Successful leaders of armies fare better, I acknowledge, though even Alexander must yield the palm to Aristotle, and the duke of Marlborough is altogether in the shade compared with Newton and Locke.

has been attached to feats in arms, is, I think, demonstrable. Let us hope, then, that this delusion, like so many others, will pass away, and that men will learn at length to appreciate as they should do those more humble pursuits by which good is conferred without the pomp of state, and, above all, without the miseries of war. Among these pursuits medicine must ever hold a high rank, and in that profession few persons in our country have filled so large a space as the late Dr. Wright Post. For twenty-seven years he was the leading practitioner in this city, and the history and character of a man who could for so long a period maintain such a station cannot be, and, as we shall soon see, is not devoid of interest, particularly to those who move in the path which he so successfully trod. I must premise, however, that of Dr. Post's early years my information is exceedingly scant, as I have been unable to procure many particulars of this portion of his life. The few which it has been in my power to collect, I will now detail.*

Dr. Post was born, I understand, near Hempstead, Long Island, about the year 1776, and was sent to a neighboring school. What pro-

* As soon as I determined to comply with the request of the Medical Society by delivering this Eulogium, I took measures to procure the necessary facts. Circumstances beyond my control foiled my efforts, and hence the meagreness of my narrative.

gress he made in his studies I do not know, but in 1782 he was a student of medicine with Dr. Richard Bayley, a gentleman whose daughter he subsequently married. In 1789, at the early age of 23 years, he was a lecturer on anatomy. In 1792, he was appointed professor of surgery in Columbia College, and immediately went to London to improve himself in his profession. On his return, he was made professor of anatomy in the same institution. He then took a second trip to Europe, for the purpose of procuring an anatomical museum, and brought back the one now in the College of Physicians and Surgeons, at that time undoubtedly, and perhaps still, the first on the continent. His lectures on anatomy were delivered in Columbia College until the Medical department of that institution was merged in the College of Physicians and Surgeons, in the year 1813. In this last establishment he continued his labors, which were alike creditable to himself and useful to others, until 1826, when he resigned his anatomical chair, and the presidency of the College. To this latter office he had been appointed on the death of Dr. Bard, 1821.

The health of Dr. Post was always very feeble. In 1815, he was obliged to cross the Atlantic for its improvement, and so much benefit did he derive from the voyage, that he was enabled on his return to resume his professional

duties. With these he was occupied until the close of the last winter, when indisposition confined him to his house. Hectic fever supervened, and on the 14th day of June he was released from his cares.

It should have been stated, that in the year 1792 Dr. Post was appointed one of the surgeons of the New York Hospital. This situation he filled, with reputation to himself and greatly to the advantage of others, until 1821, when, no longer able to discharge the active duties of the place, he resigned it, but continued a consulting surgeon of the institution until his death.

Such is a brief statement of the circumstances which marked the life of Dr. Post. Not numerous, nor to superficial observers important, these circumstances may, nevertheless, afford matter for useful reflection to two classes of persons. First, to those who are fond of philosophising upon the more general events of this sublunary world; and secondly, to those who, although more indifferent to remoter speculations, are still anxious to draw lessons of practical instruction from the example of those who attain what all do seek—wealth, rank, and reputation. To the former, I shall offer some remarks connected with the progress and condition of the two more important branches of the healing art; with the latter, I will examine the character of Dr. Post, in reference more

particularly to the great success which attended his professional career.

I have already remarked, that Dr. Post was one of the surgeons to the hospital. In that capacity, he tied with success, in the year 1813, the external iliac artery. In 1817 he was equally fortunate with the subclavian. This operation was then unparalleled in surgery, but since that time, such has been the improvement of this branch of our profession, that arteries still deeper seated have been reached. And I take occasion to mention, and I do it with pleasure as a just compliment to our city and country, that a surgeon of New York, Dr. Mott, is without a rival in aneurismal diseases. In one instance he passed a ligature around the inominata, and in another, he secured the common iliac—a feat as yet unequalled in any other quarter of the globe. On the latter occasion the event was favorable. A similar result, I have already observed, attended the operations of Dr. Post; so that we can now see why it is, as the bills of mortality prove, that the mean average duration of human life is extended. From the beginning of the world up to the present day, patients like these would have been abandoned to their fate; but, thanks to the genius of Hunter, and the intrepidity and dexterity of modern surgeons, the span of existence under such circumstances is now prolonged, and death, for a season, is robbed of his victims.

