

Sir Byrom Bramwell, M.D., LL.D., D.C.L.

BYROM BRAMWELL, whose death occurred upon 27th April 1931, was the son and grandson of medical men. An Englishman by birth, descent, and sympathy—though when south of the border it would be difficult to find one who was more loyal to the country of his adoption—he came of a long line of yeoman farmers who hailed from the Duchy of Lancaster. Born at North Shields on 18th December 1847, the eldest of a large family, he was sent at an early age to Cheltenham College, where he made his mark both in the class-rooms and on the field. For three years he was a member of the cricket eleven, receiving his cap from R. T. Reid (afterwards Lord Loreburn), and during his last year he played football for the school. His success in after life was predicted by his master, J. Brook Smith, who, in a letter to his father, wrote: "Byrom has not a sufficiently exalted opinion of his powers. I am writing to request you to urge him to aim at the highest honours in his profession, for he has much more than average ability."

Upon leaving school it was only natural that he should proceed to Edinburgh, for it was at the Academy and University of Edinburgh that his father had been educated. His early promise was fulfilled at the University, for during his undergraduate career he gained many medals, and in the class of Medicine obtained 100 per cent. of the available marks. Nor did he confine himself to his books, for, *inter alia*, he captained the University cricket eleven in his second year. The popularity of "the Baron," as he was known to his intimates, was evinced by a remarkable ovation at the time of his graduation.

After acting for six months as house surgeon to Professor Spence, he was invited by Laycock, the then Professor of Medicine, to become his University Assistant. It was with reluctance that he decided to decline this invitation and the opportunity it afforded of staying in Edinburgh, but he felt that it was his duty—and one of Bramwell's striking characteristics was his sense of duty—to return to North Shields and assist his father, whose health was not too robust, in carrying on a large general practice. This was a turning-point in his career. It is interesting to speculate as to what the effect of Laycock's mental outlook, habit of thought, and general influence might have been upon an enthusiast of impressionable age whose subsequent reputation, determined

of necessity by the opportunities afforded in practice, was essentially characterised by exact personal observation, exceptional powers of logical inference, and unusual clarity of expression.

During the next five years he was strenuously engaged in general practice, while he also held appointments as Medical Officer of Health, Police Surgeon, and Physician to the local Dispensary, Fever Hospital, and Convalescent Home. Yet from the first, despite his busy life, he found time to keep records of his cases and post-mortems, a habit which he continued throughout his life, and to make the most of an experience which, as he often said, proved invaluable to him later. And how different general practice was in those days! One has only to read the vivid descriptions of personal experiences of cholera and smallpox in his *Atlas of Clinical Medicine* to realise this. For his father he had a deep affection and admiration. Thus he writes, "Any clinical ability and knowledge which I myself may have acquired are in great part due to his teaching and example, and to the experience I gained when I had the advantage of being associated with him. I well remember a most typical case of myxœdema to which my father drew my attention when I joined him in practice in the year 1869. (The first written description of myxœdema was published by Sir William Gull in 1873.) He pointed out to me all the essential features of the disease, the peculiar character of the œdema, the normal condition of the urine, the delicate pink flush on the cheeks, the transparent, waxy-like character of the skin of the face and eyelids, the dullness of the intellect, the persistent low temperature, and the fact that the patient was most susceptible to cold. All these—the most striking features of the disease—my father pointed out to me in detail. He further stated that he believed the condition was a new disease—a disease which had never been described. How well I remember the incredulity with which I received his statement." His father died in 1884 from the effects of a rheumatic carditis, and the book upon *Diseases of the Heart and Thoracic Aorta*, which was published in the same year, was dedicated to his memory.

Appointed in 1874, at the early age of twenty-seven, Honorary Physician and Pathologist to the Newcastle Royal Infirmary and Lecturer on Clinical Medicine in the Durham University School of Medicine (he had for three years previously held the appointment of Lecturer on Medical Jurisprudence), Bramwell left North Shields and commenced practice as a consulting physician in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Practice was at first scarcely to be expected, and the next five years were largely devoted to clinical and pathological observation and teaching. An indefatigable

