

# John Creery Ferguson (1802–65)

President of the Belfast Clinical and Pathological Society

1854–55

President of the Ulster Medical Society

1862–63

## Presidential Opening Address

Belfast Clinical and Pathological Society

28th October, 1854

GENTLEMEN,—I would wish to preface the few observations I shall to-day trouble you with by an attempt to give expression, however faint, to the feeling of gratification with which I am impressed. First, by that mark of confidence and kindness which your placing me in my present position has conferred; and next, by that which I feel must be a mutual pleasure to us all—our meeting to-day to inaugurate our Second Session of the Belfast Clinical and Pathological Society.

And whether we estimate our circumstances and position by a retrospective or a prospective process, I feel we have nothing to offer each other save congratulations on the past, and in the prospect pleasure and improvement. Who of us that served in the past winter's campaign does not look back upon its weekly forays with reminiscences as pleasurable as profitable? and, moreover, replete with this very satisfactory feeling, that, though we were engaged in what might be truly designated "war to the knife," yet that we could "fight and run away," and are here "to fight another day." We are now, gentlemen, but in the second session of a career which I trust will outlive us all, and yet I am happy in being able to report that our numbers reach ninety-six—a success which I may truly say was hardly anticipated by the few who constituted the first meeting of this Society, convened now only twelve months since by our indefatigable secretary, to whom is due not only its very nativity but in a great measure its now full-grown maturity. Nor do I recognize a more pleasing feature in its constitution than that it includes so large a proportion of non-resident members, whose contributions to our transactions, and frequent attendances during the past session, give ample assurance for the future. I may here state that, with a view to their convenience, our weekly meetings on Saturdays open at three and close at four o'clock precisely.

The objects we propose to ourselves, gentlemen, are by the very name of our Society sufficiently indicated. I may, however, briefly state that they include the consideration of every topic which the term *pathology*, in its most comprehensive



sense, embraces. And here assuredly we have a most extensive—an almost unbounded flight! Matters, however, of practical import, and such as are of every day's occurrence, constitute the more ordinary topics. A glance at the "Transactions" of the past session (which I hope will soon be in the hands of every member), or at the headings and order of precedence of the various subjects, as arranged in the weekly notice, will perhaps convey the best idea upon this point, and, I may add, dispel the erroneous notion wherever it may have been entertained that mere specimens of morbid anatomy formed the staple of our subject-matter. Disorganization of tissue, no doubt, occupies its proper place, but we must be ever careful to discriminate between morbid anatomy and pathology; the former referring merely to appreciable disorganization of tissue or organ, the latter including not only these but far more important still—every phenomenon that differs from what is considered the standard of health, or that may be viewed in the light of disease, whether it be functional or organic.

Whatever the subject-matter brought forward here, expression of opinion and discussion are

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sought, and by the interchange of ideas and facts, information is mutually imparted, and knowledge necessarily elicited. This much at least I may assert of our experience of the working of our Society during the past winter, that few indeed were the weekly meetings from which its members departed without the pleasing feeling of having learned something. For myself I must say, that the opportunity of meeting my brethren, and interchanging professional courtesies at the Pathological, was looked forward to and enjoyed more than any other hour of my professional work; and I feel that I may confidently predict of the session on which we are to-day entering, that it will not fall short of its predecessor, nor disappoint the hopes of those who are sanguine in their anticipations of its success and their gratification.

Truth to say, on this point, I have but one doubt—but one misgiving, and that arises irrepressibly when I reflect on the so successful occupancy during the past session of that chair which I now so unworthily fill. Were this the place, or the time, for indulging in panegyric, I might easily, in gratifying my own wishes, strike a chord that would but echo your feelings; but I must forbear and content myself with giving expression to the hope that while I emulate my predecessor's example, my efforts may not be altogether fruitless, and that at least they may obtain for me your kind and indulgent consideration. Success in our object, gentlemen, and gratification in obtaining it, I do confidently anticipate. To secure this "consummation most devoutly to be wished," we must admit, that much, nay *all*, depends upon ourselves. We must, one and all, work; we must each, senior and junior, bring before the Society his facts, nay, even his theories; we must be prepared, as best we can, to establish our facts and to maintain our opinions, ever with a view and desire to impart or obtain knowledge—the grand object which this Society proposes to its members; and I need scarcely add, with that delicate feeling and gentlemanlike demeanour which I hope will ever characterize medical discussion. Differences of opinion, wide as the poles, may and will rise. Happily we may each hold, and fearlessly express his own, making it our boast that:

"Nullius addictus jurare in verba magistri."

We around this table at least may

"Agree to differ."

The sneers that had too often and too long been cast at the indefatigable labours of the pathologist, as well of the Continent as of our own country, have long since subsided, and the question of "Cui Bono," so foolish in connexion with this subject, has been even

hooted out of medical society. If it were true, and we believe it to have been, that by some physicians too much attention has been devoted to the effects or products of diseases, and too little to the causes and treatment, is that a reason why we should run into the opposite error, and neglect or despise one of the only two means we possess of investigating the nature, and subsequently the more successful treatment of diseases? To say that it is no use to determine whether disease exists in the pleura or in the parenchyma of the lung, because in both cases we must employ similar or analogous treatment, is a melancholy specimen of ignorance or laziness, or of both. Ignorance, for the seat of diseased action must ever make a difference, save to the routinist, in both the nature and amount of treatment; laziness, because accuracy of diagnosis must always be gratifying to the inquiring mind, ever useful in practice, and highly conducive to a habit of accurate observation. What but a knowledge of pathology can fortify us against errors as well of diagnosis as of prognosis?—errors which are far more disgraceful to him that commits them—far more than the "opprobria medicorum," than mere failures in treatment. Simply because a knowledge of the former is within most men's reach, whilst the latter too often baffle human power. In fact, the pathologist's grand object should be to combine the phenomena of disease presented in the living, and collate them with the physical alterations detected in the dead body. Hence alone can we deduce certain data for rational treatment. In this pursuit the warping influence of *theory* must be carefully guarded against. For example, whilst we admit the influence of the *solids* in the production of morbid phenomena, let us accord also its due importance to the alteration of the *fluids*. Whilst we admit that *local* disease is capable of producing constitutional disturbance, we would also maintain that those more general agents, the blood and nervous system, may be, and often are, primarily affected, and that thus *general* disease may precede the existence of any *local* affection. In short, we should select what is of real value from every theory that may be presented to us, wedding ourselves to none, but profiting when we can by it all—in matters medical being pure *eclectics*.

