

A most learned country doctor

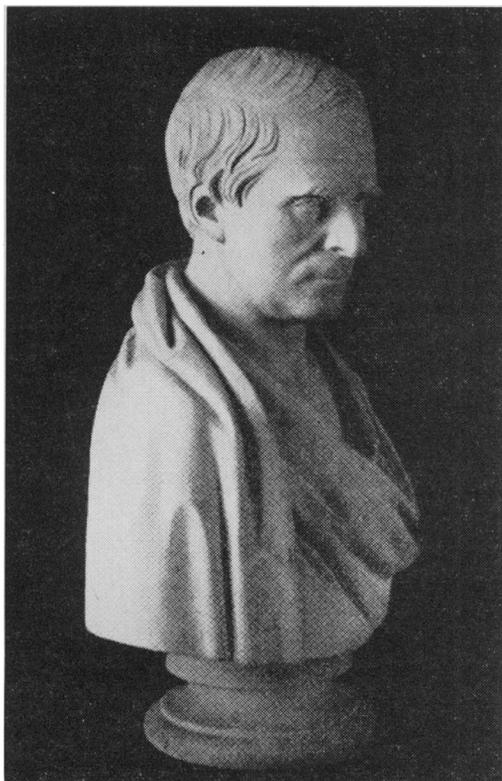
Francis Adams (1796-1861)

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"It was an extra-ordinary thing, it has been said, that the most learned physician in Britain and probably in Europe, should have been at the same time a country surgeon in a small village on Deeside."¹

SOME months ago while engaged on a private project of research into the history of medicine, three plump volumes of the works of Paulus Aegineta came into my hands. Paulus of Aegina, who has been described as the last of the classical Greek physicians lived towards the end of the sixth and beginning of the seventh centuries A.D.;² about the time when the English were just consolidating their hold on Britain and when Eadwine, King of Northumbria was making himself overlord of this country.

As his name indicates, Paul was born on the island of Aegina which lies opposite Epidaurus in Argolis. He studied and practised medicine in Alexandria.



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While reading this work one felt Paul of Aegina might with justice be called a true general practitioner, it is not of him I wish to speak but of his translator—for I read him in translation as my Greek is non-existent and my Latin a mere memory.

Though I found the translation of the original work highly interesting, the commentaries—which are as voluminous as Paul's own writings—especially caught my attention. They show, besides a knowledge of the Greek and Latin medical authors of antiquity, that our subject, Francis Adams, was well versed in the writings of the Arabian physicians and in those of later medical authors while his knowledge of ancient classics was equally wide. One's first impression—strengthened when one realised that he had translated the works of Hippocrates, edited and translated the writings of Aretaeus of Cappadocia (a writer whose descriptions of disease are so clear and concise), translated classical Greek works, written learnedly on the relation of the Greek and Latin languages and even had

published a book of poems translated from English into Greek—was that he was some well-read, perhaps theoretical physician, working in the cloistered seclusion of a college in some ancient university.

It was with great surprise and interest that when I began to investigate as to whom this erudite translator Dr Francis Adams could be, I found that he was a busy country doctor.

How a man whose practice, as he himself described it, “. . . was not inconsiderable . . .” could have driven himself to the long severe toil of his translations of the ancient medical authors is difficult for us to understand. His application speaks well for the discipline of mind which, surely, could only be found in one born and brought up in the old Scottish tradition.

Before the days when the typewriter and tape recorder had taken much of the drudgery out of such a task, he nevertheless was able to care for a busy country practice; which during the wintertime would mean many long hours in the saddle, battling with snowdrifts, sleet, wind and rain. His practice which though extensive—and again in his own words—“. . . was not very lucrative” was centred in the small Kincardineshire town of Banchory on Deeside near the point where the bustling Water of Feugh joins the river Dee on its way to Aberdeen and the sea.

It was in 1796 in the Aberdeenshire village of Lumphanan, north-east of the Loch of Auchlossan and about 11 miles north-west of Banchory along what is now the A980 road that Francis Adams was born. The village of his birth has the reputation of being the site of the last stand of Macbeth and also of Macbeth’s tomb.

Being only a gardener, Francis’ father was not in a position to give his son an expensive schooling.

Like many another famous Scot he commenced his education in the village school; but whether he went on from there to the Aberdeen Grammar School is not known. It would be good to be able to report that he was a star pupil, carefully nurtured in the humanities by the village dominie and that he gained high honours at Aberdeen University where he proceeded on a bursary in 1809 at the early age of 14 years—not an unusual accomplishment at that period. There is, however, no record of any outstanding ability either at school or university; indeed he has said that he had been in his early youth “. . . shamefully mistaught”³.

It was while at university he met, at the age of 15, a young man of much more advanced education whose attainments he seems to have admired; and he decided to emulate them. With this in view, Francis, in his own words, “. . . began devoting seventeen hours a day to the study of Virgil and Horace. . . . I read each of these six or seven times in succession. Having mastered the difficulties of Latin literature, I naturally turned my attention to Greek . . .” “I have read” he goes on, “almost every Greek work which has come down to us from antiquity, with the exception of the ecclesiastical writers”³.