worker, with wards under his own care, he spent much of his time in hospital, revelling in the opportunity thus afforded of acquiring clinical experience, and collecting material which was to form the basis of many of his subsequent publications. The *Transactions of the Northumberland and Durham Medical Society* at this date contain numerous contributions from his pen. It was then that he had as his colleague David Drummond, with whom he formed an intimate and lifelong friendship. Sir David Drummond many years later, when Bramwell was presented with his portrait, gives a vivid description of his personality in the Newcastle days. "When I first met him," Sir David says, "I had just returned from Germany and had only recently passed from under the beneficent and dominating influence of Professor William Stokes, my revered clinical chief; and my satisfaction may be imagined when, on my appointment as physician to the Royal Infirmary, I found in the colleague who was to be my most intimate associate on the staff, and co-worker in the same wards, a man after my own heart, and one who combined the thoroughness of the German with the courtesy and qualities of the heart and scientific enthusiasm—the characteristics of my old teacher, Stokes—of the best type of British physician. I felt that I had left the spirit of Stokes in the December of his life to meet it afresh in the springtime of Bramwell's."

Ambitious for a larger sphere for his activities, Bramwell left Newcastle for Edinburgh in 1879. His ultimate success appeared to be assured, but at first he had a hard struggle. Edinburgh was very conservative in those days. The portal for the consultant had always been through general practice, and no one in Scotland had hitherto confined himself to consulting practice at such an early age, although this was done in London and in some of the English provincial towns, and is nowadays a very general custom. But, further, he had the temerity to take a house to the west of Queensferry Street in a part of Edinburgh in which no consultant had hitherto practised. The presumption of this young man from south of the Tweed incurred the resentment of some of the senior members of the profession, and even his old friends shook their heads. It may be that his critics failed to realise that he had already had a clinical experience such as no one at his age had hitherto enjoyed in Edinburgh. To those who said to him, "No one has done this in Edinburgh," his reply was "But I intend to do so, and is there any reason why I should not?" There can be no doubt that an atmosphere of antagonism was thereby engendered which persisted for years and, as he admitted, rather embittered his outlook for many a day.

But "no difficulty baffles great zeal," and throwing himself heart and soul into the work of teaching, he soon became a tower of strength in the Edinburgh Academical School. In 1879 he commenced a course of lectures upon Practical Medicine and Medical Diagnosis—another innovation—which soon became very popular; and in 1880 he began to lecture on the Principles and Practice of Medicine, a course of lectures which he continued for many years. Appointed pathologist to the Royal Infirmary in 1882, a post which afforded him the opportunity he desired for observation and research, he became an assistant physician in 1885. The would-be consultant in those days—and this applies to the assistant physician—took no part in the clinical teaching in the wards, and little attention had previously been given to out-patient teaching in the Royal Infirmary. Bramwell's out-patient clinics became so popular that after a time he had to transfer his teaching to one of the large clinical theatres. When, in 1897, he was appointed a full physician, his Wednesday clinics on Clinical Medicine became one of the most popular classes in the Edinburgh Medical School. In 1886 he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, and during the years 1891, 1892, and 1893 he was a member of the Council. His pen was never idle during those strenuous years, his reputation as a clinician, teacher, and investigator was world-wide, and for many years he enjoyed one of the largest consulting practices in Scotland.

His appointment to the Chair of Medicine in Edinburgh in 1900 would have met with general acclamation both in this country and abroad, but this was not to be. "We thought," writes Professor Lovell Gulland, his old friend, former assistant physician, and colleague, "that his opportunity and that of the School had come, when at the death of Grainger Stewart the Chair of Medicine became vacant. Bramwell presented a marvellous collection of testimonials from every part of the world, a wonderful evidence of his fame and reputation, but to our—and his—bitter disappointment he was not elected." He continued his teaching, however, up to 1912, when his term of office as physician to the Royal Infirmary expired, and for the next five years, as physician to Chalmers Hospital, he was still in charge of wards. When his time at the Royal Infirmary came to an end, his colleagues and friends entertained him to dinner in the Royal College of Physicians, an honour which has not been extended to any other clinician in Edinburgh.

"As a clinical teacher," Professor Lovell Gulland writes, "he was superlatively good, clear, concise; dogmatic when it was possible to be so, cautious when it was not, bringing to the illustration and elucidation of a doubtful case the whole of his vast experience. He *was* the Edinburgh method of teaching at its best."