If ever there was a time, gentlemen, in the history of medicine which loudly called for a close investigation into the truth or falsity of opinions and facts, daily promulgated, it is the present; and for such inquiries our society offers a fair field, where I hope all such analyses will be candidly conducted, and the dross separated from the genuine ore. And here, if

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I might offer counsel without seeming to *lecture*, which, gentlemen, whilst I occupy this chair it shall be my study to avoid, I would caution all, especially my younger friends, to guard against a blind and indiscriminating *incredulity* on the one hand, and on the other against that *credulity* which receives too easily as facts, without sufficient careful investigation of them, what may have been the workings of a wandering and disordered imagination. We must steer well our bark, equally remote each vortex of ignorance—from this Scylla and that Charybdis. Both are alike pernicious in their effects, and unless men endeavour to free their minds from their baneful influence, in vain will they attempt to store them with knowledge which may serve themselves individually or advance the interests of science. The history of the researches and discoveries of the true friends and labourers in the field of medical science, affords us numberless examples of how, by the exercise of industry the most labourious and indefatigable, of learning and talents possessed by few of his confreres, how by observing certain facts with precision and accuracy, a man may have established a new truth, or may have thrown light on points previously obscure, when forthwith the pen of rancorous criticism or the tongue of envious incredulity have been roused to all their ill-directed energy, deprecating the worth, too oft even the motives, of the man, bringing into doubt and discredit his most brilliant discoveries. Hence a powerful obstacle to the more rapid advancement of knowledge, not only clogging the revolving wheel of improvement, but too often turning it from its progressive to a retrograde course. “I have always remarked (writes one of the brightest ornaments of modern medicine) that they who were the most ignorant of any science were the those who believed the least in it.” Nor could it be otherwise, for it is not the man who has observed a number of *facts*, who has attentively examined and, as far as it is given to man, verified them, who will deny their truth or validity, but far more probably *he who* may never have given himself the trouble of ascertaining even their existence.

And if *incredulity* arising, as it often does, in presumptuous ignorance, checks the advance of science, an unbounded *credulity*, or placing implicit belief in all one hears or reads, thus making us adopt, without sufficient inquiry into their truth, errors often the most absurd, is certainly productive of no less pernicious or less lamentable consequences. He who acts so is not only not likely to advance a single pace in the improvement of the science he may be

cultivating, but he retards its progress by all the wandering dreams of his own fertile imagination, and by the adoption of every phantom that meets him in his erratic career. These two extremes, then—a blinded confidence or an unmeaning distrust in the opinions of others—are, I conceive, alike tests of mediocrity of intellect; in reality the effect of ignorance, and undoubtedly the cause of still more. Doubt, or that rational hesitation, which consists in neither implicitly believing nor positively denying anything before we shall have satisfied our better judgement of its rationality and truth, or actually applied some one of our senses to its investigation. This cautious *doubt* I take to be the characteristic of a truly philosophical mind—the source of knowledge and the mainspring of improvement. In illustration of this I would instance the immortal Lænnec, who with industry the most indefatigable, with talents for observation and induction granted to but few men, worked during a period of full ten years before he ventured to put before the world his theories and facts. And in vivid contrast with this truly philosophic spirit, would I point to the baseless unmeaning phantasies which the late epidemic has elicited from too many of our profession—theories opposed to reason and to knowledge, facts unsustained by experience or truth, affording grounds occasionally, alas! but too well founded, for the boldly expressed doubt whether medicine had actually benefited the human family or not.

Pardon me, then, gentlemen, if I forcibly impress upon all the necessity of examining with care everything, especially theoretical, that may be proposed at the meetings of our Society. Let us not submit too hastily, nor bow too implicitly to

“ The paltry jargon of the schools,  
Where Pedantry gulls Folly,  
We have eyes—.”

Yes, and I may add, other senses too; and let us use them, ever holding in mind that though our science be not a physical one, yet that we should make every effort to reduce it as nearly as may be to physical certainty. Would that this great desideratum could be more frequently attained! would that our knowledge of this universally admitted difficulty, made no less dogmatic in our acceptance or rejection of problems emanating either from ourselves or others!

I have thus, gentlemen, briefly and faintly touched upon a few topics, allusion to which our present meeting seemed to me to justify. These, however, have had reference solely to our professional pursuits and our relations to each other. Now, some may think, and it may be wisely, that I

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should here, frank and mindful of “Ne sutor ultra crepidam,” make my bow and sit down. Nevertheless, I feel strongly impelled, and perhaps unwisely, if I trespass not too much on your time and patience, to crave the privilege of making one or two observations not altogether irrelevant I hope, nor unsuited to our present circumstances; and I shall confine myself to such as bear upon our relations to, and intercourse with, the public.

