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SOME
TRANSACTIONS
OF THE
BELFAST CLINICAL AND PATHOLOGICAL
SOCIETY

1853 – 1862

BELFAST
2003

Preface

Largely through the efforts of one man, a new society, the Belfast Clinical and Pathological Society, came into being in 1853. It was to last nine years. The objects of the society were: “the Cultivation of Practical Pathology, Diagnosis and Therapeutics, . . . ; the establishment of a Pathological Museum; and the keeping of Records, to indicate the progress of discovery in Medical Science.”

In this it was designed to complement, not replace, an older society, the Belfast Medical Society, which had been formed in 1806 and revived in 1822. The minutes of the first meeting of that society, held on 8 June 1822, show that the object was to provide a medical lending library for the use of the members. The annual subscription was set at one pound two and nine pence, and initially only “approved medical periodical publications” were taken. As more members joined so the financial state improved and it was not long before books were also being purchased. In 1853 the collection amounted to 2262 volumes.

Between 1822 to 1828, six recorded clinical presentations were made to the Society, all within the few months from November 1822 to June 1823. The first was two cases of *Cynanche Laryngea*, read by Dr James McDonnell, and the last was a case of *Croup* presented by Mr Coffey. What happened thereafter is uncertain. Perhaps cases were still presented but were recorded elsewhere; perhaps a deliberate decision was taken to exclude them.

The minutes for May 1828 to July 1842 are missing, but the the next surviving minute book, started on 1 August 1842, shows that the Belfast Medical Society was still almost exclusively concerned with the affairs of the medical library.

On 7 November 1842, Dr Andrew George Malcolm was elected a member. He was not a regular attender in his first year, and until 7 October 1844 played no part in the administration of the Society, other than taking the chair¹ at his first and third meetings. He and a fellow member were then asked to update and reorganise the library catalogue. On 2 December 1844 they reported that their task was completed and it was resolved that “the warmest thanks of the Society be given to these gentlemen.”

It was also resolved at the same meeting that “. . . in addition to the routine business, communications from members upon Medical and Surgical topics and reports of cases should be received and discussed.” Malcolm records² that Dr J. M. Saunders was the proposer of this resolution, and, as will be seen later, it was Saunders who presented the first case under the new rules. Malcolm strongly supported the concept and he was one of the members of the subcommittee set up on 3 February 1845 to submit proposals for the regulation of the case presentations.

¹ Rule 1 in the Catalogue of 1826 states: “Five Members to constitute a quorum, and the fifth who enters the room shall act as Chairman, and shall have, in addition to his ordinary vote, a casting one, in case of an equality.”

² On page 60 of his book *The History of the General Hospital, Belfast*.

Also proposed on 2 December 1844 was a change in the time of the meeting from 11.00 am to 7.00 pm. This was agreed on 3 February 1845 and the first evening meeting took place on 3 March 1845. It was at this meeting that the report of the subcommittee was presented and agreed, and, immediately afterwards, Dr Saunders gave an account of a case of *Haematocele*, and Dr Dill presented a case of *Lupus with Hypertrophy*.¹ Malcolm presented specimens of lungs affected by *Phthisis* on 7 April 1845,² the first time post-mortem specimens seem to have been brought before the Society.

On 4 August 1845, Malcolm was included in a subcommittee to consider the setting up of a Pathological Museum. He presented the report to the Society, and he made the subsequent arrangements, and it is quite possible that it was he who proposed the formation of the Museum.

The extent of Malcolm’s part in the proposals to present clinical material and to set up the Pathological Museum is open to speculation. But regardless of who was behind them, it seems clear that Malcolm must have thought that while the Society welcomed presentations at the monthly meetings, it was unable or unwilling to significantly expand its activities in the way that he desired. He began to think about a new society and wrote to the London and Dublin Pathological Societies, requesting advice and copies of their rules. The reply from the London Pathological Society is dated 29 June 1852.

In the summer of 1853, he and others, (the “Promoters”), issued a prospectus requesting those who would be interested in starting a local pathological society to attend a meeting in Malcolm’s house at 49 York Street at 8 pm on Friday 12 August. The idea was obviously well received as the Belfast Clinical and Pathological Society was constituted on 2 September 1853 and forty-nine persons, (“original members”), had joined by 30 September 1853. Another forty-seven joined by the end of the first year.

Although there were plans for sending a communication to the Belfast Medical Society, there is nothing in the minutes of that society to suggest that it was received. Indeed, the only reference to the Belfast Clinical and Pathological Society in the Belfast Medical Society minutes in those early days occurred in February 1854 when some discussion took place regarding the handing over of the Pathological Museum. There is no record of animosity between the old and new societies. It would have been a little surprising if there had been, considering that many practitioners would have been members of both.