Of his teaching Dr Robert Hutchison writes, "He was pre-eminently a clinical teacher and was always happiest in the out-patient room or at the bedside. Many of his old students must have vivid recollections of his Saturday morning out-patient clinics. He was seen in these at his very best, and the keen and accurate observation which he showed, and his brilliant and sometimes dramatic demonstration of cases, were a lasting inspiration to his audience."

"No one," writes Dr S. A. Kinnier Wilson, "who in other years was associated closely with Dr Byrom Bramwell, as he then was, as senior student, house-physician, or assistant is ever likely to forget the immensely stimulating influence of contact with him. At a time when the Edinburgh school was adorned with a number of distinguished men on the medical side, when its reputation was supreme and its classes thronged, Bramwell easily took his place in the front rank of students' favourites."

"As a consulting physician," writes Professor W. T. Ritchie, "Sir Byrom Bramwell stood in the very forefront, not only because of his intellectual attainments, but also inasmuch as his professional colleagues knew that in him implicit trust and confidence could be reposed. A clinician of vast experience, most impressive manner, and extraordinary sound judgment, he had the true clinical instinct of recognising and interpreting the essential while discarding the immaterial. In an incredibly short time he would solve the problem of a difficult case; his opinion regarding diagnosis, prognosis, and treatment was authoritative; he was the final court of appeal."

"Byrom Bramwell," writes Dr Robert Hutchison, "was a type of physician now becoming rare, for although his special leanings were towards neurology, yet he touched medicine at every point, and wherever he touched he adorned."

Sir Humphry Rolleston, the President of the Royal College of Physicians of London, in presenting a replica of his portrait to the sister college in Edinburgh, said of him: "To recite what he has done for medicine would be a task like reading an address on the modern advances of the last forty years."

There were indeed few departments of medicine upon which he did not leave his mark. During thirty years, from the time when he commenced practice in Newcastle to the end of the century, several books and more than a hundred and sixty communications issued from his pen. His work on *Diseases of the Spinal Cord*, published in 1881, was richly illustrated by sections and drawings, chiefly made by his own hand. It was translated into German, French, and Russian, while several editions were reproduced

in America. His *Diseases of the Heart and Thoracic Aorta*, published in 1884, was largely a record of personal experience, both clinical and pathological, and again its numerous illustrations were mainly derived from his own work. This book attained a great success in its time, and was often referred to in his lectures by one of the most distinguished German clinical teachers of the day; but being produced immediately before what may be called the instrumental epoch of cardiology, it is not now consulted as much as its usefulness deserves. *Intracranial Tumours* was published in 1888. Dr Harvey Cushing of Boston, in referring to this work in his 1930 Lister Memorial Lecture, remarked: "It has been said that if some unusual clinical condition turns up concerning which one seeks information, an account of it is likely to be found in Jonathan Hutchinson's *Archives*. To this I would like to add, particularly for the benefit of neurologists, that if Hutchinson fails, then try Byrom Bramwell." In this book too Bramwell was the first to draw attention to the connection of tumours of the pituitary body with an excessive development of fat and the presence of diabetes. His monumental *Atlas of Clinical Medicine* in three large volumes, illustrated by many coloured plates, some of them perfect examples of the lithographer's art, was issued between 1892 and 1896. The work on *Anæmia and Diseases of the Blood-forming Organs and Ductless Glands*, published in 1899, a record of his personal experience, was a comprehensive account of what was then known in this department of medicine. But of all his publications his *Clinical Studies*, which appeared in eight volumes from 1903 to 1910, were most widely read by the profession. Embodying as they did his bedside teaching and clinics, they had a large circulation in this country and in America.

Among Bramwell's particular contributions to the advance of medicine, it may be recalled that he was the first, in 1875, to introduce the arsenical treatment of pernicious anæmia, which was the method employed all the world over prior to the recent introduction of liver therapy. Again, in 1872, in a paper read to the Northumberland and Durham Medical Society, he described for the first time the transmission of scarlet fever by milk supply. He was a strong advocate of the compulsory notification of phthisis long before its introduction, and in 1893 he introduced the thyroid treatment of psoriasis and other skin diseases. Then in 1902 he first described a condition of infantilism due to pancreatic disease.

