

**Alexander Keiller, M.D., LL.D., F.R.C.P.E., F.R.S.E.**

By **T. A. G. Balfour, M.D.**

(Read January 16, 1893.)

Dr Alexander Keiller became a Fellow of this Society in 1866. He held a distinguished place as a physician, more especially in the gynæcological department of the profession, and was much and justly esteemed, respected, and loved by all his professional brethren.

His extensive experience, gained from many important public appointments and from a large private practice, and the numerous, varied, and valuable contributions with which, as the result of these advantages, he enriched the literature of his profession, placed him among the very foremost of those who have extended the confines of practical medicine, and furnished to his fellow-workers a tried and solid foundation upon which they may confidently build in prosecuting their further researches.

Dr Keiller was born at Arbroath on November 11th, 1811—a date easily remembered, if we adopt the mnemonics which he has humorously supplied: “I was born,” he said, “at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of the 11th year of this century.”

His father, John Keiller (or Keelor, as it is written in the burgh ticket which he obtained at Aberbrothock in 1804, and which, through the kindness of a friend, is now before me), was a merchant in that town, but seems to have been originally from Dundee, as he is stated to have *returned* to Dundee from Arbroath in 1814.

Dr Keiller's early education was, I believe, at the grammar school at Dundee; and afterwards, with a view to prepare him more thoroughly for his preliminary medical studies, he was placed under the tuition of Mr James B. Lindsay, whose fame as an educationist was widely acknowledged over the northern counties of Scotland. At that time, on a house in Union Street, Dundee, you might have seen a signboard with the unpretentious inscription—James Lindsay, Teacher of Languages; and within that house there lived a man in many respects truly remarkable—a kind of prodigy of learning.

He was a profound mathematician, an able and accomplished scientist and experimentalist, and as a linguist it would be hardly too much to say that he was *facile princeps* of all the philologists who ever lived; for there was scarcely a language spoken on earth which he did not know and could not speak. It was to the training of such a man that Dr Keiller was now entrusted. His affections were drawn out towards his teacher, and almost the last of his public acts was to pay a loving tribute to the great merits of Lindsay in a paper which he read as lately as last August before the British Association, by showing that he was among the first, if not the very first, who invented the Electric Telegraph, and had actually worked one of his own construction between Dundee and the coast of Fife; and that he also successfully experimented on electricity as a source of lighting.

Contact with such a genius could hardly fail to inspire a like enthusiasm and perseverance, though these, in the case of this pupil, were directed into other channels, and must have done much to lay the foundation of his after success and eminence, both as a careful observer and skilful inventor. Some time after the death of his father, Mrs Keiller removed with her family to Edinburgh, and took up her abode for some years in Adam Square.

Before commencing his medical studies at Edinburgh, young Keiller had shown a strong bias to anatomical pursuits, and might have been found, when fifteen or sixteen years of age, at the *Earthen Mound* (as it was then called), sitting for hours together under a temporary shelter, and by means of an old book on Anatomy studying the various human bones which he had picked up from the loads of rubbish which from time to time, since 1782, had been laid down during its formation. With a proclivity so marked, we are prepared to learn that when, in 1830, he attended the lectures of Dr Knox, who was then at the zenith of his popularity, Keiller became a favourite pupil, and that that distinguished anatomist augured well regarding his success in that science.

After taking the diploma of the Royal College of Surgeons in 1833, his neatness of hand and proficiency in anatomy doubtless commended him to Dr A. Jardine Lizars, an able and successful teacher of that science in the Argyle Square Medical School, who afterwards became Professor of Anatomy at Aberdeen, and Dr

Keiller was appointed his Prosector and subsequently his Demonstrator; and while here he made, and superintended the drawings of, a large series of dissections for a work on Regional Anatomy.

After Dr Knox retired we find Dr Keiller, in conjunction with the late Dr Skae, lecturing on Anatomy on his own account. During his student days, however, a new subject had been brought under his notice, which was destined to form the special study of his future life. Dr John M'Intosh was then lecturing with much acceptance on Midwifery, and his pupil, and afterwards class assistant, Keiller became; and in this post, and at a Dispensary which Dr M'Intosh opened and left almost entirely to his assistant's care, he had an excellent opportunity of acquiring a knowledge of those subjects of which in later life he became the able exponent, and in the successful prosecution of which he gained his laurels.

In 1835 he took his degree of M.D. at St Andrews University, and afterwards became one of its examiners in Medicine; and in 1886, as a mark of their appreciation of his merits, the Senatus conferred on him the honorary title of LL.D.

After having lectured on Anatomy for two years in Edinburgh, he went to Dundee, and, following in the footsteps of Dr M'Intosh, he took part in establishing and conducting a Medical and Surgical Dispensary there, and gave special attention to that department of it which related to Midwifery and the Diseases of Women and Children.

Having laboured for seven years at Dundee, he was induced to return to Edinburgh by the urgent request of his friends, and notably by Professor (afterwards Sir James) Simpson, with whom he was on terms of the greatest intimacy. On his return, in addition to general practice, he commenced lecturing on *Materia Medica*, and subsequently took up the subject of Medical Jurisprudence; and ultimately in 1853, on the death of Dr Campbell, who had been Lecturer on Midwifery and the Diseases of Women and Children in connection with the Royal College of Surgeons, Dr Keiller was appointed to that honourable post, and to that special department he afterwards almost exclusively devoted himself.

The mere recital of these subjects on which Dr Keiller gave his prelections shows very clearly his extensive acquaintance with various branches of Medical Science, and the amount of collateral

knowledge which he brought to bear on the subject to which at last his energies and talents were mainly directed.