¹ “A very animated discussion centred upon this case. . . [which] gave the members great encouragement regarding the change in the constitution of the Society.”

² By chance, at the same meeting, the Society agreed to attend in procession, on 9 April, the funeral of their oldest member, Dr James McDonnell, one of those involved in the Society’s revival.

Some Transactions of the Belfast Clinical and Pathological Society

The Belfast Clinical and Pathological Society met weekly from the end of October to the beginning of May on Saturdays at 3 pm. All contributions were to be original, or were to be original translations from authentic foreign records. They were expected to fall into the following categories:

- Cases of interest;
- Statistical reports;
- Novel modes of practice;
- Morbid specimens of pathological or general interest;
- Replies to medical queries posed by members;
- Brief clinical facts of practical interest.

The Society offered a microscopical and analytical service, so that if a member excised a tumour or found an unusual sample of urine, he could receive a report on it from the appropriate committee. This would have been particularly useful for a single-handed country practitioner.

In accordance with the third object of the Society, abstracts of each meeting were to be sent weekly to every member and to one of the Dublin journals, and the *Transactions of the Belfast Clinical and Pathological Society* were to be published annually.

No collection of the weekly abstracts as sent to members is known to exist. The *Dublin Hospital Gazette* (New Series) was published in seven volumes from 1854 to 1860, starting too late to print the abstracts for the first session, and ending too early to print those from the eighth and ninth sessions. It did, however, print all those in between. The *Dublin Journal of Medical Science* (previously known as the *Dublin Journal of Medical & Chemical Science*) printed the abstracts for the ninth session only.

We have no reason to think that the *Transactions of the Belfast Clinical and Pathological Society* was not published annually until the Society terminated in 1862, but copies for only five of the nine years of the Society's existence are known to exist. Those years, and the libraries where the copies are held, are shown below:

	Ulster Medical Society	Queen's Medical Library	Linenhall Library ¹	Univ. Lond Library
1853-54	●	●	○	●
1854-55	○	●	●	○
1855-56	○	○	●	○
1856-57	○	○	○	○
1857-58	○	○	○	○
1858-59	○	●	●	○
1859-60	○	●	○	○
1860-61	○	○	○	○
1861-62	○	○	○	○

Because the series was incomplete, it was thought it would be useful to assemble all the printed records of the meetings of the Belfast Clinical and Pathological Society found outside the printed annual *Transactions* and publish

¹ Recorded in catalogue, but not locatable March 2000.

them. Hence this volume, of which the contents have mostly been taken from the *Dublin Hospital Gazette* and the *Dublin Journal of Medical Science*. Everything relevant to the Belfast Clinical and Pathological Society has been included¹ even though some of it, indeed much of it, will duplicate what is already included in the annual *Transactions*. It was not thought necessary to attempt to reproduce the contents of the *Transactions* themselves.² The membership lists are taken from various sources.

These records offer a valuable insight into the minds and the daily practices of the medical practitioners of Belfast and Ulster nearly a century and a half ago. They were busy with childbirth, with injuries due to falls from heights and other accidents, with syphilis, with infections of skin, soft tissue and bone, with typhoid and typhus, with tuberculosis, with the consequences of rheumatic heart disease and with a lot else. There were no true specialists. Even the local ophthalmologist, Surgeon Samuel Browne, R.N., had a very busy general surgical practice as can be seen from the variety of cases that he presented to the Society.

The purpose of the Society was to encourage a scientific approach to medicine and perhaps this influence can be seen by comparing the report, in the third session, of a hand deformity of a child whose mother had been frightened by a lobster during pregnancy, with Dr H Murney's review of head injuries in his presidential address in the ninth session.

Malcolm died of rheumatic heart disease in his 38th year, in September 1856, just a few months after he completed his year as President of the Belfast Clinical and Pathological Society. His obituary appeared in the *Dublin Hospital Gazette* of 1856 and is reproduced on page 30 of this volume.

The Belfast Clinical and Pathological Society itself terminated in 1862 when it amalgamated with the Belfast Medical Society to form the Ulster Medical Society. One hundred and thirty-eight years later the latter continues to thrive. It still has some of the books of the Belfast Medical Society but it no longer offers the facilities of a lending library nor the microscopical examination of pathological specimens.

The compiler would be obliged if errors were brought to his attention. Any information regarding the location of other copies of the *Transactions*, or any other material relating to the Belfast Clinical and Pathological Society, particularly any Presidential address not printed here, would be gratefully received.

This preface has been revised prior to the publication of the 2nd edition on the internet. *February 2003*

¹ But not material related to individual members of the Society nor material related to other aspects of Belfast medicine.

² For the sake of completeness, consideration will be given to including the transactions of the first session in a future revision.

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