If there be a profession, gentlemen, whether we view it in the abstract or its daily, hourly applicability to man’s wants and circumstances, which should secure for its votaries the esteem and respect of their fellow men, assuredly that profession is ours. In what quarter of the globe, civilized or savage, from the eternal snows and crushing icebergs of the polar regions, to the burning plains and deadly jungles of sunny India, does our country not ask and have our willing service? Where nations have been menaced by, or are suffering from, the fearful scourges, pestilence and war, has medicine ever shrunk from her perilous post, or deserted the hallowed path of duty? To whom when “the noisome pestilence” stalks through the land, dealing dismay and death around, to whom have the people turned and looked “for safety and for succour?” Mid the carnage of the deadly sea-fight, and the slaughter of the ensanguined battle-field but yesterday at Bomarsund, on the banks and heights of the Alma, and around the bastions (and I trust ere now in our hospitals) of Sebastopol, has she not done her part? Has she not been deservedly praised and honoured? Do not passing events well illustrate the truth of old Homer’s panegyric—

“The learn’d physician, skilled our wounds to heal,  
Is more than armies to the public weal.”

Or, to view our position in another light, will it be denied that a just estimate of the extent and importance of the knowledge which medicine requires and imparts, would have the effect of elevating our profession to the very highest rank in the world’s estimation? What department of mental philosophy is there that medicine has not availed herself of, or that medical men have not successfully cultivated? And yet we cannot, we must not, close our eyes to the fact that, as a profession, medicine is not held in that high estimation to which she is entitled, at least by the general public, whom we may well regard as—

“Monstrum horrendum, informe, ingens, cui  
lumen ademptum.”

That public—

“Whose pleasure is as great,  
In being cheated as to cheat.”

Although medicine, as a science, has made rapid and extensive progress, her sons have never reaped rewards proportionate to their labours and to their sacrifices in behalf of the community. Whilst the sister professions of law and divinity are upheld and defended in their rights and privileges by the strong arm of the legislature, and by codes of ethics and of etiquette, no doubt self-imposed by their members, medicine, which surely is inferior to neither in the extent and variety of its studies, or in the grandeur of its aims and objects, has been left to struggle as best it may against apathy, too often even contumely from without, and unhappily (and this, gentlemen, is our great reproach) against angry dissensions and jealous bickerings from within. This state of affairs, as unfortunate as notorious, has been long admitted and deplored, and numberless have been the remedies proposed to palliate or remove the canker. Yet, though their name be “Legion,” an antidote supplied through them seems still remote and problematical.

For my own part, without entering at length into this difficult and vexed question, I would expect that benefits greater than from any other source would accrue to our profession from a good understanding and perfect union amongst ourselves—from self-reliance and from self-esteem. Let there be no mysterious assumption of superiority, nor affected air of condescension on the part of any; but on the contrary, let there ever subsist amongst us the most amicable relations, the most cordial coöperation, the most punctilious observance of the dictates of unflinching probity and honour, and the strictest attention to the requirements of decorum and professional etiquette, our ruling principle being “to do as we would be done by.” May we never forget, for we never can with honour, that “Good name in man and woman is the immediate jewel of their souls; who steals my purse steals trash; ‘tis something, nothing; ‘twas mine, ‘tis his, and has been slave to thousands; but he that filches from me my good name, robs me of that which not enriches him, but makes me poor indeed.”

Should we ever find cause to be dissatisfied with, or openly to prefer a charge against, a professional brother, be it ours, prompted by the “still, small voice of conscience,” whispering “humanum est errare,” to try and have our differences arranged, and amity restored, if not by the interposition of mutual friends, at least within the pale of the profession. But, above all, be it ours religiously to avoid, as well in word as deed, as well in look as gesture, the insidious innuendo, the crafty, base insinuation; these let us shun even more

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scrupulously than we would open accusation. The solemn oath imposed by “my Lord Hamlet” on his “good friends,” would not be very inappropriate, me thinks, to us:—“Never with arms encumbered thus, or this headshake, or by pronouncing of some doubtful phrase, as ‘well, well, we know,’ or ‘we could, an’ if we would,’ or ‘if we list to speak,’ or ‘there be, an’ if they might,’ or such ambiguous giving out to note that you know aught.” Oh! gentlemen, many be the ways of doing the vile, the noxious deed, but to us let them be anathema. Mutual confidence, respect, courtesy, and good feeling should characterize the intercourse of all the members of our profession.

Such conduct on our parts will lay the firmest foundation for that esprit de corps, that close bond of union, which we see with such beneficial effects pervade other professions so very much more spiritedly than our own; the want of which in our body, I firmly believe, in point of fact, to lie at the root of many of the evils we complain of. Doubt there can be none, gentlemen, that that man will ever secure for himself the most lasting and sincere respect who contemns every word and deed that has even the semblance of littleness or meanness, and who eschews every act that is unworthy of an honourable, manly, and exalted mind. Let us, then, laying aside our petty, selfish jealousies, our paltry, party struggles for ephemeral preëminence, evidence our self-esteem and self-respect by union amongst ourselves, and by proper esprit de corps. Let us establish our claims on the high consideration of the public, as well individually as collectively, by adopting a lofty standard of education, both literary and medical; and, above all, making it our pride and boast, “nil conscire sibi, nullâ pallescere cupâ;” let our professional morality be without taint, above suspicion, and strong am I in the conviction that, though we may not accomplish all we may desire, yet that then, and not till then, we shall have put ourselves in a position most likely to promote and secure our individual good, and advance the best interests of our noble profession.

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**Presidential Closing Address**  
Belfast Clinical and Pathological Society  
At the Conversazione  
5th May, 1855

Gentlemen, guests, and members of the Belfast Clinico-Pathological Society, on me has devolved to-night an onerous and a double duty; in one respect the most gratifying and pleasing that could be imposed, bidding you, our guests on the present occasion, a sincere and hearty welcome to this our closing reunion of the session; and in another, exciting feelings not less intense, though of an opposite tendency, and calling on me imperatively, though reluctantly, to say to you, my fellow-members, in vacating your presidential chair, a respectful and grateful farewell. And though in good truth I could have wished that this duty had fallen to the lot of one more capable of doing justice to such a theme, and more eloquent in conveying the thanks of the society for the honour conferred on us by the presence of our guests, yet to none will I yield in the warmth and sincerity of feeling that prompts both greeting.