If such be the improvement in one great department of the healing art, our attention is naturally turned to the other, and the question immediately presents itself, has an equally beneficial change taken place in that also? Is the curative power of medicine as much extended as that of surgery? The reply, I fear, must be in the negative; and if so, we cannot but ask ourselves, how has this happened? Why have not the physicians kept pace with the surgeons in meliorating the condition of man? In solving this inquiry, it is but fair to observe, in the first place, that the task of the surgeon is comparatively easy. Of the maladies which he has to treat, by far the larger portion comes under the cognisance of his senses; his eye and finger are most efficient aids; whereas the medical prescriber is, to a great extent, deprived of these facilities, and must rely upon inferences rather than perceptions.

In the next place, surgical complaints are much more uniform than diseases strictly medical. In the former, there is little scope for the operation of those perturbing* causes to which I have elsewhere alluded, and which, in the latter, are perpetually modifying results in a manner which to us is altogether inscrutable.

* Vide page 172 of the New York Medical and Physical Journal, New Series.

Hence the experience of one surgeon is a much surer guide to his brethren, and may be much more implicitly relied upon, than the observations of a physician, supposing both to be equally desirous of stating the truth; and what is more uncommon, supposing the perceptive powers of both to be equally unperverted by preconceived opinions and hypothetical notions.

But, after making all these allowances, it must still be acknowledged, that medicine has been less successfully cultivated than surgery; and the question of course recurs, whence this relative inferiority? I say *relative inferiority*, because I acknowledge that the improvement in medicine has not been small, though far less than in surgery; whence, then, the difference? It has arisen, I conceive, in this, that the surgeons, with a plainer path before them, have not disdained the line and plummet of sound philosophy; in other words, "They have experimented with caution and observed with care, and, from facts thus ascertained, have deduced the conclusions which they warranted." Take the very disease, aneurism, of which we have been speaking as an example. Mr. Hunter having, probably, observed, that the main artery of a limb is sometimes obliterated spontaneously, and sometimes destroyed by accident, and yet the member did not perish for want of a due supply of blood, determined to try the effect of

tying such vessels when affected with aneurism. The event was favorable, and from that point surgeons have proceeded until they have attained the splendid results already mentioned. And how have the physicians acted? Why, with a preposterousness almost inconceivable, they have entirely reversed this the procedure of the surgeons. Because their footing was unstable, they have been heedless; because it was dark and uncertain, they have been rash and confident; and because their steps were beset on all sides with responsibilities the most awful, they have but dashed on the more recklessly, plunging without chart or compass into oceans of conjecture and hypothesis, and pursuing phantoms which have forever risen and forever faded upon their eager and deluded sight. But enough of these follies; relief is at hand. The march of common sense is manifest, and I look forward to the day when the dominion of philosophy and right reason will be as absolute in medicine, as it has already become in all the other departments of human knowledge.

The progress of surgery, then, has never been retarded by physiological systems, as they are sometimes called, or the happy process of advancing *from* that of which we know nothing, *to* that of which we likewise know nothing. This mode of progression, I may remark, must necessarily be adopted by all those

who are determined to explain every thing in the animal economy. For there are many parts of the human system whose uses or *modus operandi* are at present unknown, and there is a yet greater number of phenomena of which the causes are involved in equal obscurity. These obstacles, so long as they subsist, are of course insuperable to every one who thinks an observance of the rules of philosophising of any importance in the discovery of truth. Not so our theorists, however. To them this state of double ignorance has proved the most convenient thing imaginable. *It has enabled them, after their manner, to find employment for every discoverable organ, and to furnish a solution for every conceivable difficulty.* The means by which these ends are accomplished, are twofold. The first consists in assuming the facts from which the conclusion is to be drawn, and then from the conclusion establishing the facts; which, like all arguments in a circle, proves any thing or nothing, according to the acuteness and disposition of the reader.*

