

John Swanwick Drennan (1809–93)

President of the Ulster Medical Society

1866–67

Presidential Opening Address

Ulster Medical Society
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Gentlemen, – In conformity with a custom which has been generally, if not invariably observed, I proceed to address to you a few remarks at the commencement of our Winter Session. Whilst by no means affecting originality, or aspiring to the dignity of an Inaugural Discourse, these may serve to direct the attention of our more recently elected members to the principal objects of this Society, and the best means of effecting them.

I have already taken the earliest opportunity of expressing my sense of obligation for the honour of being appointed your President for the current year, and I need now merely repeat that it was an honour quite unsolicited on my part, but only the more prized for its being spontaneously bestowed. I should have sincerely rejoiced if some more distinguished member of the profession had been at this time selected for the office – not only for the increased dignity to have been thereby reflected upon it, but for the substantial benefits which talent and influence installed in this chair might have conferred on our Association at a somewhat critical period of its existence.

You are aware, gentlemen, that this society, judging from the decrease in the number of its subscribers and the diminished attendance at its meetings, has fallen off somewhat of late from the position it formerly held, and which, from its designation as the “Ulster Medical,” it would even seem called on to assume. On the causes of this declension I shall not enter, if for no other reason than because I am really very imperfectly informed as to their nature and extent. Amongst them, undoubtedly, cannot be reckoned any want of ability or energy on the part of my predecessors in this chair, or the other official members of the Society. Nor can I for a moment suppose that there has been, at any time, a lack of inclination amongst the practitioners of this locality to maintain an institution so capable of diffusing professional information, and advancing their own claims to confidence and respect. Let us conclude then that our society has been merely suffering of late from a little temporary “Asthenia”, indicative of no serious organic disease or senile debility, and easily removable by some simple

measures for imparting additional warmth to its members and increasing the force of its cerebral circulation. The copious supply of *new* blood infused into it during the present year will doubtless contribute much to its convalescence, whilst we have already had proof, in the proceedings of our Summer Session, that there is no decline whatever in the vitality of the *old*.

Amongst those who formerly co-operated with us, we have to lament the recent death of a respected associate in the person of Dr. Halliday. He died comparatively young, and the arduous duties of Dispensary Medical Attendant, which he so sedulously discharged, and which had latterly pressed very heavily upon his strength and spirits, hastened in all probability his passage to the grave. He filled for several years the office of Treasurer to the Clinico-Pathological Society, and took a frequent part in its discussions, and those of the older “Medical.” In token of respect for his memory the members of this Society attended his funeral, and his professional and personal worth was still more vividly attested by the thronging together of his poorer friends, as the earthly remains of their kind “District Doctor” were carried to the tomb.

With the exception of this loss on our part, and some others less recent, we meet here to-day under circumstances specially propitious. The room, which by the kindness of the Hospital Committee, had been for many years devoted to our exclusive use, has been of late partially applied to other purposes. For this restriction, however, we have received in the convenient and capacious apartments in which we this day assemble for the first time a much more than equivalent return. In them we possess not only a large, well lighted, and commodious place of meeting and reading-room, but space sufficient for the suitable arrangement of our collection of pathological portraits, casts, and specimens. Whether it may be advisable hereafter to transfer our library also hither must depend on circumstances, and will be a question for future consideration. The Society must feel truly grateful, and will, I presume, express its acknowledgments to those to whom we are indebted for this very valuable endowment. To Mr. Charters, the munificent donor of this wing of the hospital, to the Hospital Committee, who have conceded this portion of it to our use, and to our worthy Vice-President, Dr. William MacCormac, at whose suggestion and by

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whose intercession it was mainly obtained – to each and all of these we are certainly deeply indebted, and owe the expression of our warmest thanks.

