

SECTION OF MEDICAL HISTORY IN THE BRITISH
MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

(Victorian Branch)

At a meeting of the section held in the Medical Society Hall, Melbourne, on 13 April 1959, Mr. John Hueston read a paper on Baron Dupuytren (1777-1835).

Mr. Hueston began by outlining the contemporary scene of Napoleon's First Empire, pointing out the wonderful opportunities for gaining surgical experience provided by the stream of casualties from his campaigns. The Paris hospital services were then described, particular attention being paid to the Hôtel Dieu, the oldest and best known of the Paris hospitals. It was at that hospital that Dupuytren achieved his pre-eminent position in French surgery, after having risen to the Chair of Clinical Surgery and the position of senior surgeon within fifteen years of receiving his degree. In contrast to his popular rival, Astley Cooper, he had many unlikeable characteristics and was reputed to be 'first among surgeons; last among men'. The remainder of the paper dealt with Dupuytren and these two aspects.

'First among surgeons' he surely was if only for his brilliant *Leçons Orales*, each of which presented his ideals in clinical instruction and consisted of a concise history taken in front of the students, a masterly demonstration of the clinical features of the case, and a pronouncement on treatment and prognosis. While eponymously immortalized for the retraction of palmar fascia, an ankle fracture and his classification of burns, Dupuytren himself considered his major achievements to be his cure for lachrymal fistula, his amputation of the mandible, and his operation for artificial anus (*anus contre nature*) with his enterotome, the prototype of the modern colostomy crushing clamp.

'Last among men' seems no exaggeration when Dupuytren's tyranny of dressers, students and patients is considered along with his unscrupulous treatment of his colleagues and his exploitation of Court connections. However, his personality can be justifiably regarded as typical of an ignorant village lad who was taken to Paris, where his belated education combined with a great natural ambition to produce the man whose personal maxim was '*ce qu'il faut craindre avant tout c'est d'être un homme médiocre*'.

Dupuytren's death at fifty-eight years in 1835 had been preceded eighteen months before by a mild cerebral thrombosis which had rendered pathetic this last phase of his life where the greatest clinical teacher of his day was reduced to a shambling, slurring shadow of his former stature.

At the conclusion of his paper Mr. Hueston read a translation of Dupuytren's lecture on 'Retraction of the Palmar Fascia'.