We have to-day, gentlemen, reached the close of the second session of the Belfast Clinico-Pathological Society, and in accordance with one of its laws, I necessarily vacate the office of president, I avow it not without feelings of regret, no doubt greatly modified by the conviction that in my successor the society will discover many qualifications for the office in which I am fully conscious of my own deficiency. Yet the uniformly kind consideration and support which I have received from every member of the society, the actual amount of information I have gained, and the pleasing interchange of professional courtesies which the possession of it secured me, naturally make me happy and proud of having been the occupant of this chair, and proportionably engender regrets at my retiring from it. The few remarks with which I am about to trouble you, gentlemen, were intended for the annual meeting held this morning for the transaction of the society's more immediate business, but at the eleventh hour it has been deemed expedient that they be inflicted on you here; consequently, they will possess, I fear, but few attractions and little interest for an audience not strictly professional.

One subject, however, I hope to effect—be not startled at the announcement—I mean to extend the sphere of your knowledge; for I am persuaded that many who hear me will leave this room informed on what they were before ignorant. It is more than

probable that many of my audience date their knowledge of the very existence of the Clinico-Pathological Society from the hour of their entering this room; and I would wish to lay before the meeting a general outline of its objects and machinery, with a view to inform our non-professional visitors on a subject with which they could scarcely be expected to be familiar. If I but succeed in this I shall deem myself as *functus officio*. For we all know that the public interest themselves but little about matters connected with our profession; or when they do, are too apt to associate the idea with the ills and disagreeables of life. Now, assuredly, this should not be so. On the contrary, I feel satisfied that from more frequent opportunities of meeting, as on the present occasion, for the interchange of ideas and courtesies, between those within and those without the pale of the profession, great mutual advantages would accrue to each, and much prejudice and ignorance would be dispelled.

For what is there interesting or important in the whole sphere of natural knowledge which directly or indirectly the science of medicine does not embrace? What can be a more worthy or more lofty theme than her first and more immediate object, to study and learn the construction of that noblest work of the all-wise Creator, man?—man for whom this teeming world was called into being; for whom such wonders have been lavishly spread out by the great first cause. What more intellectual occupation than to contemplate the means by which we “live and move, and have our being?” Is it not ours to investigate the nature and operation of the various influences by which health is interrupted and restored—to apply the means by which, to the honour of medicine be it told, disease, suffering, and even death itself may be averted? The study of nature, and the search after the truth which she teaches, are the leading objects of our pursuits. Is there not here much neutral ground where all can meet and profit by each other's labour? We, of this society, hold this opinion strongly, and feel that we have sufficient ground for it in the great variety of matters of value and interest by which we are to-night surrounded, all more or less intimately connected with medicine. We therefore seek a closer and more intimate alliance with our fellows, labouring though they be in a different field. We believe that reunions such as, I hope, the present may prove, are well calculated to promote this

“Consummation most devoutly to be wished”—  
And we trust that they may be as frequent, as mutually instructive and interesting. When I addressed the society at the opening of the session, it

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was in terms congratulatory of our success. First—on what is and should be its paramount object—the endeavour to elicit and diffuse professional knowledge; and secondly—on the number of our members. In both these respects it gives me sincere pleasure to state that our present position is equally if not more satisfactory. As regards the former point, I would appeal to the abstracts of our proceedings, lithographed and distributed to our members after each weekly meeting, in which even a cursory glance will discover evidence of the society having, during the past Winter, addressed itself to many of the most interesting and novel points of clinical medicine and surgery, of pathology, therapeutics, physiology, histology, new and improved mechanical appliances connected with our art, &c.; nor have the *specialitiès* been overlooked. I may particularize midwifery, ophthalmia and aural surgery; and I might add the many individual cases illustrative of various and anomalous forms of disease which have been supplied either from the private practice of members, and kindly communicated, or selected from the prolific wards of our hospital. I feel I may safely assert that such *consultations* as these cases have given rise to have ever been productive of instruction to ourselves and suggestive of good to our patients.

And as regards the *second* point, our numbers—that far from despicable test of progress and success—I am happy to say they are most cheering and satisfactory. In the first session of our infancy—the Winter of 1853 and 1854—we boasted, and with reason, our 96 members—43 resident and 53 non-resident in Belfast; whilst in the closing session of 1854 and 1855 our numbers have risen to 105—45 resident and 60 non-resident members. It is not for me to enter into an analysis of the composition of this society—a subject I feel satisfied better understood by many of those whom I address than by myself; but I will hazard the expression of my individual opinion, that neither in professional erudition, intellectual endowments, nor social position, are its members surpassed by their brethren of this great community, whence is supplied one of its constituent parts, not of the Province of broad Ulster, which chiefly, though not exclusively, supplies the other.

As may be readily inferred from a mere glance at the objects by which I find myself surrounded, the almost endless variety of topics that have presented themselves to my mind as worthy of being brought before the notice of the society on the present occasion, has rendered selection as well as omission a necessary, though not an easy, task. In fact, my difficulty has been *l'embarras des richesses*. But the

fast failing sand in old Time's hourglass reminds me that I must be brief: and for only one or two points, connected with the working of our society, would I for a moment claim your indulgent attention.

It seems by common consent to have been admitted that the facts brought forward at our meetings merited something more than a mere ephemeral existence, and that our theatre should not be alike their cradle as their mausoleum. We have the recognition of this principle in the publication of our "Transactions" of the former session, and its flattering reception by the profession. The same idea has suggested during the late session the publication of the weekly "Abstract," which, I have reason to think, has given very general satisfaction and pleasure, but, for obvious reasons, to non-resident members more especially. The "Abstract," I should hope, however, will not interfere with our volume of Transactions. In fact, I feel that in this matter we have committed ourselves; that the profession expect it from us; and I confidently trust they shall not be in any way disappointed. Nor can I leave this subject without giving expression, however faint and inadequate, to what I, in common I am sure with every member of our society, so strongly feel—our deep sense of the obligations in the accomplishment of these objects that we all have incurred to our zealous, our indefatigable hon. secretary, whose presence alone checks my indulging in eulogy farther than what, in candour, must be admitted, nay proclaimed, that *his* is the master mind that not only projects, but works the most of our machinery.

