

SIR JOHN FORBES (1787-1861)*

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I first saw the portrait of Dr John Forbes as a young physician in the Board Room of the Royal West Sussex Hospital in Chichester in 1953 when I was interviewed there for the post of House Physician. It stimulated a curiosity about him which has lasted for just over 40 years.¹

John Forbes was born on the 17 December 1787 at Cuttlebrae near Cullen, Banffshire, in the North-East of Scotland, the fourth son of a local tenant fanner, Alexander Forbes.² He received his early education at the Parish School at Fordyce, where he was taught English, French, German, Latin and Greek.³ There he met young James Clark, who also came from local farming stock, and they became life-long friends.⁴ After winning a Smith Bursary to Aberdeen Grammar School he studied French, German and the classics.⁵

In 1803, this 'Lad of Pairs' — to quote from Dr John Blair's description of hard work being the gateway to higher education in Scotland — gained his entrance to Marischal College in the University of Aberdeen. He remained in the Arts class there until 1805. After an apprenticeship to two Banff medical practitioners, he gained the Licence of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh on 18 February 1806 (not 1807, as stated in all the standard biographies).⁶

This Diploma was sufficient to gain Forbes entry to the Royal Navy as a Temporary Assistant Surgeon in January 1807.⁷ He was promoted to the rank of Full Surgeon on 27 January 1809 at the age of 21 after serving nearly two years in HMS Royal George in the Caribbean. Between 1809 and 1814 he served mainly on the North Sea Station and at home in Haslar Naval Hospital.

From 1814 to 1816 he came under the command of Admiral Philip Durham who flew his flag in the 74 gun ship of the line, HMS Venerable. Forbes remained as Durham's Surgeon and Personal Secretary until he was retired on half-pay on 30 May 1816.⁸ During this period Durham was Commander-in-Chief of the West Indies Squadron and Forbes, as his Secretary, wrote all his despatches to the Admiralty. Durham (later Sir Philip) was also a Scot and spoke some French. They got on well and Durham may have encouraged Forbes to study and improve his French.

* Based on a paper delivered to the Liverpool Medical History Society on 5 October 1995.

¹ The portrait (artist unknown) now hangs in the foyer of the new Postgraduate Medical Centre of St Richard's Hospital in Chichester.

² P.J. Bishop, *The Life and Writings of Sir John Forbes (1787-1861)*, Tubercle, 42 (1961), 255.

³ J. Craig, 'A General Dispensary Practice 150 Years Ago', *Aberdeen University Review*, 44

⁴ A.A. Cormack, *Two Royal Physicians: Sir James Clark, Bart., 1788-1870, Sir John Forbes, 1787-1861: Schoolmates At Fordyce Academy*. Reprinted from the *Banffshire Journal*, 26 June 1965, 31.

⁵ E.A. Parkes, 'Memoir of Sir John Forbes, Kt ... Reprinted by Permission, from the January Number, 1862, of the *British & Foreign Medico-Chirurgical Review*, (for Private Circulation). By E.A. Parkes, with preface by Alexander C. Forbes' (London: Savill & Edwards, 1862), 8.

⁶ Archives of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh.

⁷ PRO, DOC. ADM 104/30, p. 509.

⁸ PRO, DOC. ADM 104/13, p. 315.

Forbes returned to Edinburgh at the end of the Napoleonic Wars at the age of 29. A year later, in August 1817, he successfully submitted an MD thesis entitled *De mentis exercitatione et felicitate exinde derivanda* and dedicated in flattering terms to his old Commander-in-Chief in the Navy, Philip Charles Durham.

Because of an interest in geology — and partly for health reasons — after graduating MD Forbes went to Cornwall where he stayed for five years in general and in hospital practice at Penzance Dispensary.⁹ In 1829 Forbes was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society, probably for his work on geology and climate in Cornwall.¹⁰

During this time René Laënnec (1781-1826) published his classic work on the use of the stethoscope.¹¹ Using his knowledge of French gained during his naval service and prompted by his old friend James Clark (now practising as a successful physician in Rome), Forbes translated Laënnec's work into English in 1821 and dedicated it to Mathew Baillie (1761-1823).¹² This translation was paramount in spreading Laënnec's teachings to the English-speaking world, after Laënnec's death.

