

MEMOIR

OF

DR. WILLIAM MURDOCH.

BY

HIS SON,

DAVID BEATSON MURDOCH.

Written in the year 1867.

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“Vita laudabilis boni viri ; honesta ergo quoniam laudabilis.”—

Cicero.

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THE LATE MRS. HARRIET MURDOCH.

ON March 18th. (1887), Harriet, widow of the late William Murdoch, M.D., departed this life in her 75th year.

Mrs. Murdoch was an old and much respected inhabitant of the Parish of Rotherhithe, being a member of the family of Beatson. She will be greatly missed by the many friends to whom her warm-hearted Christian character endeared her. Many of our poor neighbours have lost in her a kind and sympathetic friend and helper.—*St. Mary's, Rotherhithe, Parish Magazine,*

The older inhabitants of Rotherhithe will receive with deep regret, the news of the death of Mrs. Harriet Murdoch. Her Husband, Dr. William Murdoch, who died about twenty years ago, was well known in the South of London as a skilful and popular medical practitioner, and an accomplished scholar and linguist. He spoke, more or less fluently, no fewer than twenty languages. As Medical Officer of Health for Rotherhithe, he not only took great interest in the sanitation of the Parish, but also in everything affecting the education and general well-being of the working classes. Dr. Murdoch belonged to a very ancient Gaelic family; whilst Mrs. Murdoch was a near relative of General Beatson, and other officers of that name, who held important commissions in the army and navy in the early part of the present century. Mrs. Murdoch was a kind, Christian lady, and her loss will be deeply regretted by many elderly parishioners who delighted in a chat on "old times."—*South London Press.*

MEMOIR

OF

DR. WILLIAM MURDOCH.

WILLIAM MURDOCH, whose parents were of Gaelic origin, and had passed their earlier years in the Highlands of Scotland, was born in 1806. At the age of 13 he was sent to the Collège d'Ecossais, Paris, and afterwards to the Collège d'Henri IV., where he remained some years, and obtained several prizes in classics during his course of study. Later, he selected the profession of Medicine, and enrolled himself as a student in the University of Paris. In 1826 he took the degree of Bachelier ès Lettres, and a few months afterwards that of Bachelier ès Sciences. In 1827 he attended M. Lefranc's course on Surgical Operations. In the year 1828 he was appointed *Interne* to the Hôpital des Enfants malades. From '29 to '30 he held a similar office at the Hospice de la Vieillesse (hommes) at Bicêtres.

In 1831 he was *Interne* to the Hôpital du Midi (vénériens) under M. Cullérier, and in 1832 to the Hôpital de la Pitié under M. Velpeau.

The following are specimens of the certificates awarded to him:—

"Hôpital de la Pitié."

"Je soussigné, chirurgien en chef du dit établissement, membre de l'Académie de Médecine, agrégé à la Faculté de Médecine, opératoire et de Clinique chirurgicale, chevalier de l'Ordre Royal de la Légion d'Honneur, certifie que Mons. Murdoch, natif de Londres a suivi avec zèle mes leçons de médecine opératoire pendant toute la durée de l'année 1827, qu'il a pratiqué plusieurs fois sur le cadavre devant moi toutes les opérations chirurgicales et qu'il a dirigé d'autres élèves dans leurs études de la pratique des opérations.

Ce 1er Jan. 1827.

(signé)

"LISFRANC."

" Hospice de la Vieillesse, (hommes)

" Je soussigné, docteur ès Médecine de l'établissement, chevalier de l'Ordre royal de la Légion d'Honneur, membre de l'Académie de Médecine, ex-chirurgien en chef de la garde impérial, certifie que Mons. Murdoch né à Londres a été interne dans mon service depuis 1^{er} Jan. 1829, jusqu' en 1^{er} Jan. 1830, qu'il a suivi pendant ce temps mes visites et leçons médicales, et qu'il a étudié avec assiduité sous moi la pratique médicale et l'Anatomie pathologique et qu' il a fait des recherches special sur l'aliénation mentale.

Ce 1^{er} Jan. 1830.

(signé)

" FERBUS."

