
WHY NOT?

Why not give Wakley credit?

CHARLES W. BROOK, CBE, FRCGP

General Practitioner, Bromley

Introduction

DURING a period of over 30 years, I have collected a considerable amount of information about Thomas Wakley, whom I have come to regard as the most important personality in nineteenth century world medicine. For a few years after qualifying as a surgeon, until he founded the *Lancet* in 1823, Wakley was a general practitioner, and therefore the Library of the Royal College of General Practitioners seemed to be the most appropriate place to house my accumulation of 'Wakleyana'.

Early career

Born in 1795 at Land Farm, Membury, Devon, Thomas Wakley was the eighth and youngest son of Henry Wakley who, although illiterate, was a most successful farmer. After early education at local grammar schools, and a short period in the merchant navy, Thomas chose medicine as a career. Following initial apprenticeships, he 'walked' the then United Hospitals of St Thomas's and Guy's and in 1817 qualified as a member of the Royal College of Surgeons. His financial resources did not allow him to be apprenticed to a London surgeon and he was obliged to become a general practitioner.

Marriage to the daughter of a wealthy merchant enabled him to practise in a fashionable part of London, but his house was destroyed by fire, and he moved to Norfolk Street, Strand, where in October 1823, with the active co-operation of William Cobbett, he established the *Lancet*. Wakley was involved in a series of libel actions, but was relentless in his attacks on leading London surgeons, accusing them of nepotism in the choice of their successors. The Royal College of Surgeons also incurred his wrath, and on one occasion he was forcibly ejected from the building.

Member of Parliament

In 1835, he was elected to Parliament as an Independent Radical representative for Finsbury. Initially, he became widely known by a speech lasting for over two hours, when he pleaded for a reprieve for the six transported 'Tolpuddle Martyrs'. He became the spokesman for victims of political repression and inaugurated many progressive measures.

His activities in connection with the medical profession were outstanding, and it was his Bill for the Registration of Medical Practitioners and for ensuring a proper standard of medical education that ultimately led to the Medical Act of 1858 and the creation of the General Medical Council. Both in Parliamentary speeches and in the columns of the *Lancet* he bitterly attacked the horrific conditions then existing in Poor Law institutions, which he described as "ante-chambers of the grave".

Editor and Coroner

As Editor, one of Wakley's outstanding achievements was the establishment of the *Lancet* Sanitary Analytical Commission in 1851, which not only enormously reduced food adulteration but led to the appointment of public analysts. As Coroner for West Middlesex, he achieved considerable publicity, and the admiration of Charles Dickens and other well known public figures. His most celebrated inquest was that held on Private White, of the Seventh Hussars, who died as a result of receiving 150 lashes of the cat: Wakley's outspoken verdict put a stop to this barbarous practice.

In memoriam

Wakley's triple activities as Editor of the *Lancet*, Member of Parliament, and Coroner proved extremely onerous, and in May 1862 he died from a pulmonary haemorrhage while on a recuperative holiday in Madeira. His embalmed body was brought back to London and interred in the catacombs of Kensal Green Cemetery. A century later commemorative ceremonies were held at Harefield, his country seat in Middlesex, which now constitutes part of the Chest Hospital, at Membury, his birthplace, and at 35 Lincoln's Inn Fields, which was for many years his London residence. At each of these places there are plaques, and in Membury Church, where he was baptized, there is a memorial tablet donated by the proprietors of the *Lancet*. In the House of Commons great tributes were paid for his outstanding activities in promoting public health legislation. His concept of the education and registration of members of the medical profession provided a model to be copied throughout the civilized world, and this alone establishes him as the foremost medical pioneer of the nineteenth century.

So, why not give credit where credit is due?

© *Journal of the Royal College of General Practitioners*, 1979, 29, 358.