But besides the press, there is another means by which much that is interesting in our labours may be rendered useful and available for our purposes—I allude to our museum. This, I think, is a subject well worthy the serious consideration and attention of the society. Morbid specimens, dried or preserved in spirits, or—what I am inclined to consider better still—those exquisitely beautiful and truthful models which we have seen occasionally through the session, and of which specimens are in the room, together with casts and drawings, as each individual case may require, should be eagerly sought for and carefully collected, with a view to the formation of a museum, which, I have little doubt, would in a short space of time prove not only most instructive and interesting, but actually of intrinsic value, and highly creditable to our society. Few will deny the great value of both these means in rescuing from oblivion our weekly labours. Therefore would I anxiously solicit from all their aid and assistance in achieving these objects, as also impress upon members the importance of each

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of us communicating cases and facts of particular interest, in order that thus a record of them, accessible to all, may be obtained and preserved. Such a volume, and such a museum, by placing the experience of the profession before individuals, must prove almost invaluable. Which of us does not often feel the want of such a guide midst the doubts and difficulties of practice? But to our professional brother of the rural district, who may not enjoy the daily or hourly interchange of thought and converse with his peer, must not the possession of such a record on practical points be a "*decus et tutamen*?" Hence do I indulge the hope, that not only will every hospital and dispensary attendant in the province join our ranks, but that each will aid us by his practical contributions.

I would next direct attention to a source of information in our art, becoming daily more interesting and important. I mean the *microscopic* investigation, and the *chemical* analysis of morbid tissues and secretions. For such investigations our society presents many facilities. Nor during the past Winter have instances been wanting illustrative of the great value of such inquiries.—For example—the practitioner in a remote district wishes for assistance to determine whether or not an excised tumour be malignant; or he may desire a chemical analysis to ascertain the morbid condition of any of the secretions. He corresponds with our committees and his doubts are at once dispelled. I know that already many have availed themselves of this privilege, and that it has proved a very great boon.

Nor should I omit to mention that, in accurately portraying morbid appearances, as well as those remarkable alterations in the expression of "the human face divine," given by disease, not only the artist's pencil, but in the wondrous products of photography, the very sun's rays have been made subservient to our purposes; many interesting illustrations of which you will have an opportunity this evening of inspecting. And to what, gentlemen, do all these different objects tend? And perchance the reply, though it may not alike *interest*, yet equally *concerns* my non-professional as my professional hearers. Obviously they are but means to an end; that end accuracy of diagnosis, or, in other words, the means of ascertaining the presence or absence and the nature of any morbid affection. Is there a quality in the medical practitioner more deservedly prized, or by the enlightened and educated medical mind more anxiously and laboriously sought for than the capability of forming an accurate diagnosis? If he possess not the means of determining the seat,

nature, extent, and intensity of the disease he may be called on to treat, how can he be qualified to direct such curative means as may be best calculated to counteract or remove it?—Would that we could boast that the days were gone by when, in utter disregard, perhaps ignorance, of the change of structure or derangement of function which gave rise to them, mere symptoms were regarded as diseases, and treatment directed solely against them.

We all know how much in our profession what is called *experience* is prized and vaunted. But what, gentlemen, are the proofs, what are the tests of its value? If, as I fear is often the case, it can be measured by or inferred from a man's years, heterodox though the opinion to some may seem, for my part I reject the standard, and I ignore the validity of the inference.—If it be founded on a close observance of symptoms at the bed-side, whilst I appreciate the value and importance of such knowledge, I deny its sufficiency for the object; and I maintain that *post-mortem* investigations, and the results there obtained, collected and compared with living signs and symptoms (in other words, pathology) constitute the only safe and valid foundation for the great superstructure of accurate diagnosis. If time permitted, it might be interesting to inquire how some of the more modern and vaunted (misnamed) systems of medicine would bear the application of this test. But of most of *them*, I fear, may be said that "what is new is not true, and what is true is not new." What force and point *we* recognise in that pithy exclamation of Rostan, "All medicine consists in diagnosis." Nor does he stop there; but so great stress does he lay on the worthlessness of that practice which is based on symptoms, irrespective of pathology, that he adds, "The medicine of symptoms is the worst of all medicines."

Let us then, gentlemen, members of the Pathological Society, persevere in our efforts to spread a taste for and knowledge of pathology. The field is yet an open and a widely spread one. The labourers no doubt are many and fully equipped for their work. We must not lag behind, but rather spiritedly, and I hope successfully, keep our place in the van. A mere feather thrown up clearly enough shows how the wind blows. "*Verbum sat sapienti.*" A "pathologist" to the hospitals of Scutari has been sent out by the Government—an ample though a tardy recognition of the vast importance of this subject. Nor could a better or more judicious selection have been made than my former distinguished pupil, Dr. Lyons. On his appointment I would together congratulate him and the profession of which he is an ornament.

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Are we to accept this as an omen of better days? Are the errors, the horrors, and fatalities of *routine* and *red-tapeism* in the medical department of our Government at an end?

Are the snows of age ever to be a necessary qualification for the onerous and important duties of office? Loth though I should be to found an objection on their possession, yet holding with the prisoner of Chillon, that

“My hair is grey, but not with years;  
Nor grew it white  
In a single night,  
As men’s have grown from sudden fears.”