The reader will bear in mind that in 1832 this country and France were simultaneously visited by that fearful epidemic of Cholera, which after having prevailed for some time in Asia on the borders of the Black and Caspian Seas, rapidly advanced into the centre of Russia, and devastated in succession all the countries of Europe. The mortality in London in 1832 was estimated at 5,000, whilst that in Paris is said to have exceeded 18,000. The hospitals were crowded to excess with patients, whose treatment sorely taxed the physical powers of the medical attendants. We have satisfactory proof that William Murdoch did his duty at la Pitié, for we find a certificate with the celebrated Velpeau's signature appended, stating:—

"que toute la durée de l'épidémique qu' il a rempli ses pénibles fonctions avec zèle intelligence et assiduité."

M. Velpeau in a treatise on Cholera, describes the diligence of his Interne as *above all praise* (an dessus de tout éloge).

While William Murdoch prosecuted with vigour the more practical departments of his profession, he continued to devote considerable time to the collateral sciences, such as Botany and Zoology, and also to linguistic studies. He frequently listened to the Lectures on the ancient languages, delivered in the University, was a constant attendant at the discourses of the illustrious Cuvier, and paid almost daily visits to the Museum of the Jardin des Plantes.

In 1832 he obtained the degree of Docteur ès Médecine, and returned to England in 1833, after paying a brief visit to Germany and Italy. He then studied for a year or two at Guy's Hospital, in London, and obtained the diplomas of the College of Surgeons and Apothecaries' Hall.

He commenced his career in Rotherhithe as a general practitioner, and soon met with considerable success. In 1839 he mar-

ried Miss Harriet, daughter of Mr. David Beatson, who belonged to a distinguished Scotch family. He held for some years the appointment of Surgeon to the Thames Tunnel Works, the Royal Humane Society, and the Poor Law Board; but as his private practice increased he was compelled to resign the last-mentioned, to the regret of the poorer inhabitants. In time he became Medical Officer of Health, and held that post till his death.

The illness which led to his untimely end came upon him very suddenly. On the morning of Sept. 3rd, 1866, he was apparently hale and robust; in the evening of the same day, he lay pale and powerless, on a sick bed from which he never arose. For a time he went through the routine of his duties without betraying a symptom of the approach of the terrible malady which was to befall him in the course of a few hours. Later in the day his patients noticed his staggering gait, and death-like pallor, which formed a marked contrast with his usually rudy complexion. Several became alarmed at the Doctor's altered appearance, and enquired anxiously concerning his health. Bearing up with becoming resolution, he gave to each enquirer a cheering answer. To the oft repeated question, there was as often an encouraging reply. That high sense of duty, which characterised him through the whole of his career was never more strikingly manifest than in this hour of acute suffering. His duty was to attend the sick; and this fatal illness overtook him in the very act of doing his duty. While he was tottering from house to house with a throbbing pain in the head, which he could only compare to frequent blows from a mallet, and with the merciless paralysis stealthily overpowering his limbs, one might have aptly said, "Physician cure thyself."

Sic vita erat; facile omnes perferre ac pati:

Cum quibus erat cunq̄ue unâ his sese dedere;

Eorum obsequi studiis; adversus nemini,

Nunquam preponens se aliis.—

(Such was his life; ready to bear and comply with all; with whomsoever he was in company, to them to resign himself; to devote himself to their pursuits; at variance with no one, and never preferring himself to others.)

Soon after he had seen the last patient on his sick list he was forced to succumb; he reeled backwards and fell in the street, near a house which he had just visited. On being brought home, the assistance of several local practitioners was summoned, when it was discovered that he was suffering from hemiplegia, or paralysis of one half of the body. The advice of some eminent physicians was

also consulted; but notwithstanding their skilful treatment and unflagging attention, he gradually sank and died, after lingering about a fortnight,

Im gefühl der Pflicht zu fallen.
Himmel, Welch ein schöner Tod.

(To fall with the sentiment of doing one's duty: heavens, what a beautiful death.)

During the interval between his seizure and death he amused himself with quoting from classical and foreign authors, and though ordered to keep his mind at rest, he persisted in entering into discussions upon philosophical questions, scientific discoveries, derivations of words and other abstruse topics. His intellect seemed to be unimpaired, and he met death with the same decorous fortitude which he had opposed to all the trials of his life.

He was interred at Nunhead Cemetery. Those who had been so long associated with him in parochial work, paid him by their presence at his funeral, a last tribute of respect; whilst a large number of mourners, unbidden, but unforgetful, followed his remains to their resting place.