In 1820, while still in Penzance, John Forbes married Eliza Mary Burgh.¹³ Two years later in 1822, Forbes and his bride moved to Dr William Bumett's practice in North Street, Chichester, where Forbes was to be the main driving force in raising money for the building of the city's new Infirmary.¹⁴ In 1824, the year of the birth of his only son, Forbes published a significant work of his own entitled *Original cases*, dedicated, in Latin, to Laënnec.¹⁵

Mickerson's said of this book:¹⁶

This work is in five parts. In the first, the Preface, Forbes says that his 1821 translation of Laënnec's work sold rapidly. However, he was led to fear 'that the impression made was more lively than profound; and through the influence of prejudice. theory and indolence, - one or all, - the greatest improvement of the present age, is in danger of sinking into oblivion'.

The second part is on Auenbrugger's Treatise on Percussion of the Chest published in German in 1761.

Extracts from Laënnec's Mediate Auscultation make up the third part, in which there is a description of the stethoscope - one foot long, of wood, one and three-quarter inches thick with a bore five-sixteenths of an inch in diameter and with one end hollowed out in the form of a funnel.

⁹ A. Sakula, 'Sir John Forbes (1787-1861). A bicentenary review', *J R Coll Physicians Lond.* 21(1987), 77.

¹⁰ A. Sakula, 'Gentlemen of the hammer: British medical geologists in the 19th century' *J.R.Soc.Med.*, 83(1990), 793.

¹¹ R.T.H. Laënnec, *De l'Auscultation Médiante. Tome Premier* (Paris: Brosson et Chaudé, 1819)

¹² J.A. Forbes, *A Treatise on the Diseases of the Chest in which they are described according to their Anatomical Characters, and their diagnosis established on a new principle by means of Acoustic Instruments* (London: T & G Underwood, 1821).

¹³ Parkes, 17.

¹⁴ F.W. Steer, 'The Royal West Sussex Hospital. The First Hundred Years 1784-1884' *The Chichester Papers*, 15 (1960), 2 [Chichester City Council].

¹⁵ J. Forbes, *Original Cases with Dissections and Observations illustrating the use of The Stethoscope and Percussion in the diagnosis of Diseases of the Chest; also commentaries on the same subjects translated from Avenbrugger, Corvisart, Laënnec others* (London: T & G Underwood, 1824).

¹⁶ J. Mickerson, Unpublished life of Sir John Forbes.

The fourth part is a description of cases seen mostly at Chichester Dispensary, with 'Dissections and Remarks illustrating the application of the stethoscope and Percussion to the Diagnosis of Diseases of the Chest. Very full case histories and examinations of thirty-nine patients are described, often with postmortem records.

The fifth and last part is a condensed translation of an essay by a French doctor, Victor Collin, on 'Physical Signs in Diseases of the Chest (Paris, 1824)'.

The second part was, in fact, the first translation into English, by Forbes, of the *Inventum Novum* of Auenbrugger (1722-1809). Although French physicians had been familiar with the technique of percussion for some years, John Forbes's translation introduced it to British doctors for the first time. There seems no doubt that *Original Cases* fulfilled the need, expressed by Forbes himself in the preface, for a reliable textbook to disseminate Laënnec's teachings on auscultation to a medical world still sceptical about the value of the stethoscope.

Eight years after the publication of his book, Forbes entered on a new phase of his life which was to last for 15 years. In conjunction with Alexander Tweedie (1794-1884) and John Conolly (1794-1866), Forbes launched the *Cyclopaedia of Practical Medicine*. This monthly journal appeared in four volumes between 1832 and 1835 and provided a forum for the best medical writers in Great Britain and Ireland. Besides being chief editor, Forbes contributed articles himself; Mickerson mentions in particular a 25 page dissertation on auscultation with special reference to the foetal heart sounds, which 'may be perceived as early as the fifth or sixth month of pregnancy'. When the journal was sold off in 1835, Forbes compiled an excellent bibliography of its contents, which was the first of its kind in British medical literature.¹⁷ The *Cyclopaedia* was succeeded in 1836 by the prestigious *British & Foreign Medical Review*, published quarterly. John Conolly (MD Edin. 1821) was initially co-editor but on the 1 June 1839 he resigned to take up the post of Physician in Charge of the Asylum at Hanwell.¹⁸ Forbes was then left as sole editor, a position he occupied until 1847.