Honours naturally came to him, though he was not one of those who sought them. The Universities of Edinburgh, St Andrews, and Birmingham conferred on him their honorary LL.D. degrees, and from the University of Durham he received the degree of D.C.L. He was chosen

in 1899 to deliver the Morison Lectures in the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, and in 1910 he was elected President of that College. In 1885 he presided over the section of Medicine, and in 1898 over that of Neurology, at the Annual Meeting of the British Medical Association. He became President of the Medico-Chirurgical Society of Edinburgh in 1909, and President of the Association of Physicians of Great Britain and Ireland in 1923, when his admirable summing-up of several of the discussions was the subject of general comment. In the same year he was elected under By-law XXXVIII (b) a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians of London, the first clinician to receive that distinction, and at this time his friends and former pupils took occasion to present him with his portrait. At this time too he was elected the first Honorary President of the Royal Medical Society of Edinburgh, a distinction which he greatly prized. In 1924 he received the honour of knighthood "for services to medicine." He was a corresponding member of the Neurological Societies of Paris and Philadelphia and of the German Neurological Society, and an honorary member of the Société des Médecins Russes de St Petersburg, of the American Neurological Association, and other medical societies in this country.

A man of particularly robust physique, of boundless energy and power of concentration, a strenuous, untiring, and very thorough worker, every moment of his day from early morning to bedtime was, in his earlier years, fully occupied. His activities were at their height at a time when attention was focussed upon the application of morbid anatomy to symptomatology. A profuse note-taker, he was able to review his personal experience upon the topic of the moment. Possessed to a quite exceptional degree of the faculties of observation, clarity of thought, logical inference, perspective, and judgment, he regarded the methods of precision and of the laboratory from the standpoint of the clinician as adjuncts which were to be valued in direct relation to the information they afforded and their practical utility. He did not suffer fools gladly; he had no use for the "text-book clinician," nor for the man whose thoughts were always "in the air." But for a great scientific thinker (and here Hughlings Jackson was his prototype) he had an admiration almost amounting to reverence. He took little interest in medical politics and procedure, and committee work did not appeal to him. On the other hand, his mental attributes were such as would have insured his success at the Bar or on the Bench.

A good athlete as a youth, he continued to take a keen interest in cricket and football up to the end. Even a few years before his death he

liked nothing better than to spend a whole day watching county cricket at "Lords" or at the "Oval." A keen angler from boyhood, he boarded as a student with William Stewart of *The Practical Angler*; this no doubt accounted for his skill with the "upstream worm." Many a pleasant day he spent on Loch Leven in an annual competition between the staff of his wards and that of the late Dr George Gibson, each side captained by its Chief, and many a happy day too he had on Threipmuir, in the Pentlands, during the years 1896 to 1919, when Baberton House was his country residence.

The last few years of his life, after the death of his beloved wife, who had done so much to encourage him and in his earlier days to help him with his work, were spent at 10 Heriot Row, where his wife's cousin and lifelong friend, Miss Meggison, tended him with every care. His time was largely occupied in reading, and he kept himself abreast of all that was going on through the columns of the *Times*. He took a special interest in astronomy, and would read any popular books upon which he could lay his hands, more than once saying that if he had to begin life over again he would adopt astronomy as the profession of his choice. He lived for his children and his grandchildren, whose health, happiness, and success were ever in his thoughts. All the old antagonisms and struggles were memories of the distant past. He lived, indeed, at peace and happiness with all men. The visits of his old friends Sir David Drummond, Professor Lovell Gulland, Sir Edward Sharpey-Schafer, the late Dr John Macdougall of Cannes, Dr G. Sandison Brock, Sir Ashley Mackintosh, Dr F. N. Kay Menzies, Dr R. M. Ronaldson, and many others, were to him a special pleasure; while he often spoke of the visit paid him by his former house-physicians Dr George Gibson, Mr J. M. Graham, and Dr Hugh Davidson on his seventy-fifth birthday. Clear in his mind to the very end, he greeted Dr Fergus Hewat, who called to see him the day before his death, though speaking with difficulty, by telling him that he was glad to hear that he had been elected a member of the Threipmuir Angling Club, though the fishing had never been so good there after the old plantation was cut down.

There are many who will feel of Bramwell as did Sir David Drummond when he wrote: "He is long to be remembered as one of the greatest clinicians of our time, but to me his reputation as a physician is overborne by the memory of a loyal and warm friend whom to know was to love and to admire."

E. B.