Dr. Murdoch's tall, stalwart frame and stern thoughtful countenance, are so familiar to the people of Rotherhithe, that we can dispense with a delineation of his features. In his early life he was rather thin, but muscular; at the age of 34 or 35 he began to get corpulent, and from that period his bulk gradually increased—when it reached its maximum, he weighed no less than 16 or 17 stone. Notwithstanding his great weight he was quick and active, and capable of sustaining the fatigue of long journeys—even when he had well-nigh attained three score years. In his student days he was addicted to, and excelled in, fencing and other manly exercises. Two or three of his old fellow students of Paris, who occasionally visited him in London, used to relate how he doffed his coat one fine morning near the Jardin des Plantes and undertook to walk seven miles in an hour—which was considered a very fair performance in the olden time. He is said to have accomplished the task with ease, and to have won his little wager from a fellow-student who backed "Time."

The extent of his mind seemed to correspond in some degree with the size of his body. To his powerful physique he united a singularly nimble spirit and an abundance of life which promised a far longer course of years than his allotted span. With a mind richly stored with solid literature and general information of every

description, with powers of conversation of peculiar compass and capacity, his presence was always acceptable; his society was edifying; a pleasantry and humour enlivened the domestic and the social circle. He had a natural inclination for raillery and occasionally indulged in satire. One of his intimate friends has not unjustly remarked, "he sometimes wounded more than his good nature intended." His conversation was so free from affectation, that his candour was sometimes carried to bluntness of speech; he scorned to appear, in fact, he could not appear, that which he was not. He would have said with Molière's Misanthrope:

Je veux que l'on soit homme et en toute rencontre,
Le fond de notre cœur dans nos discours se montre,
Que ce soit lui qui parle, et que nos sentiments
Ne se masquent jamais sous de vains compliments.

(I would have every one acquit himself like a man; and under every circumstance to speak his mind freely, and never allow his real feelings to disguise themselves under vain compliments.)

Though somewhat *brusque* in manners, he was highly susceptible to the emotion of natural tenderness; his kind and feeling heart was soon affected at the sight of human suffering, and prompted him to afford all the relief in his power. He was naturally *vivif* in temper, but his irascibility was atoned for by a thoroughly cordial and forgiving disposition.

He took great interest in all social questions, whether sanitary or political; in fact, in every movement that offered an increase of happiness to all classes. It was this desire to elevate the condition of the poorer people, which induced him to give gratuitous lectures to the working classes at various local institutions. He might have appropriated the oft quoted words of Terence:

Homo sum: humanum nihil a me alienum puto.

(I am a man, and nothing that concerns a man do I deem a matter of indifference to me.)

Perhaps the most striking trait of his character was his insatiable thirst for knowledge,—or as a Roman writer would have expressed it, *Cupidissimus literarum fuit*. He found time to study, even when his daily labour had encroached upon his hours of rest to an extent that would have been incompatible with health in a body of weaker constitution. In later life he contracted a habit of associating reading with his lighter duties. When he shaved, he placed an open book on the drawer of his looking-glass; and while

going his visiting rounds he got through a 'deal of reading in a peripatetic manner. Amidst all the arduous duties of his professional life, he continued his devotion to Philology; his talents as a linguist were extraordinary; he could read the literature of most European and some Oriental languages. He was fond of classical learning; was fairly conversant with Greek literature, and was a perfect master of many of the Latin Authors—especially the poets; few, if any, of the finer passages of Virgil, Juvenal or Horace, had escaped his notice; so thoroughly did he appreciate the beauties of the latter, that he translated several odes into English verse. His Greek reading chiefly comprised Homer and Aristotle, with an occasional glance at one of the dramatic writers. In regard to modern languages, French was to him as his mother tongue; he was fluent in Italian, and was thoroughly conversant with the German language; he could make himself understood in, and could read the literature of several other tongues, such as Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch and Norwegian. He habituated himself to the pronunciation of Ancient Greek according to the rules of the Modern tongue, and delighted to exercise his knowledge of the colloquial language whenever he came into contact with Greeks.

Sic enim Græce loquebatur.