I must take leave to question their being indispensable. Are “three score years and ten” the greatest recommendation of a public servant? The truth and force of “*Solve senescentem maturè sanus equum*” were never more displayed, though, perhaps, never more overlooked in certain quarters than at the present moment. Hence that dismal “cloud” that just now “lowers upon our house;” but let us remember “*aide toi et le ciel t’aidera*,” and soon shall it be “in the deep bosom of the ocean buried.”

But I fear I have trespassed on your patience; and though the theme be one on which I might dwell at greater length, yet must I restrain the *cacoethes*, however impulsive, I hasten to a close. But before doing so, I would again tender you, gentlemen, who have favoured us with your presence this evening, our best thanks and grateful recognition of your kindness. We pray you overlook the many defects and imperfections of our “youth and inexperience,” but two years’ old, and this is our first essay! We deprecate hypercriticism, and we promise to improve. And, gentlemen of the Pathological Society, deeply impressed as I am with the utility, the intrinsic value, the growing importance of our undertaking, satisfied with its present, and secure of its future, success, with feelings sincerely and deeply grateful for all the kind assistance and support I have ever received from the office-bearers and members of this society, I now restore to you, I hope unsullied, the honours with the chair of your president.

# John Creery Ferguson

## Presidential Opening Address

Ulster Medical Society

1st November, 1862

Gentlemen, – The opportunity afforded me by this day's inauguration of the Winter Session of our Ulster Medical Society, I cannot permit to pass by, without again giving expression, however brief and faint, to the feelings of gratitude and pride which your unexpected as unmerited election of me to the honourable position of your President have inspired: gratitude for the courteous kindness of sincere, but, I fear, too partial friends; and pride, that even to them I should have appeared not altogether unworthy of so honourable and so distinguished a mark of confidence. For myself I could have wished that the duties of the Presidential Chair of a Society professionally so important as yours had devolved upon some member – and you have many such among you – more competent and better qualified than its present occupant to perform them efficiently and satisfactorily. When first you called me to this post of honour, I felt, and I still do feel, a consciousness of my own deficiency in many of the almost necessary requisites for such an office. Nevertheless, in an anxious desire to promote the best interests of the Ulster Medical Society, to endeavour, by every worthy means within my power, to establish and maintain it in a position, as well social as professional, worthy of our medical brotherhood of Ulster, I honestly avow I will yield to no man. Hence my resolution was at once taken; for, looking to and depending upon that support and encouragement from my fellow-members which good intentions are ever sure to command, I felt it almost a duty not to shrink from the attempt to fill this chair, and I hoped not altogether unworthily. To accomplish this during the Session we are now entering on, shall be my chief aim and object; but I trust it will never be forgotten, that for that support and assistance in the performance of my duties, which I feel conscious of needing, I may ever look, perhaps appeal, to your kindness and forbearance, and satisfied am I, never appeal in vain.

Since we last met in this room death has struck down his victim from among us, and the place of our friend and fellow-labourer Dr. Robert Bryce, "knoweth him no more." He had been for many years a member of the Medical, and from its origin took an active part in the proceedings of our Pathological Society. Few of us have not had frequent opportunities of witnessing the good sense, the matured experience, the

originality of thought and suavity of temper displayed by him in our discussions. If any of us felt the force and point of the bolt he shot, yet it brought with it no venom, and left no sting behind. His intellect was sound, his heart warm and true, his professional honour unsullied. The words of Horace, believed to refer to his immortal but eccentric friend Virgil, might perhaps not inaptly be applied to him –

"Rusticius tonso toga defluit, et male laxus

In pede calceus haeret: at est bonus, ut melior

Non alius quisquam: ac tibi amicus, et ingenium  
ingens

Inculto latet hoc sub corpore."

Let then his failings, and if any they were few, "be interred with his bones." Let the memory of his virtues, and they were many, "live after him," and to his ashes Peace.

For many years Belfast has been, I may say, rich in the possession of societies connected with our profession, into the particulars of whose history or circumstances, however interesting, it is not my present purpose to enter. Suffice it to say, that each had its own peculiar object, its own means of working out that object, and that it did so, I believe, assiduously and effectually; each society devoting itself more particularly to subjects connected with the scientific or the practical department of medicine and surgery; or to the guardianship and protection of the best interests of our profession. 'Tis now some time since the idea occurred to some members who have always taken an active part in the working of these societies, that their amalgamation might be effected, not only without impairing the usefulness of any, but rendering the working out of the objects of all, more facile, more agreeable, and at the same time, equally productive of good to our republic. In fact, many of us began to feel that we were rather hampered by what might be, with truth, designated an "*embarrass des richesses*." This idea spread rapidly among us, until it gradually assumed a palpable and a practical shape, eventuating, as we all now know, in the amalgamation of the three previously existing societies, to form the Ulster Medical Society, in which it is fondly hoped, that all the objects of its predecessors, I may say parents, shall be worked out; where the *science* of medicine may be pursued with unabated zeal; where the *ars medendi* may secure to itself all the interest, investigation, and attention, which its primary importance and utilitarian tendencies demand; and lastly, where the social status, the best interests and the honour of our noble profession may be jealously guarded and worthily maintained.

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With respect to the first two of these objects, it may be that we do not habitually or sufficiently distinguish between them – I mean the science and art of medicine – and, as I have lately seen this well put, and briefly, in a paper on “Art and Science, a contrasted parallel,” by Dr John Brown of Edinburgh, I would for a moment claim your attention to his “contrast” of them as applied to medicine. He says:

ART,  
Looks to symptoms and occasions.  
Is therapeutic and prognostic.  
Has a method.  
Is ante-mortem.  
Looks to function more than structure.  
Runs for the stomach-pump.  
Submits to be ignorant of much.  
Acts.

SCIENCE,  
Looks to essence and cause.  
Is diagnostic.  
Has a system.  
Is post-mortem.  
Looks vice versa.  
Studies the phenomena of poisoning.  
Submits to be ignorant of nothing.  
Speaks.