The second plan consists in the use of the *argumentum ad ignorantiam*. It is thus ap-

* Could every person who undertakes to put forth new notions in medicine, be required to prove his premises before he proceeded a step farther, what an infinity of discredit to the profession, and mischief to the public, would be saved!

plied. Suppose inquiry be made of one of these theorising gentlemen, what purpose does any particular portion of the terra incognita of our bodies subserve? He answers, such and such are its uses or modes of action, according to the peculiar notions, whatsoever they may be, which he has to support. Very well, the querist rejoins, all this is very well, provided you can prove it. Prove it! exclaims the man of notions, Prove it! *Why, if such be not the use of the part in question, pray what is its use?* If, on the other hand, the cause of some phenomenon be required, with regard to which he is just as wise as he was on the former occasion, he refers it, with with the greatest complacency and confidence, to some viscus of which little or nothing is known. Most commonly the nervous system is selected, on account of its extent, importance, and our profound ignorance of the manner in which its functions are performed. But, whatever part may be chosen, the same argument, *mutatis mutandis*, is had recourse to—if such be not the cause, use, &c., pray what is it! And such is the reasoning upon which human life and human comfort have been made to depend!

But from all such follies Dr. Post was entirely exempt. His cool* and clear head was

* To ordinary observers, Dr. Post's moral temperament bore the same stamp with his intellectual powers. But.

not to be disturbed by "words without knowledge." Untrained, indeed, in the schools, he had that sound sense which no training can give, and which renders such training, so far as the individual is alone concerned, in a great measure unnecessary. And this brings me to the second head of my discourse—the intellectual character of Dr. Post—a character little apt to be appreciated as it merits by the world at large. For, in this age of noise, bustle, show, and glitter, something striking is always required, and if there be nothing to dazzle, many infer there is nothing to admire. Accordingly, it has been more than once observed to me, that Dr. Post was not an extraordinary man—nothing uncommon. No! How did it happen, then, that at the age of twenty-three he was a lecturer on anatomy; that for nearly thirty years he was at the head of his profession in this city, and now that he is gone, not only is there no one prepared to succeed him, but we cannot even designate the person who

however cold in appearance, he had a fund of feeling, not lying upon the surface, indeed, though, when touched, of the warmest character. This feature I had suspected from some incidents which I had myself witnessed, and my conjecture was confirmed by a gentleman whose opportunities of knowing Dr. Post intimately were more ample than mine. That gentleman remarked to me, that in the chamber of death, under circumstances of unusual and deep distress, he had seen Dr. Post cry like a child.

is ultimately to fill his high and lucrative station? Why do not some of those who consider Dr. Post as so very common a personage step into the place which he has vacated? The inducements are ample. Honor and emolument on the one hand, and the esteem and confidence of his fellow citizens on the other, await the successful aspirant. Yet he appears not. Will it be said that these things come by chance—that Dr. Post was *lucky*? Let no man thus solace his vanity. Every one may rest assured, that events are no more fortuitous in the moral than they are in the material world, and that in the one, as in the other, every effect has its appointed and apportioned cause. To great permanent success, then, though other things be requisite, corresponding abilities are indispensable. I say *permanent* success, because I acknowledge that by puff and parade, by sounding his own praise and by hiring others to “swell the note,” a man may acquire a certain kind of notoriety. This is particularly easy in medicine, from the acknowledged incompetency of the public to judge of medical men. But this mushroom fame never lasts. In the end justice is sure to be done, and mankind, though imposed upon for a time, finally reduce the vain pretender to that obscurity from which he so improperly, and frequently so surreptitiously, emerged. Now, whatever may be thought of Dr. Post in other

respects, here all will concur. All will concede that no man ever existed who had less recourse to fictitious or nefarious aids to bring himself into notice. No newspaper paragraphs announced his cases or cures. No bawling sycophants proclaimed the wonders which he wrought to raise a reputation on which they might subsequently batten. Precisely the reverse of all this was the fact. Every thing connected with Dr. Post was quiet and unobtrusive, perhaps retiring, and his success, as we shall see, was the result of very different causes.