Among the other valuable results of this seasonable acquisition, we have now that portion of our revenue, recently expended on the rent of hired rooms, at our disposal for other purposes. Of these there is surely none more eligible, none more urgent, than the improvement of our defective library, by the addition to it of books of sterling professional value. One of the primary objects of the Society, as stated in its fundamental rules, is “to afford its members increased facilities of consulting the best medical works and periodicals,” but in consequence of restricted resources, that object has been of late very imperfectly accomplished. A substitute for the purchase of new works was attempted by the hiring of them from a lending library. But however a means of this kind may answer as a supplementary one, or for the procuring of publications of comparatively trivial interest and the lighter literature of the day, it affords very inadequate facilities for the serious study of elaborate treatises, and none whatever for the consulting of voluminous and systematic works. For such purposes a permanent and progressive library is absolutely necessary, and most of us can only hope to enjoy such a possession by holding it in common. At no time more than the present has there been required on the part of every member of our profession, who wishes to promote its advancement or uphold his own credit, an acquaintance with its scientific history and actual progress. The spirit of free inquiry, that motive spirit of the age, is acting in no field more energetically than that of medicine. Deny or deprecate the fact as we may, medical theory and medical practice, too, are at present in a state of transition. No doctrine, however venerable, no statement, however often attested, but must submit now to fresh scrutiny, and to the confirming, destroying, or emendatory hand of the strictest criticism, armed with new instruments of research. The number of able and ardent inquirers in every department of our art was never before so great, and the press teems with the results of their investigations. He who ignores these results, who in the midst of all this sifting of old opinions and seeking for new truths, rests satisfied with the traditionary formulas of medical faith, will soon find he is *behind the time*, and has forfeited his claims to consideration even as a “practical man.” His shallow dogmatism may impose upon others yet more ignorant than himself, but he will be held in no esteem by the only real judges – the well-instructed members of his own profession. I say,

then, that were this Society merely an economical instrument for communicating through books and periodicals the accessions to medical knowledge that are continually being made, and the course of the ever-flowing currents of medical philosophy, it would be amply deserving of our support. We have here a comfortable reading-room open at convenient hours; we have secured the services of a competent librarian, at hand most of the day for the receiving and giving out of books; a complete catalogue has been lately drawn up, and a more satisfactory mode of circulating the journals adopted. In short, for the formation and maintenance of a useful and creditable medical library, we want nothing now but sufficient funds and their judicious expenditure.

But this Society was not intended to be merely a Book-Club. It has important objects besides that of furnishing us with other men’s opinions, however valuable these may be. It is meant for the expression, discussion, and diffusion of our own. The comparatively short period of time to which our meetings are limited is an obstacle to the introduction of theoretical questions requiring lengthened exposition or prolonged argument, but has been found quite sufficient for the reporting of interesting cases, for the exhibition of pathological specimens, and for instructive commentaries on both.

Medical experience is constantly presenting, if not absolutely new subjects for notice, though such not unfrequently occur, at least novel relations of, and inferences from, the old. Every busy practitioner meets with striking and suggestive cases, with points in pathology, or with results of treatment worthy of record and subsequent reflection. To determine the true worth and bearing of such incidental facts nothing can more effectually contribute than the submitting of them to minds of kindred pursuits, whilst at the same time free from the bias which so often unconsciously attaches to the original observer. “Truth, like a torch, the more it’s shook it shines.” Its flame gathers strength, and its light flashes farther for the motion, whilst in its swift passage from mind to mind it throws off the adventitious particles which at first obscured its lustre, and becomes at length a pure effulgence—a *lumen siccum* never afterwards to be extinguished.

An acute, though unpremeditated question, an apt analogy or a pertinent counter-instance, may often aid effectually in defining a dubious fact or dissipating a nebulous hypothesis. Nor is the utility of our discussions to be measured by their more immediate or obvious results, or the length to which they are carried. Short suggestions may be thrown

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out in the course of them to be afterwards worked upon and tested, tacit assumptions may be quietly corrected, or a new importance suddenly imparted to some half-forgotten observation or train of thought. In a word, the simultaneous action of different minds on the same subject is often the shortest, simplest, and most decisive means of ascertaining its real import and value. As a criterion it operates “tuto et cito,” and here, at least, we will anticipate always also “jucundé.” The differences and the concurrence of the inquirers alike aid in the discovery and development of truth. The one stimulates the desire, the other strengthens the capacity for attaining it, whilst the very seeking of it in common augments the sense of its importance. On disputed points of theory or practice, a society like ours has, of course, no pretensions to be considered an ultimate tribunal. As a court of opinion, however, we may sometimes properly assume the functions of a grand jury, and quash the bills submitted to our scrutiny, or remit for further trial. Perhaps an occasional interchange of single papers or collected transactions between ourselves and other kindred societies might prove conducive to the common objects of both.

On questions of professional etiquette and personal difference – should such unfortunately occur – our council might, I think, advantageously continue to occupy the place filled by that of a former society, and act as a court medical for their amicable arrangement. All who have the dignity of the profession at heart would certainly prefer a reference to some such friendly arbitration to exposing their personal grievances or dissensions before an indifferent public. On this subject, I may observe that the code of medical ethics drawn up by the Belfast Medical Society is still extant, and worthy, I think, of adoption by our own.