In 1813, at the age of 17 years he graduated M.A., following which achievement he left Aberdeen for the city of Edinburgh where he began, as an extra-mural student, his study of medicine; engaging himself as was usual at that time and for some period later, as an unqualified assistant or apprentice to an established doctor. During the two years he was so occupied, he must have made good use of his time and of the opportunities which were open to him to learn the rudiments of his profession for at the end of this period we find him on his way to London. This was in the later part of the year of Waterloo (1815) and within a few weeks of his arrival he had passed the examination which admitted him to the membership of the Royal College of Surgeons. He was then only 19 years of age.

It was not until 1819, at the age of 23 that he finally settled in Banchory and commenced practice on his own. Of his movements during the intervening four years, there is no record; but he would no doubt be gaining experience either in London or probably in the Scottish capital with the doctor under whom he had studied and who,

no doubt, would be glad to welcome him back as he would hold him in high regard on account of his diligence and discipline of mind. Once settled in Banchory nothing could ever tempt him to leave it; though he was later, as a result of his published works offered important academic posts. There he toiled for 40 years gaining the love of his patients and bringing many children into the world during this time—we know from his writings that he was especially interested in obstetrics.

Not long after his arrival in Banchory he wooed and won the daughter of a local landowner but was fated to lose her by the time he was 49, when he was left with a family of seven children¹ whose care and education was added to his already full life.

At that time he must have been nearing the end of his many years work on Paulus Aegineta though there was much more left for him to accomplish among the ancient authors. The care of his family was never—as in the case of so many geniuses—allowed to go by default.

He could always find time to interest himself in their classical studies—and what better teacher could they have had? They were also introduced to the study of nature; the flowers and birds in which Deeside still abounds. It was no doubt as a result of these studies that one of his sons A. Leith Adams, the discoverer of the fossilized pigmy elephants of Malta, later became Professor of Natural History in Cork.³

In a letter written just after the Indian Mutiny to his second son Francis,¹ who was then a serving officer with the Madras Grenadiers, one can sense the deep bond of affection which bound him to his children. Sadly enough only two years later this son died at the early age of 28 years, like so many young men at that time a victim of the climate and conditions of life in India.

The house which Francis Adams took on his arrival in Banchory was the Old Manse where he continued to live until the day of his death. Was it fate which decreed that he should choose this very house? For this was where George Campbell, later to become Professor of Divinity and Principal of Marischal College, Aberdeen, had lived and where in its old turret window he had sat and written his translation of the four Gospels.

Professor Campbell had died the year Francis Adams was born and it was 36 or 37 years later that the latter sat in the same turret window and began his greatest work, the translation of Paulus Aegineta, and here all his later writing was done.

What was Adams like? To give us some idea we have a bust which was presented to Aberdeen University by his son Professor A. Leith Adams, F.R.S.⁴ This shows a man of finely cut countenance, wise, sympathetic and discerning. A photograph in an article by Professor John Craig shows the same face and features somewhat older, weatherbeaten and rugged—as we know he spent many long hours in the saddle—with keen, piercing eyes of one who would see through pretence yet give kindly consideration to human frailties. One can imagine too that he was a man of dry but not cruel wit. He made no pretence or show for in this studio portrait he had made little attempt at personal elegance but was content to appear as himself in his badly fitting country-made clothes. He enjoyed intelligent conversation and his friends liked his charming understanding, his quick comprehension and acute grasp of the matters under discussion.

Often riding back from some country visit he allowed his grip on the reins to slacken as he pondered, probably over some more than usually difficult Greek construction, with the result that his mount would stop and fall to cropping the grass alongside the track. Alerted by the extra tension on the reins the rider would bestir himself and, gathering up the reins, continue to jog his way homeward to his evening meal. After his meal in the evenings his first task, before he took up his work on his book, was to oversee his children's lessons, only then would he return to his reading or translating and writing his commentaries by candle-light; or perhaps the light of one of the new improved Argand

lamps fed by the oil from the flourishing whaling industry of Aberdeen; for the use of mineral oil for lighting purposes only came in in the second half of the nineteenth century. The long day, much of it spent in the open air would soon take its toll and he would be overcome by sleep—but only for two hours when he would waken to work until five in the morning after which he slept again before his daily round of seeing his patients at ten. The quiet hours of the night would be interrupted by no telephone bell and with his household retired he would fear no disturbance from them. Perhaps occasionally he might hear the clop, clop of a horse's hooves telling him of the approach of an anxious parent come to call him out to an ailing child, or an equally anxious young husband seeking aid for his wife who had come into labour; for his obstetric practice was wide. Every minute he could spare from his busy life as a country doctor and father of a family he would snatch to devote to his work of writing.