From time to time he received lessons in Russian and Polish from native teachers, and considering the difficulty that inhabitants of Western Europe experience in mastering the numerous inflections and consonantal combinations of those languages, he possessed as good a practical knowledge as one could hope to acquire without living in a Slavonic country. Of Oriental languages, he could read Hebrew well, and had overcome the elements of Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit, and had dabbled in Hindoostanee, Hindi and other Indian dialects. And lastly, there is a long list of languages, such as Anglo-Saxon, Welsh, Scotch and Irish Gaelic, Icelandic, Bohemian, Bulgarian, Turkish, Chinese, &c. &c., of which he possessed a superficial knowledge, or sufficient to enable him to prosecute his studies in Philology and Comparative Grammar.

Though his genius chiefly impelled him to the study of languages, he was almost equally profound in Natural Science; nor is this surprising, if we bear in mind the fact that he enjoyed the advantage of living in Paris at a time when that city teemed with illustrious naturalists, whose names it is hardly necessary to mention: for

such as *Cuvier, Magendie, Geoffroy, St. Hilaire*, and others, are as familiar to the English ear as household words. Dr. Murdoch was just the man to reap the fruits of such advantages. He was well read in Astronomy and Geology, as well as in those sciences which have a near connection with his profession, such as Botany and Zoology. To Zoology and Comparative Anatomy he was particularly devoted; his great love for this branch of Natural Science he probably imbibed from the noble eloquence of his great preceptor Cuvier, whose lectures he had attended regularly in Paris, and whose "*Régne Animal*," he had studied most diligently.

To pass from his private to what might be called his public life; though Dr. Murdoch had but few opportunities of exercising his faculties as a speaker, yet all who have heard him, admit that he was possessed of no mean ability. He rather excelled in extempore oratory; he had a remarkable power of adapting his expressions to the sentiments of his audience, be it that he was addressing a sedate assembly at a literary institution, or an uproarious mob gathered round a tavern on the eve of an election. In his political speeches he always advocated civil liberty and religious equality.

Ever willing to communicate his knowledge and share with others the pleasure of his own intellectual enjoyment, he delivered from time to time lectures to Local Institutions and Young Men's Societies. Many years ago he delivered a course on Botany and Zoology at the Working Men's Institute of Greenwich. His lectures were interesting and instructive, and he never allowed the attention of his hearers to flag for one moment. After giving a minute description of some scientific details, he would introduce a humorous anecdote to excite a little mirth, and then would burst forth into a peroration upon the sublime in Nature.

To his professional skill I need hardly refer, for doubtless the inhabitants of Rotherhithe are fully competent to form their own estimate; and the same high opinion of his sound and practical medical knowledge is entertained by several physicians and consulting surgeons, whom he had occasion to meet in consultation, as well as by those who have been under his care as patients. Several eminent medical men have remarked that had he attached himself to one of the London medical schools, instead of engaging in general practice, there is little doubt but that his public fame would have equalled his private reputation. His long experience in the French Hospitals was ably seconded by the natural endowments of

coolness and precision; his penetration was quick and his attention constant and unabated; he took very great care in the investigation of symptoms; hence his diagnosis was generally accurate. In his treatment he avoided both of the extremes which prevailed in his day—the antiphlogistic and the overstimulating. While in Paris he had opportunities of performing most of the greater and more dangerous surgical operations. The Revolution of July, (1830) though of short duration, was sufficient to direct his attention to the importance of the study of military surgery. He was a good obstetrician, had devoted considerable attention to the diseases of women and children, and was fond of the study of medical psychology; but practical surgery was his *forte*. During the construction of the Thames Tunnel, accidents were frequent, and sometimes appalling. Dr. Murdoch was often called upon to treat cases of compound and comminuted fracture, to apply ligatures to deep arteries, amputate limbs, and perform other operations, which are very trying to the skill of a general practitioner.

He wrote several papers, which were published in *L'Journal Hebdomadaire*, and *La Clinique Médicale*: the most important of which were, *Recherches sur l'épanchement du sang*;" "Observations de fistule sus-laryngienne aërienne et alimentaire;" and "Considérations sur les retractions musculaires spasmodiques." Many years ago he contributed to one of the English medical journals, "Remarks on Tubercle of the Brain," and wrote a pamphlet on "Epilepsy."

