

Richard Ross (1826/7–95)

President of the Ulster Medical Society

1876–77

Presidential Opening Address

Ulster Medical Society
Tuesday, November 14, 1876

Gentlemen,—My first duty, in taking this chair as President of the Ulster Medical Society, is to return you my cordial thanks for the honour you have conferred upon me in electing me to the office. I can unaffectedly say that I would have preferred that your choice had fallen upon some one else who had higher claims than I have. Indeed, I at first hesitated to accept the position, but on hearing that my appointment was desired by a number of my professional brethren, I felt that I would be wanting in a due appreciation of their kindness if I refused so flattering a compliment. I will take this opportunity of making a few observations upon the value of such an institution as the Medical Society, if worked properly. Our worthy ex-President, Dr. Wheeler, notwithstanding the demands upon his time, has shown us a good example in his regular attendance at, and in the interest he has taken in, the meetings during the past Session.

The friction of mind with mind, as iron upon iron, sharpens our faculties and promotes our professional improvement. No one can attend our meetings — listen to clinical facts accurately recorded — see disease or the effects of medical or surgical treatment in the living man — examine morbid specimens in which are exhibited the destructive effects of injury or pathological processes — keep himself informed in medical literature by our circulating library — and fail to find his mind more enlightened and his feeling of self-confidence increased when he holds the scales of life and death in his hands. Knowledge in our profession, as in every other department of human activity, is endless, and, no matter how great our information, we shall always have much to learn. Some one has written, “In earth there is nothing great but man; in man there is nothing great but mind and we, to whose care is committed this wonderful microcosm, may well magnify our office, but it all the more becomes us to develop, by every means within our reach, our intelligence, skill, and proficiency. The course of



nature is doubtless unalterable; but the Almighty has conferred mind on man enabling him to be an interpreter of nature, and by his knowledge of natural laws capable of modifying one law by another. Bacon said that “man commands nature by obeying nature.” Nature makes water flow down, but man makes it flow up a hill to fill a reservoir, by modifying, not interrupting, the laws of nature. Likewise in scientific medicine, if we get clear ideas of nature’s laws in man and in his environment — or, to go more into detail, if we study man mentally and physically, in health and in disease, acquaint ourselves with his surroundings, the air he breathes, his food, his drink, the accidents to which he is exposed, what is favourable and what is unfavourable to his health — abundant opportunities will be afforded us of bringing to pass results which, but for man’s intervention, unaided nature would not bring to pass.

One word upon another advantage of our Association, and I have done. It is as true of individuals as it is of nations, that with the increase of relations and mutual knowledge suspicions and enmities decrease. Our meetings here for the advancement of medicine and surgery, our discussions, and each of us making it our motto,

Richard Ross

“Gladly would he learn and gladly teach,” must tend to the promotion of kindly feelings and good-will in the members of the Society:—

“Friendship is no plant of hasty growth,
Though planted in esteem's deep-fix'd soil:
The gradual culture of kind intercourse
Must bring it to perfection.”