His greatest work—masterpiece is perhaps a better term—Paulus Aegineta, is a piece of history; a description of the medical knowledge and therapy of the seventh century A.D. handed down from Hippocrates, Galen and the other great Greek masters of medicine. To this he added a learned and interesting commentary in which he quotes from Galen, Pliny, Aetius, Oribasius, Rhazes and many other writers of long ago. He also gleaned from other classical writers what they had to tell of medicine in their days, for all educated men in those ancient times deemed it fitting that they should understand something of medicine. But to Francis the knowledge contained in the Seven Books of Paulus Aegineta, in the Works of Hippocrates, and those of Aretaeus was not just history, it was living medicine. When Francis was undergoing his training, Hippocratic medicine was still being taught in Europe.

Sigerist⁵ tells us that in the School of Medicine in Paris in 1794 courses on Hippocratic Medicine were *required* to be given but that this *requirement* was, in 1811, abolished “since all the professors were teaching Hippocratic Medicine.”

It was his friend, Dr Kerr of Aberdeen who first introduced him to the ancient medical authors and on his death Adams was able to purchase “. . . a pretty fair collection of the Greek medical authors which he had made.” It was this introduction and the acquisition of this library which was the spur to him, for he says “My ambition was always to combine extensive knowledge of my profession with extensive erudition.”

His first volume of Paulus—the first three books—was finished and published in 1834 but unfortunately his publisher fell on difficult times and the rest of the work was not completed until the Sydenham Society took up the matter ten years later and between 1844 and '47 the whole work was finally published.

The “Genuine Works of Hippocrates” followed two years later and the “Works of Aretaeus in 1856.”

Besides these works he wrote others on literary and classical subjects as has already been indicated, contributed to various reviews and other works and wrote numerous articles for medical journals on surgical, obstetrical and medical conditions and one book on “The Construction of the Placenta.” All these works brought him the acquaintance and friendship of famous people in London, in both English and Scottish Universities and on the continent. But we must not think of him as a bookworm though he was never long away from his beloved books. Even at a meal he might be seen translating an ode of Horace into Greek verse³. We must, however, first and foremost remember him as a friendly family doctor eager for knowledge, a kindly mentor to his patients and an able physician. His practical experience in clinical medicine was of great help to him when he came to write his commentaries on Paulus and Hippocrates.

To the majority of the medical profession of the present day he is unknown but his translations and commentaries are still referred to by writers on the history of medicine. For instance Owsei Temkin in his excellent translation of Soranus' Gynae-

colony falls back on Adams to elucidate several passages.⁶

Academic honours, the LL.D. of Glasgow in 1846 for his Paulus, M.D. (*honoris causa*) Aberdeen for his Aretaeus, and the offer of the Chair of Greek at his old university failed to tempt him away from the work that he loved as family doctor to the people of Deeside. With all his activities he still found time to make an occasional journey to London or Oxford and regularly to ride in the 18 miles to attend the meetings of the Aberdeen Medico-Chirurgical Society of which he held the Presidential Chair in 1844-'45.

He was a giant in his own day and to those who know of him through his works, he remains a giant today. Francis Adams died as he had lived—in harness.

Late one winter night (1861) he had been called out to a distant patient. The night was wild and wet and on his return he was wet through. For a man of 65 at the end of a tiring day this was the last straw; pneumonia supervened and he died, as he would have wished, active to the end.

Acknowledgements

I would like here to thank Professor John Craig of Aberdeen for his kindness in sending me the reprints of two articles, written by him, on Dr Adams and which I have found of great help in my search for information on the latter, and the librarians of The Royal College of General Practitioners and The British Medical Association for the assistance they gave.

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A comprehensive cervical cytology survey in a small country town. JUNE M. MAC TAGGART, M.B., Ch.B., D.P.H., JOSPEH LYONS, M.B., Ch.B., M.R.C.S., L.R.C.P., D.P.H. and F. GLORIA RICHARDS, M.R.C.S., L.R.C.P., D.Obst.R.C.O.G. *Med. Offr* 1968, 120, 331.

A pilot cervical cytology survey was carried out in a small country town (Dartmouth) with two aims—(a) to determine what technique and effort were required to obtain a good response especially from women in the most vulnerable social classes, i.e. IV and V, (b) to determine whether the clinical findings from a simultaneous examination of cervix, vagina, breasts, abdomen and urine would be such as to justify the diversion of medical and nursing manpower from other work. One thousand one hundred and ninety-one women between ages 25–60 were invited to attend. Nine hundred and ninety-four of these attended after one or two letters of invitation and 39 more after home visits by the health visitor. Of those who did not attend 100 were either 'not interested' or gave no excuse. Thirty-three were nervous of either the examination or the possible findings. Other reasons for non-attendance were 'too busy', personal or family illness, dislike of doctors or the clinic, embarrassment (1), religious objections (1).

Only two cases of carcinoma of the cervix were discovered but there were ten previously unnoticed lumps in the breast, and 22 with abdominal swellings probably due either to fibroids or ovarian cysts. Nine women had large cervical polyps and five severe prolapse. No undiagnosed diabetics were discovered. In all 15 patients required and obtained early operative treatment following diagnosis in the survey.

The overall response was considered good but the refusal rate for social classes IV and V combined (22.9 per cent) was much greater than for classes I, II, and III combined (9.8 per cent). The amount of clerical work involved for the health department staff, 750 hours, was considerable.