No doubt this may be somewhat arbitrary, but, in the main I think it is not far from the truth, and it has certainly brevity to recommend it. And with respect to the third, the maintenance of the honour and social status of our profession, that “in union there is strength,” few will deny. We have sought and accomplished this *union* of the “*membra disjecta*” of our profession in Ulster, and have we not a right to expect the natural consequences? Yes, gentlemen, and if we be but true to the honour and dignity which should be ours, true to what medicine has a right to expect – nay demand – from all who embrace her, true even to ourselves and our own selfish interests, the accomplishment of our union will inevitably confer – ours it must be to take care and see that that *power* be well and honourably directed.

Confiding in the truth of the aphorism already alluded to, it occurred to some of our body that our union might be made more perfect, that we might be brought more frequently and more directly in contact, and other desiderata effected by the establishment of *Medical Rooms* in a central situation, where a selection from the books of our library, medical periodicals, and a few of the more prominent journals of the day might be always readily accessible, making the rooms more attractive, and affording a

convenient and useful rendezvous for the resident as well as country members of our Society. That this has been carried out successfully, and that all the advantages anticipated from our possessing rooms presenting the attractions alluded to have been fully realized, needs no confirmation from me; but *I do* feel that to those gentlemen who took so much trouble, and so successfully, in “setting our house in order,” we owe a debt of at least gratitude and thanks. There may, no doubt, be some of us who think that non-professional journals and hebdomadals were superfluous, or not just suited to the atmosphere of these rooms – a matter of taste, about which, proverbially, *non disputandum est*. But I am apt to think that though most of us may be tolerably well-informed on the passing events of our own locality, yet that it would not be altogether valueless to us, or devoid of interest, that we should see from different points of view what others think and say of the world’s progress. Who that wants to be informed, – and to whom is such information more requisite than to the medical man? – who that wants to be informed on the daily march of events in the great world beyond this little “gem of the sea” of ours, can afford not to read the *Times*? Or can a man in our day be said to live, and not rather to exist, who, feeling that “*dulce est desipere in loco*” seeks not after his week’s work the solace of conning over the fun and frolic, the wit and wisdom, blended with the sound morality and virtuous purpose of the laughter-loving *Punch*? Sydenham, a high authority all will admit, when asked by Sir Richard Blackmore what medical reading he would advise, rejoined, “Read Don Quixote, Sir.”

And now I must pray you to bear with me whilst I briefly allude to the points which in my mind ought, and I think are most likely, to constitute the chief objects of our attention in the practical working of our Society. As I before hinted, I would classify them under three heads; as Theoretic Inquiries, or the science of medicine; Practical Facts, or the art of healing; and Professional Ethics. These subjects, to their utmost limits, come within the scope of our investigations. The meetings of our Society, but more especially those held on Saturday during the winter session, offer favourable opportunities for the production of papers or for discussions on all new discoveries in medicine, or on theories as yet not fully developed or established. And here I hope I shall not be misunderstood, but excused in the liberty I take, when I pray that attention may be given to a careful separation of this class of subjects from what I have designated *Practical Facts*. And I feel the rather

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justified in alluding to this matter, from the natural tendency of most, if not all, men's minds to receive with favour, perhaps partiality, the offspring of their own intellectual workings, and to accept as *facts* what it may be further investigation on their own part, or an appeal to the less prejudiced judgment of their brethren, might lead them to view in a very different light. To observe in medicine, or in any other *art*, a genuine, honest, palpable *fact*, requires more strength and force of mind than to spin out any amount of fine *theory* or plausible hypothesis, or to build any number of, as Sydenham calls them, *castella in aere*, whose architects unfortunately can rarely be said

"To know what's what: and that's as high  
As metaphysic wit can fly."

In no other science is it more necessary that the process of induction be rigidly observed than in medicine. Let us have our *facts* first, and on them found our theories. This I believe to be the only path by which *truth* can be reached – truth, the aim and object of all our inquiries. And truth, to use the pithy words of one of Ireland's eminent sons, – "Truth is to be sought," says Curran, "by slow and painful progress only. I know that error is in its nature flippant and compendious, hopping with airy and fastidious levity over proofs and arguments, and perching upon assertion which it calls conclusions." Let us, my friends, endeavour to eschew this "error." And let us ever remember that the stepping-stones to truth in medicine are well authenticated and unmistakable *facts*, entities, carefully to be distinguished from, and never to be confounded with, the mere opinions of those who observe and describe certain phenomena, and who are too apt to regard these mere opinions as facts. "Few persons," says Louis, in his *Researches on Phthisis*, "are free from delusive mental tendencies, especially in youth, interfering with true observation; and I am of opinion that, generally speaking, *we ought to place less reliance on cases collected by very young men; and, above all, not entrust the task of accumulating facts to them exclusively.*" We all have heard Cullen's pithy remark – even in his time it is to be feared too well founded – "that there are more false *facts* than theories in medicine." And in his "Materia Medica," he gives us a full and classified statement of the many mistakes and untruths which are drawn from what he calls "*false experience.*" Dr. Cullen, admitting that these "false experiences" were often mere mistakes of judgment, and not made in consciousness of their falsehood, yet hesitates not to reprobate, and with much severity, the *manufacture of facts in medicine*; and he concludes with a rather remarkable and trenchant statement: "This leads me

