

George Frederick Wales (1829–1905)

President of the Ulster Medical Society

1877–78

Presidential Opening Address Ulster Medical Society 5th December 1877

Gentlemen – In entering on the presidential duties of the session, let me thank you for the honour you have conferred on me – an honour which was unlooked-for, and which I value the more because of its coming from you so unanimously. It is gratifying to a man after a life's labour to find that he is considered worthy of such a spontaneous tribute of respect, for next in satisfaction to that afforded by the *mens conscia recti* is that resulting from the approbation of one's professional brethren. I wish I could feel that I really merited such favourable consideration. I can but strive to prove in some degree worthy of your kindness.

I have to acknowledge gratefully the many promises of co-operation in the work of the Society from members generally – from some of my respected predecessors in office, and from my seniors in the profession. With such support, and your indulgence for my shortcomings, I hope, aided more immediately by the staff of the Society and its able and indefatigable Secretary, to see its usefulness preserved, and, if possible, extended in the coming session.

It is now more than a quarter of a century since I entered on the duties of my profession and joined the old Medical Society of Belfast. About this time men began to rouse themselves out of the old grooves of thought. Physiological, pathological, and chemical research took on more activity – a spirit of inquiry and criticism spread abroad, leading not only to a disposition to break new ground, but also to test afresh the foundations of received opinions and established practices. Amongst the foremost in this town to catch the spirit of the time was the late Dr. Malcolm. He founded the Pathological Society here, not to supplant but to supplement the Medical. I had the honour of acting with him as joint-secretary during the first year of its existence. It turned out remarkably successful. Its meetings were held weekly, and were well attended by members of the profession, old and young, from town and country. Queries were regularly propounded for discussion, and formed a prominent feature in the working of the Society. These always excited interest, the members generally taking part in the discussions, which were published. No man ever did more for the profession in Belfast while he lived than did Dr. Malcolm. Like a little leaven he leavened the whole mass with the spirit which animated himself, but he died too soon,



and left a void in our ranks which was long felt. After his death the Pathological Society maintained its usefulness for a time, but gradually it waned, and finally merged with the Old Medical into the "Ulster Medical Society." We thus combine the two, and considering that much of the old, matured element is still with us (a consideration which inspires me, in passing, to hope that former presidents will occasionally manifest by their presence and countenance the interest they once felt and promised in our welfare), and considering the superior character of the new element, it will not reflect creditably on either if we have a sluggish and unprofitable session.

In closing this special reference to our Society, it is with unfeigned sorrow I notice, at this our opening meeting, the absence of a once familiar pleasant face. I refer to the late Dr. John M'Crea. We will miss him in the work of the Society, in which his ability, attainments, and cultivated experience made him so valuable; and we will miss him otherwise, for the high tone of honour and genial fellowship which characterised him and made him a favourite.

The last quarter of a century has been a period of transition and progress. No similar period in our history has been so eventful, so revolutionary, so

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humbling to assumption of power, and yet so satisfactory in point of work done. At the commencement of the time referred to we still pursued the vigorous methods of combating disease which belonged to the previous generation, chief of which was blood-letting. In my early years few days passed without my using the lancet, and yet it is now several years since I performed venesection. At first sight it will appear either that we were wrong then, or that we are wrong now. I believe the lancet was too much used before, and is unjustifiably neglected now, in deference to modern views. I can well recollect the great and permanent relief so frequently given by it in acute serous inflammations, pneumonia, and congestive head affections; and yet it is so forgotten now that I venture to say a great many of our younger brethren have neither bled nor seen bleeding throughout their whole career. Some explanation of the difference in practice at the two periods is afforded by the recollection that formerly it was quite the habit of people to be bled annually. However such an injurious practice came about I do not know, but it begot a plethoric condition which operated in health and disease, and maintained a demand for periodic depletion, owing to the relief that always followed. About the time that bleeding began to be called in question, or rather a little prior to it, very active medication was as much the rule as bleeding, so that patients, I may safely say, were seldom lost by inaction; but with the growth of homoeopathy there came a change in our views. Notwithstanding all the irrational assumptions of that system, it secured many adherents amongst the better classes. It fascinated them by the simplicity of its law, by the possibility of their grasping the symptoms, and selecting easily the assumed remedy by a reference to its alleged effects. It satisfied thus that craving for amateur doctoring which so universally prevails. Then, again, the sugar globules and fanciful dilutions were not unpleasant to taste like our medicines. They did not sicken, and whatever other effect they had or had not was supplied by the imagination. But under homoeopathy and hydropathy, another rival system of therapeutics, it was found that patients did very well. Medical men were not slow to discover the truth. They perceived that Nature could be safely trusted to manage a good deal of her own business, and that she did manage it in every case treated homoeopathically, except so far as the admirable dietetics of that system, and the mental impression contributed to the result.