The year 1840 was to prove a turning point in Forbes's career. He was 52 years of age when he made the risky decision to sell his very lucrative practice in Chichester and move to London in order to supervise the Review more closely and to establish himself in private medical practice in the capital. There he had to compete with a rival journal, the *Medico-Chirurgical Review*, edited by James Johnson (1777-1845). Like Forbes, Johnson had also served in the naval medical service but throughout the whole of the Napoleonic wars. While in the Navy he had written some important papers on the health of the sailors; on retirement in 1814, he had become a successful editor of a journal with a run of 2,500 copies at the peak of its circulation. In his later years, his editorial style was ridiculed, although not by Forbes.¹⁹

Those early days in London were anxious ones for Dr and Mrs Forbees and the young 18 year old Alexander. They resided at 12 Old Burlington St between Old Bond Street and Savile Row. At this critical juncture, the Forbes family were rescued by John's old schoolmate from Fordyce, James — now Sir James - Clark, QHP (1788-1870).

¹⁷ Bishop, 258.

¹⁸ Parkes, 24.

¹⁹ Parkes. 45.

Clark and Forbes had been born within a year of each other and their families were neighbouring tenant farmers at Cullen, Aberdeenshire. As we have seen, the two boys became firm friends and are said to have walked together to the parish school at Fordyce.²⁰ Both graduated MD at Edinburgh in 1817, having served previously as surgeons in the Royal Navy. They ever named their respective sons after each other.²¹

Clark practised in Rome between 1819 and 1826, making use of a primitive stethoscope in his diagnoses. Among his patients was the moribund John Keats (1795-1821). The Scottish physician was unable to identify the chest disease from which the young poet suffered — pulmonary tuberculosis — and which proved fatal on 23 February 1821.²² Although Clark had learned stethoscopy under Laënnec at the Necker Hospital in Paris, he had difficulty in the interpretation of the physical signs in Keats' chest.

Clark later became a successful doctor in London and was appointed physician to the young Queen Victoria in 1837. In the following year, she created him a Baronet. In view of the continuing closeness between Clark and Forbes, it is not surprising that on the 15 February 1841, Forbes succeeded his friend as Royal Physician after Clark resigned in 1840.

After an early struggle to establish a consultant practice alongside the *British & Foreign Medical Review*, Forbes achieved both his objectives and reached the peak of his career. By the mid-1840s he had a flourishing medical practice in a fashionable area of London and was editor of a successful journal. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians of London in 1844 and appointed Consultant Physician to the Brompton Hospital in 1846. In 1845 he published *Illustrations of Modern Mesmerism* but there is no evidence that he was entirely convinced of the therapeutic value of this technique.²³

These years however were marred by two factors — the chronic illness of his wife Eliza and the publication in his Review of an article which appeared to support homeopathy.²⁴ However, although he respected Hahnemann, he did not support the doctrine of 'Like Cures Like' in minute doses. The object of Forbes's article was to expose the over-prescribing of drugs by young inexperienced doctors. The ensuing brouhaha may have partly led to his resigning the editorship of the *Review* in 1847. On this occasion, as a token of affection, many of his old friends and medical colleagues presented him with a magnificent candelabra and his portrait painted by John Partridge. Forbes's brief flirtation with homeopathy resulted in no lasting harm to his reputation as he was made an honorary Doctor of Civil Law of Oxford University in 1852 and knighted by Queen Victoria in 1853.

Following the death of his wife in 1851, he partially retired but went on to write several travel books. He holidayed abroad on the Continent and in Ireland, armed with a notebook in which he wrote down facts for subsequent publication.²⁵ His final book, a

²⁰ Cormack, 31.

²¹ Sakula, 79.

²² S. Taylor, '-John Keats (1795-1821)', *J.Med.Biog.*, 2(1994), 215.