to observe," says he, "that a very fertile source of false facts has been opened for some time past. There is in some young physicians the vanity of being the authors of observations which are often too hastily made, and *sometimes perhaps dressed in the closet.* We dare not at present be too particular, but the next age will discern many instances of perhaps the direct falsehoods, and certainly the many *mistakes in facts*, produced in the present age concerning the powers and virtues of medicine." "*Non meus hic sermo,*" Gentlemen. These words, be it distinctly understood, were written so long since as 1789. But it might suggest itself to inquisitive minds to calculate how far they were applicable to a later period in the world's history. "In this intensely scientific age," writes one of our own day and generation, "we need some *wise heads* to tell us what not to learn or to unlearn, fully as much as what to learn. Let us by all means avail ourselves of the unmatched advantages of modern science, and of the discoveries which every day is multiplying with a rapidity which confounds; let us convey into and carry in our heads as much as we safely can of new knowledge from chemistry, statistics, the microscope, the stethoscope, and all new helps and methods: *but let us go on with the old serious diligence – the experientia as well as the experimenta*, – the forging and directing and qualifying the mind, as well as the furnishing, informing, and what is called accomplishing it. Let us, in the midst of all the wealth pouring in from without, keep our senses and our understandings well exercised on immediate work. Let us look with our own eyes and feel with our own fingers." In other words, let us observe, record, and prize real *facts*.

From the long experience I have had of the working of the Pathological Society – whose very memory is still pleasant to me, as its meetings had ever been profitable and instructive – I think I am justified in believing that 'mid the subjects that may hereafter engage our attention "practical facts" will occupy a prominent place, and give to our meetings that interest which they have ever heretofore and deservedly elicited. Few of us, I ween, have attended many meetings of the old *Pathological* without carrying away with us more knowledge than we brought there; or without, at least, feeling that we had spent one hour of our week well. Nor do I think it would be too much to say that the application of the file to which we were all there subjected, and the necessary but wholesome collision of opinion there elicited, have proved often very effectual in making each of us, if not quite "*totus teres atque rotundus,*" at least somewhat more "*factus ad unquam*" than before.

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Be this as it may, however, it cannot be doubted that, as I have said, on these “practical facts,” carefully observed and rigidly investigated, must all theories be founded, and from them must all safe inferences applicable to the practice of our art be drawn. Judging from the past, may we not confidently look forward to a future copious and comprehensive supply of facts, cases, and objects in every department of medicine and surgery? For my part, I am sanguine on this point, being satisfied that not only will our former contributors not fail us, but that we may reckon, and confidently, on the new blood transfused into our renovated system. But I would forewarn that “new blood,” and pray it to bear with me, while I suggest to it caution, circumspection, deliberation, even a study of the brilliant exemplar, if I may be excused the personal allusion, that has been set before it in the recorded autopsies of the old Pathological, giving, as they do, if properly appreciated, subjects worthy of the closest imitation, and whilst stimulating to increased industry and exertion on our part, yet proving too conclusively that “*non cuivis homini contingit adire Corinthum*”

Permit me now, Gentlemen, to offer a remark or too on the subject of professional ethics, more especially in connexion with our relations to each other. As in other professions and callings, opposite interests and diversities of opinion lead to controversy and even contention, so in ours are they occasionally – happily not frequently – productive of similar results. Where such arise, I hold that conflicting opinions and views, differing upon points of professional etiquette, should be referred by both parties to a court composed of their peers, where their differences may be impartially and correctly settled; where right will be maintained and wrong set right; where in every case the disputants have such confidence in the court, that they bow to and abide by its decision; where all such investigations and awards are held as strictly private and confidential between the parties themselves and their brethren. Such a court, and such a means of adjusting professional disputes, our Society presents to the profession. I fear it were to take too Utopian a view of life as it is, to entertain the hope that such differences may not, nay will not arise. If we were all to lay down as our rule of conduct that noble maxim enjoined by “the Great Physician” – “As ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise,” and in every circumstance of our professional path through life act up to it, then indeed would there be no need of the “court medical,” then were our code of ethics virtually a dead letter. But as “it needs must be that offences

come,” all, I think, will admit that publicity is not likely to close or heal the breach, and that the private arbitration of professional friends is best suited to arrange differences satisfactorily, with less personal annoyance or injury to the disputants, and with less chance of discredit or obloquy being reflected on the profession; for I imagine that I but echo the sentiments of the majority in maintaining that bickerings and disputations between individuals must ever reflect unfavourably, or even injuriously, on the entire body. We all know how almost proverbial for its bitterness and intensity the *odium theologicum* has ever been – that hatred of a man’s neighbour for the love of God! Barely less intense, but certainly not less odious where it exists, will the *odium medicum* be ever found. But from that unhallowed combination, the monster offspring of both, “angels and ministers of grace defend us.” Nor among the means that have been recommended as likely to allay the virulence of, or it may be, even eradicate that malady, the *odium medicum*, so inveterate where it has unhappily been once engendered, can I on the present occasion pass over unnoticed one in particular, – a remedy which, whilst it will be by most of us recognized as efficacious, will be, I hope, adopted and acted on by all of us to-day as a most wholesome and agreeable specific, if there be such a thing as a *specific* in our *materia medica*. The British and Foreign Reviewer puts this so well, that I shall offer no apology for quoting and adopting his words. When speaking of this odious *odium medicum*, he says : “The true remedy for professional jealousies is frequent intercommunication. A good dinner at the ‘Royal’ would heal the professional feuds of a large town. The man of *science* who thinks he practices his profession for the sheer love of it may smile at the sensualness of the means, and it may not be the remedy *he* requires; but most practitioners are the men of the ‘*metier*,’ and like a dinner of the craft as well as others. We wish there were a medical guild in every large town, with an *ample dinner fund*; good fellowship would increase and abound, and with it unity of purpose, honour, public and personal esteem.” Gentlemen, these are sentiments and wishes in which, whilst I would urge them on your attention, I for one most heartily concur. Frequent intercommunication, unity of purpose, mutual and self-esteem, leading directly to honour and public respect, were “a consummation most devoutly to be wished.” I have but to add, Gentlemen, that our future meetings during this winter’s session will be held in the museum of the Society, at the General Hospital, every Saturday, at three o’clock.