I deeply regret that the task of tracing this brief biographical sketch has not been allotted to an abler writer than myself, for I feel incompetent to do justice to the memory of one who was so deservedly esteemed. I do not pretend that Dr. Murdoch's history will be of any interest to the outside world, beyond his own and the adjacent parishes; but even those who were not personally acquainted with him will admit that his career was not an ordinary one, and that his devotion to duty and diligence were exemplary. Many of his friends seem to think that he might have attained to great distinction in his profession, or as a naturalist or a linguist, had a life of leisure been allotted to him, instead of the laborious calling of a general practitioner of medicine. I will not lay too much stress on such opinions:

The world which credits what is done,
Is cold to all that *might* have been.

however, without overrating his abilities in the least degree, it may

be said, that he was endowed with a divergence of faculties which would have fitted him for almost any calling. His mind readily appreciated scientific facts and problems; and in addition to this he was gifted with a wonderful *Verbal Retentiveness*, which enabled him to quote at pleasure, long passages from the original text of nearly all the great European writers, Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Byron, Molière, Fénelon, Voltaire, Schiller, Gæthe, Dante, Tasso, Cervantes, De Camoens, and others were ever at his elbow. It was characteristic of the man to put the whole of himself into whatever he undertook, and whether he was commencing a new study, or entering upon a movement that offered an increased happiness to the poorer classes, he threw himself into it with all his force. The mere acquirement of so many languages involved a concentration which would have sorely taxed ordinary intellects. From the Norsk and Lapp of the North, to the Græco-Latin of the South: from the Scotch and Irish Gaelic of the West, to the Indian and Mongolian languages of the further East, there are but few known tongues to which he had not devoted himself. The literature of every civilized country was open to him, and every language is said to reveal a new sphere of ideas.

Huic versatile ingenium sic pariter ad omnia fuit, natum ut ad id unum diceret quodcunque ageret.

(This man's genius was so versatile, so equally adapted to every pursuit, that in whatever he engaged, you would pronounce him to have been born for that very thing alone.)

His laborious habits ruled him even in his holiday; a few hours snatched at hap-hazard from the stirring turmoil of business, were spent within the silent walls of a museum, where he delighted to penetrate into ages past, and contemplate the broken monuments of antiquity. An occasional visit to the sea side offered him still wider scope for enlarging his mind. The earth, the air, the water, all contributed to his intellectual enjoyment. He was now exploring the hedges for ferns and flowers—now searching the cliffs and caves for relics of pre-historic life—now visiting the homes of the Mollusca and Actinice in the deep recesses of the rocks. He would fain know how the hills and rocks were formed, how ridge and valley came into existence; the sea-cliff, the mountain glen, the quarry by the way side, the pebble in the path, each had to yield up to him its story.

But while paying this tribute to his versatile talents, and untiring industry, we must not neglect to notice those higher qualities

which endeared him to his fellow-men. Too much could not be said in praise of his sound humanitarian principles. His sense of duty induced him to remain in harness at a time when he might have retired from his labours and devoted the remainder of his days to his favourite pursuits; or have adopted the less toilsome calling of a consulting practitioner; but he was so unambitious, so disinterested, so perfectly content to remain in the same circle in which he had worked so many years, that he preferred to go on plodding his daily rounds, year after year, till Death summoned him from his toil. Many of the inhabitants of Rotherhithe regarded him as a Friend, whose willing counsel was never refused, and whose vast stores of information and intellectual riches were freely and generously conferred on all who sought them. Free from ostentation, plain speaking and affable, he was at home with the poor, whose anxious enquiries during his illness, and grief at his funeral, bear honourable testimony to their esteem. Generous to a high degree, undeviating in friendship, charitable to all in need; in short, when we contemplate the various qualities of his character we are at a loss, whether to admire most his indefatigable diligence and steadfast application as a student; his fluency and extensive learning as a linguist; his sound knowledge as a medical practitioner; his cheerfulness of manners and sprightly humour; his plain habits and unaffected simplicity; or his disinterestedness of character and spotless probity.

The eulogy bestowed upon a celebrated English Author by his biographer, is well applicable to Dr. William Murdoch.

"He admires with all his heart good and virtuous men, stoops to no flattery, bears no rancour, does his public duty uprightly, is fondly loved by his family, and dies at his work."