I have already stated that he was for nearly thirty years at the head of the profession in this city. Now, to acquire and maintain that station, two things are necessary—the confidence of the public, and the good opinion of the faculty. To obtain the former, mere ability will, in a great degree, suffice; but to secure the latter, something farther is required, virtue must be superadded, a flaw in the heart being here as fatal as a defect in the head. For so extremely delicate is the nature of the intercourse which takes place between medical men and their patients, and so easily and with such apparent security and advantage can propriety in this respect be violated, that a man, if unrestrained by strong moral principle, infallibly does wrong. Sooner or later, however, his offence is detected; the offender is then op-

posed by his brethren, and if he persist, he is finally scouted from their ranks. But so unlimited was the confidence of, I believe, every practitioner in the city in the honesty of Dr. Post, that no patient could be more anxious to receive the benefit of his advice than the attending physician was ready to meet him in consultation. Does not this at once explain what to some appeared so marvellous, the success of Dr. Post? Where is the mystery now? The public appreciated his talents, and the profession relied on his virtues. And what renders Dr. Post's character in this respect the more praiseworthy, is this, that while perfectly correct himself he well knew how to rebuke and to punish any medical man who should infringe with regard to him those rules of good conduct and gentility which should regulate medical intercourse. Were the plan adopted by Dr. Post generally pursued, of arraigning, exposing, and denouncing at the tribunal of the profession offenders of this description, there would, I am sure, be more harmony in the profession; since fear would then constrain those whom principle could not govern. I may observe, that the anecdote on which the foregoing statement is founded I had from Dr. Post when on a visit to this city in the year 1819. His narrative impressed me forcibly with regard to the energy and decision of his character—qualities not often called

forth in a man so cool, correct, and dignified as himself.

While on this part of my subject, I cannot avoid the gratification of mentioning the good understanding which always subsisted between Dr. Post and myself. At first in opposition, then joint professors, and lastly, independent friends; no hostile feelings were at any time manifested with regard to each other, nor did any, I am persuaded, ever exist. And now, by a train of circumstances the most singular and unexpected, it has fallen to my lot to hold up, however feebly, to the just admiration of his fellow citizens the only man with whom in the whole course of my life I have come into any sort of collision, whose talents and whose station could for a moment induce me at least to consider him as a rival. This may savor of pride. If so, I hope it is of honest pride; and the sentiment, if a compliment to the living, I have reason to believe was esteemed no reflection by the dead.*

I have thus, Mr. President and Gentlemen of the Society, brought to a close my remarks upon the life and character of Dr. Post. From

* Speaking of Dr. Post to a most esteemed friend when on my way to the south in 1814, I expressed what I have stated in the text. Circumstances have caused me to think that the remark reached the ears of Dr. Post, and that it was not disagreeable to him.

the account which I have given, two useful lessons may, I think, be deduced. First, that Fortune is not so capricious in her favors as many imagine; and secondly, to secure those favors, in other words, to attain the success of Dr. Post, we must first acquire his skill and tact, and, what is perhaps more difficult, certainly more rare, we must practise these qualities with his steadiness and virtue.

Before I conclude, it is proper for me to observe, that our profession is sometimes charged with want of attention to religious duties. How far this remark is well founded, I need not inquire. It certainly did not apply to Dr. Post, who, I am assured, bowed to the fatal mandate in that frame of mind which becomes beings so frail and imperfect as ourselves.

Such, then, was Dr. Post as a man, a physician, and a Christian; and I have only to add, that, at the final adjustment, may we all be gathered where is reason to hope that he will be garnered.

FINIS.

