

CIVILIAN SURGEONS AND HOSPITALS IN THE CRIMEAN WARJohn Shepherd

Before the Crimean War there had been no official employment of civilian doctors by the British Army. The disastrous winter of the campaign led to gross overcrowding of the base hospitals at Scutari, a very high death rate of both patients and doctors, and a wave of public criticism of the army medical service. For these reasons the government decided to establish additional hospitals staffed entirely by civilian doctors. The scheme was not approved by the army doctors who felt their ability had been questioned and who resented that the civilian doctors were to receive higher pay. In addition there had already been a rather haphazard and semi-official attachment to the Scutari hospitals of a relatively small group of civilians. This scheme had not been acceptable to the regulars and the volunteers were never clear about their status.

In March 1855 a large, insanitary barracks at Smyrna was chosen for a new hospital. In the opinion of many this was too far from the Crimea and from Scutari for convenient transfer of patients. Meanwhile, at home, from a large number of applicants 23 doctors had been chosen to staff the hospital. There was a preponderance of surgeons over physicians, which was ill-advised as inevitably medical cases would far outnumber surgical cases.

Initially the hospital was quite busy but never overcrowded. By June the admissions dropped considerably as by then the numbers of sick at Scutari had become more manageable. The medical staff at Smyrna made the most of their experience, establishing a medical society to which they gave reports on the diseases dealt with in their wards. The surgeons had little operating to do and a few volunteered to serve at the front. A small group of nurses were attached to Smyrna and despite initial misgivings, the value of their services was eventually recognised. Of the surgeons Spencer Wells (1818-1897), Holmes Coote (1815-1872), John Hulke

(1830-1895), and George Macleod (1828-1892) subsequently had distinguished careers. Of the physicians Arthur Leared (1822-1879), and George Rolleston (1829-1881) became well-known. Of the Smyrna staff two were Presidents of the Royal College of Surgeons of England, one President of the Royal College of Surgeons of Ireland, five were appointed Professors in British Medical Schools, and there were six distinguished consultants in British Hospitals. Of the group four were awarded the F.R.S.

When Smyrna was closed at the end of 1885 there were some critics who pronounced the experiment a failure. On the other hand it had been proved that it was possible for civilian doctors to take over an army hospital completely. Opposition from the regular army doctors was not overcome and no great enthusiasm was expressed for the project by the Royal Commissions which reported The Army Medical Science in 1858.

Originally it was planned that six civilian hospitals would be established but in the end only two were created, Smyrna and Renkioi. In February 1855 Isambard Brunel, the well-known engineer, was asked by the war office to furnish designs for a pre-fabricated hospital which could be shipped out to the East. Brunel completed his plans and estimates in less than four weeks. He envisaged a hutted hospital composed of units each containing 64 beds, connected by covered ways. In due course a total of 1,500 beds was to be provided. Brunel worked out every detail, including kitchens, washing and toilet accommodation, water supply, drainage, and ventilation. In six weeks the first batch of units was ready, sufficient for 500 patients.

Edmund Parkes (1819-1876) was sent to choose a site and he selected Renkioi in a healthy area on the S.W. shore of the Dardanelles. This was 100 miles by sea from Scutari. Parkes remained to serve as Medical Superintendent of the new hospital. It was opened in August 1855 with 600 beds available. It would have been ready for use earlier had the army stores arrived promptly. By March the hospital had expanded to accommodate nearly 2,000 patients. However the fighting in the Crimea finished at the end of September and although the army stayed in

occupation until June 1856 there was no recurrence in the winter of 1855/1856 of the appalling sickness rate of 1854/1855.

Thirty-one civilian doctors were appointed to Renkioi. This time there were more physicians than surgeons. They came out in June and July and some served at Scutari and some in the Crimea until the new hospital was ready to admit patients. The surgeons of note (in addition to Spencer Wells and Holmes Coote who were transferred from Syrna) were George Buchanan (1827-1906) and Charles Bader (d. 1891). The physicians who attained some distinction after the war were William Robertson (1818-1882), Henry Goodeve (1807-1884), John Cowan (1829-1896) and John Kirk (1836-1922). Three of the Renkioi doctors subsequently held Chairs in British Universities and three were awarded the F.R.S. Both Robertson and Kirk were expert photographers and they took many plates of Renkioi and the medical staff, to provide a unique record of the hospital.

Perhaps the most interesting individual was Kirk. After the war he joined David Livingstone in his African explorations for some four years. He was appointed as Botanist to the expeditions but also acted as medical officer. In 1866 Kirk was made Consul at Zanzibar and later Government Medical Officer. He exercised a powerful and beneficial influence in the political field and played an important part in the suppression of the Slave Trade in Zanzibar.

After the war Parkes was appointed Professor of Hygiene in the newly formed Army Medical School, subsequently based at Netley Hospital. He had much to do with the success of this project and became a world authority on military hygiene.

In the whole period during which Renkioi functioned only 1,300 patients were admitted. The medical staff was never under pressure and for most of the time enjoyed a pleasant social life. Five had their wives with them and Mrs. Wells and Mrs. Coote each gave birth to daughters while abroad. The doctors found recreation in riding and shooting or in exploring the adjacent country. Goodeve and Wells indulged in archaeological pursuits. Two of the doctors emulated Byron by swimming the Hellespont.

At home adverse comment was made concerning the leisurely existence of the doctors. However it was no fault on their part that there was so little work to do. When Renkioi was opened in August 1855 there was no certainty that the war would not drag on for another winter. It is interesting to speculate whether the overcrowding at Scutari and the terrible mortality rate of the sick would have been greatly diminished if Brunel's Hospital had been completed a year earlier.

The design of the hospital was of great originality and recognised at the time as an advance in hospital construction. The plan was subsequently adopted in the American Civil War. As with Smyrna little note was taken of the work at Renkioi by the post-war Royal Commission. It was not until the Boer War that civilian doctors were called on to augment the regular army staff, but in this case the civilians, who comprised the entire staff of certain hospitals were given temporary army rank. It was only slowly accepted that volunteer doctors were essential for the expansion of the services during war, leading some fifty years later to the establishment of the Territorial Reserve for the Army and of the Volunteer Reserve for the Navy.

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