In the relations of our profession with the public at large such a Society as this might, it appears to me, render material service to both parties, and occupy a higher position than ours has yet held. Whilst, gentlemen, no other body of citizens, I assert, confer such an amount of public benefit in so liberal and self-denying a spirit, we medical men are undoubtedly deficient in some of the chief elements of popular consideration. Very few of us are affluent – most of us of comparatively small means, and this “res angusta” must tend to impair the social estimation in which we are held, especially in a community where wealth is not only the general object of exertion, but too apt to be esteemed its highest reward and the prime standard of value. Nor can we boast of imposing titles, or corporate political influence. In

short, we want all the coarser elements of *power*, and it is therefore not surprising if we be sometimes treated as the *weak*. Now, the mere associating of ourselves together, be it only for scientific objects, must strengthen at least our moral claims to consideration by exalting our character as a class. But it may do more than this : By cultivating among ourselves a certain laudable “*esprit de corps*,” and common methods of action, it will enable us, on the good old principle of “*vis unita fortior*,” more effectually to maintain our professional status and defend our professional rights, should either become the object of depreciation or attack.

I by no means wish to convert the Society into a trades’ union for the maintenance or advance of wages – though trades’ unions themselves have their strong points of justification. I would not even desire much of our time to be spent in discussions on the subject of fees. But even here, inasmuch as we are all, I presume, quite willing, individually, to accept such offerings, it might not, I think, be anywise inconsistent with professional delicacy if, as a united body, we should come to some understanding as to their suitable amount. There is an unpleasant ambiguity about that polite Latin word, “*Honorarium*,” and an occasional disagreeably close translation of it by our patients, which an authoritative definition of the term by ourselves might help to amend. Our junior brethren at least might find it not unfrequently desirable to be able to refer for an ample meaning to a recognised *medical* dictionary.

On matters of public hygiene and medical police, this Society might, I conceive, sometimes originate valuable suggestions, or at least offer valuable advice when consulted by our municipal or other local authorities. As a sort of standing counsel on such questions, its services if required would, I am sure, be always gladly rendered. That there is no indisposition to allow its due weight to professional opinion on matters regarded as within its province, I may refer to a late occasion where an important point in the administration of the adjacent hospital was mainly determined by an appeal to medical authority.

It is quite true that on some subjects in sanitary science – as, for instance, the preventive and curative management of the formidable epidemic now within our boundaries – we may fail to be unanimous, and our deliberations may thence yield in their result but an uncertain sound. But we should not, in my opinion, fear to let such discordance be known. “*Doctors differ*,” no doubt; it is only theologians and lawyers who always agree – but we seldom differ for difference sake, but simply because

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the subjects on which we are called on to pronounce are often of a kind in which positive knowledge is at present unattainable. On such matters difference of opinion amongst "experts" implies serious grounds for hesitation, and the proper inference to be drawn from it is the propriety of caution in action. The warning thus conveyed may be in itself most salutary, if only by discrediting the more presumptuous counsels of the sciolist and the charlatan.

With regard to quackery itself, whether public or private, I do not believe it can ever be extinguished, or even materially repressed by legislative enactments. It is a necessary consequence of the imperfections of our art – a natural expression of impatience with them. Health is a jewel of such inestimable value – in such universal request – that when the mine of knowledge proves unable to furnish it, the gutters of ignorance and imposture will ever continue to be raked in the futile hope of finding it *there*. The best, if not the only means, in my opinion, of discountenancing the unprincipled empiric, is to maintain and try to elevate still further our own character, individually and collectively, for candour, philanthropy, and science. Those, however, who may wish to enforce the law against unqualified practitioners, will find facilities for doing so in the Medical Protective Society, which is amalgamated with our own.

I have now, gentlemen, sketched feebly, and, I fear, tediously, the nature and purposes of our Society, as I conceive they are or might become. I had intended a discourse of another kind, and haply of more general interest; but on reflection it seemed that, at this particular juncture in the lifetime of our association, it might be expedient to recall the objects of its existence, and attempt to impress them afresh on the attention of its godfathers and guardians. Certainly without a lively sense of these, and a steady conviction of its capacity for effecting them, we are little likely to secure for the "Ulster Medical Society" length of days or energy of action. But *possunt qui posse videntur* and worked and wielded with a will we shall make of it, I feel assured, a powerful instrument for advancing knowledge, promoting friendly feeling, and maintaining professional credit. Even in aiming at such ends, we shall not only merit the support of our own body, but become entitled to the esteem and countenance of the general public.