²³ J. Forbes, *Illustrations of Modern Mesmerism from Personal Investigation* (London: John Churchill, 1845), pp. IX-X

²⁴ J. Forbes, 'Homeopathy, Allopathy and Young Physic'. *Brit. & Foreign Med Rev* 21(1846), 225-65.

²⁵ R.A.L. Agnew, 'Forbes in Hibernia: the narrative of a Scottish Physician's visit to Ireland in 1852', *J.Irish Coll.Phys.Surg.*, 21(1992), 40-44.

philosophical work entitled *Of Nature and Art in the Cure of Disease*, appeared in 1857. This ran to a second edition in 1858.²⁶

For health reasons, Forbes had reluctantly declined an invitation to set up a military hospital at Smyrna (Izmir) at the time of the Crimean War (1854-56). He did not work with Florence Nightingale (1820-1910) but they corresponded as late as February 1860 after her return from the Crimea.²⁷ Although they were neighbours for two or three years from 1856 to 1859, there is no record that he ever met with Florence Nightingale socially.

By 1859 Sir John began to suffer from falls and virtually retired from public life. The years were taking their toll and he decided to donate his large library to his old alma mater in Aberdeen — on condition that the College paid the cost of removal to Marischal College.²⁸ Most of these books were later transferred to King's College, Aberdeen, according to Mickerson. Forbes also made a will bequeathing small sums of money to his sisters-in-law and to Sir James Clark; a cottage at Fordyce with its land was to be sold and the proceeds given to the Minister and Master of the Parish School as trustees to fund book prizes for the boys at Fordyce School.²⁹

For the last two years of his life Forbes lived in the quiet rural surroundings of Whitchurch on the borders of Oxfordshire and Berkshire in Swanston House which belonged to his son, Alexander Clark Forbes. Also in residence were his 36 year old barrister son (with his large family and servants) and Forbes's elder brother, Alexander, who had made his fortune in Mexico before returning to live with Sir John in London in 1858. Sadly, between 1859 and 1861, Sir John began to be more disabled by cerebral atheroma and became housebound. He is also said to have suffered from emphysema and cardiac enlargement.³⁰ It is good to know that he was visited regularly by Sir James Clark during these last two years of his life.³¹ He died peacefully on 13 November 1861, just before his seventy-fourth birthday.

In December 1861 Forbes's son arranged for his mother's remains to be removed from Kensal Green Cemetery in London and to be re-interred alongside those of her husband in a new family grave in St Mary's Churchyard at Whitchurch. Inside the Church there is a memorial plaque to Eliza Forbes alongside which is a plaque to Sir John, showing his family coat of arms and motto 'Labore Robore Spe', with the text: 'Cast thy bread upon the waters: For thou shalt find it after many days' (Ecclesiastes, Chapter 11, Verse 1).³²

So ends this story of John Forbes's journey from Cuttlebrae to Whitchurch. Happily, his final years were spent with his family in the tranquil surroundings of Swanston House. Abroad his life had been honoured by his membership of many

²⁶ There is a copy in the Library of the Liverpool Medical Institution.

²⁷ F. Nightingale, Letter to Sir John Forbes, 23 February 1860. West Sussex Record Office ADDMS No 2545.

²⁸ Minutes of Marischal College, Aberdeen, 5 April 1859. Personal Communication, Mrs M.I. Anderson-Smith, Sub-librarian, University of Aberdeen.

²⁹ Will of Sir John Forbes dated 20 December 1858. West Sussex Records Office, ADDMS No 2545.

³⁰ Bishop, 260.

³¹ Cormack, 46.

³² R.A.L. Agnew, 'John Forbes (1787-1861). In Memoriam: From Cuttlebrae to Whitchurch', *J. Med-Biog.*, 2(1994), 191.

esteemed academic societies;³³ at home his merit had been recognized early by his election as a Fellow of the Royal Society and later by his appointment as Royal Physician. Above all, he is universally acknowledged as the translator of Laënnec.

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³³ Cormack, 45.

³⁴ W.A. Greenhill, Forbes, Sir John (1787-1861) in Dictionary of National Biography ed by L. Stephen and S. Lee (London: Oxford University Press for Spottiswoode & Co., 1967-68), 7; pp. 405-07.