The lesson had its influence. It was found that disease could be dealt with without such active drugging as had been in vogue, and faith and empiricism gave way largely to scepticism and rationalism. The reaction from the excessive use of drugs, like bleeding, led, in the tendency to extremes, to much unjustifiable neglect of therapeutics.

It is right to be as rational as we possibly can in the treatment of disease, but the practice of medicine must always remain largely empirical, and we must

not undervalue it on that account. The experience of our fathers should receive our most respectful consideration. If they had not the same light to guide them that we have now, it did not hinder them from doing good work. They certainly were great in powers of observation. They have portrayed disease for us, in nearly all its phases, with singular truth and fulness, and they have given us the great bulk of the medicines we possess, with an accurate description of their effects. That was their work. Ours is to develop the causation and pathology of the one, so as rationally to utilise the other. In other words, by an improved knowledge of the causes and conditions of disease, to select remedies that will apply to them in preventing or mitigating their operation rather than such as may only influence the symptoms and signs. The more we can succeed in doing this the more scientific and rational will be our practice. That we are gaining sure footholds in the path of knowledge, and making rapid advances cannot be doubted. True these advances are sometimes made at the sacrifice of much that was considered well established; for example, it is disconcerting to be told that the idea of a limited brain area for each special sense is no longer tenable; that if any such localisation exist, it exists in cells diffused pretty generally through a large extent of brain substance. We can no longer say in a case of aphasia, anaesthesia, or motor paralysis, that the lesion is absolutely so and so, for we are told that, apart from any lesion, mere irritation, remote as well as direct, will induce any or all of these; and, further, that such conditions may be maintained indefinitely by some inhibitory influence, often slight, the removal of which will again bring into play the functions of the uninjured generating and conducting nervous structures. In point of practical value I believe that no investigations of late excel those made by Professor Lister. It is a great step in knowledge to know that animal fluids and secretions have not any inherent tendency to putrefy – that they will remain in contact with pure air – *i.e.*, air freed from living germs, without change; that such change when it takes place is a true fermentative process – *i.e.*, a change due to the growth and development of living germs. I think the Professor has absolutely demonstrated these points by his recent experiments, and that those who have asserted that the ferment (so called) may be a chemical and not a vital agent, have failed in their proofs. Great as have been the advantages resulting to surgery from the application of this knowledge, I believe that greater will be realised from it in medicine when the various morbid blood conditions come to be better investigated.

Having lightly touched on questions peculiarly our own, there remains one which is of general importance and interest, and which, I think, from the increasing magnitude of the evil, we, as guardians of the public health, have not only a right to speak out on, but I think we are morally bound to do so. I allude to the growing evil of intemperance. I cannot conceive any subject more important or more worthy

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of our earnest consideration. I am sure I am only speaking your experience when I say from my own that amongst men, and not inconsiderably amongst women of all classes, the use of strong drink as a beverage has produced much of the disease we have had to treat, not to speak of greater evils even than disease. Speaking for myself, I would say that alcohol in any form is unnecessary in health, and injurious unless taken in great moderation; that when so taken it should only be in connexion with food, and not before dinner; that those who have not been accustomed to it should not lightly begin it, and that youth should take none. It is difficult to see how young persons can be preserved as long as stimulants are habitually used at table. I was much impressed while in the United States recently, at the "Centennial." by observing the general absence of liquor on the tables in the dining halls of the large hotels. Persons who wished for drink had to go to the bar for it. This was a great protection to youth and weak persons of both sexes, and might be imitated with advantage amongst ourselves. Beyond the class likely to be in any degree influenced by suggestions from us, there are the great classes which will never move to save themselves. They resort to public-houses, not to refresh, but to get wholly or partially drunk. If it is wrong for the respectable man to drink before dinner, why should the poor wretches who have lost self-control in the matter of drink be allowed to drug themselves to ruin and death, either for the profit of the State or individuals? *Things are not right.* Let the clergy speak out boldly, and tell their people of the moral degeneracy that drink is producing. Let our legislators and magistrates endeavour not less to diminish the facilities which they have created and sanctioned, than to punish those who, tempted by such facilities, become victims. Let philanthropists generally who desire to accomplish the greatest good for their fellows and their country, try to save the rising generation from intemperance, protect the weak, and render the irreclaimably inebriate as harmless as possible. Let us aid the philanthropists and others, by our influence and advice, and by our declaring what we know of the evil effects of alcohol as a beverage. With its use medicinally temperance advocates have nothing to do, and would wisely take nothing to do. Our experience will guide us better than their theorising and assertion. The whole question is on the paper for discussion. One of greater gravity and importance there cannot well be; and I commend it, gentlemen, to your sympathy and earnest consideration, with the view to some practical suggestions and action in the interest of a much-needed reform.