In 1846 Dr Keiller was fortunate in securing as his partner in life the daughter of Major Roy, a lady in every way fitted to contribute to his happiness and comfort. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians in 1848, and was one of its examiners in Midwifery and Medical Jurisprudence; and after having for years been an active member of Council, he was elected President of that College in 1875. On the lamented death of Dr Sellar, he was chosen a trustee, and very recently held the appointment of Morrison Lecturer; in connection with which he delivered two courses of lectures devoted to the consideration of the nervous diseases of women, in which the value of his early anatomical studies and work were apparent.

In 1851 he was appointed one of the Ordinary Physicians to the Royal Infirmary, and continued to discharge the duties of that office for fifteen years. While here he was the means of securing the setting apart of a special ward for the clinical study of the diseases of women. He afterwards became Consulting Physician to that institution; and at the same time was chosen one of the Ordinary Physicians to the Royal Hospital for Sick Children, which office he held for eight years, and during that time delivered clinical lectures on the diseases of children. He also held the office of Consulting Obstetric Physician to the Royal Public Dispensary, and was one of the physicians of the Royal Maternity Hospital.

He was appointed an examiner in Midwifery at the University of Edinburgh, and from time to time lectured to the class of Midwifery in that school of learning at the request of his attached friend, Sir J. Y. Simpson. When the deeply lamented death of that most distinguished physician occurred, Dr Keiller became a candidate for the vacant chair, and many were the testimonials which he received from all parts of the world, and several of them from those who had attained distinguished positions in the profession, as to his eminent fitness to become the successor even of one so pre-eminently renowned as its late occupant. I may add that Dr Keiller was an Honorary Fellow of the Obstetrical Society of London, and an Honorary Member of the Gynæcological Society of Boston, U.S.

His writings were very numerous, and were communicated to

various Societies, both here and at London; but specially did our Obstetrical Society get the benefit of his ripe experience and soundness of judgment. For twenty or thirty years he was present at almost every meeting of that Society, and scarcely could a subject be introduced, or a specimen exhibited, on which he could not profitably dilate, as having in his own practice had cases of a similar kind which he had carefully studied.

To Dr Keiller we are also indebted for the invention and introduction of various useful instruments into obstetrical practice. In this connection it is interesting to know that a similar inventive faculty was possessed by a brother of Dr Keiller at Perth, who patented valuable machines, among which was a self-registering target, so as to avoid any risk to the marker at rifle competitions, and of this the Government, I understand, ultimately availed themselves. Another of his inventions, by his failing to renew the patent, was adopted by others, who thereby enriched themselves at his expense. As regards Dr Keiller, I may specify that it is to him that we are indebted for the introduction of caoutchouc bags into midwifery practice, he having brought them under the notice of the Obstetrical Society here at least a year before any competitor appeared on the field; and it is to be regretted that, in the minds of some, these instruments are even now associated with another name than that of Keiller, and thus he was subjected to the painful experience of the poet when he exclaimed:

“Hos ego versiculos feci, tulit alter honores;  
Sic vos non vobis,” &c., &c.—

an experience to which his brother also was not a stranger.

The retiring modesty of this estimable physician formed a marked feature of his character, and may, to some extent, have concealed his real merits, though, in the case of all who knew him well, it only added a fresh lustre to his other qualities, as in all discussions he was ever ready to acknowledge the merits of others, and there was a total absence of anything like self-assertion on his part. Sir J. Y. Simpson early observed this beautiful feature in his friend, for in 1843, in writing to him that he (Sir James) would be proud to acknowledge his zealous labours, he adds: “Do send something for our *Journals* yourself. You have in you the power of doing much more than you suppose.”

While his talents and high professional standing secured for him well-merited honour and respect, his sincerity of heart, kindly and amiable disposition, and the vein of quiet humour which he possessed, greatly endeared him to all his professional brethren, and made him a most welcome guest at their social gatherings. His removal from the midst of us has left a great blank, and caused deep and sincere sorrow, and his memory will long be cherished with affectionate regard.

Dr Keiller's attention, however, was not limited by the things of time and sense, but extended to the higher and nobler objects beyond: as his minister, the Rev. Arthur Gordon, well said, "He had wisely cultivated the spiritual as well as the intellectual side of his nature." He availed himself of the means of grace in, and was a respected elder of, St Andrew's Parish Church. He held fast the old truths of the infallible Word of God, and had no sympathy with, but grieved over, that specious and pretentious, but really shallow rationalism and infidelity of the present day. Nor was he ashamed to own that he did so, as appears also in his remarks on Mr Lindsay, when, after speaking of his philological pursuits above referred to, Dr Keiller adds: "It may be mentioned, as imparting greater value to these researches, that Mr Lindsay's attention was originally riveted on philological studies, owing to doubts which he entertained as to the authenticity of Scripture history, more especially as regarded the origin of the human race from the primal pair; but that the more he studied the different languages, dead and extant, the more his doubts gave way, and the stronger did his conviction of the truth of the literal exactness of the Scripture statements on this subject become."

Dr Keiller died at North Berwick, where his country residence was. The cause of his death was apoplexy. The shock occurred on September 18, 1892, and proved fatal on the 26th day of the month. He had reached the ripe age of 81; but till within a few days of his death his corporeal and mental vigour seemed so little impaired that his friends were joyfully anticipating that his sojourn on earth would still be considerably prolonged. A large and attached group of mourners assembled at St Andrew's Church, and conveyed the remains of their beloved friend to their last resting-place in Warriston Cemetery.