

JAMES CURRIE—THE PHYSICIAN AND THE QUEST*

by

ROBERT W. SHAPIRO†

ON 24 March 1775, there appeared in *Pinckney's Gazette* of Philadelphia an article defending the position of loyal British subjects living in the colonies of America. The command of language and the political maturity of the article belied the fact that the writer was a young man only eighteen years of age. That young man was James Currie, and the events of his early years were filled with a turbulence which closely paralleled the unrest of the emerging nation in which he found himself.

Born in Annandale, Scotland, on 31 May 1756, Currie was the only son of James Currie, a minister of the Scottish Church, and Jean Boyd, daughter of a Scottish writer. When James was thirteen his mother died of consumption, and he received his early training at the hands of his father and of a Dr. Chapman, who conducted the grammar school at Dumfries. At the age of fifteen Currie had the desire of most young boys, to go to sea and have strange adventures in far-off lands. However, unlike the youthful dreams of most men, those of Currie soon became a reality. His father had a merchant friend who urged him to allow James to enter his service and go to America, and in 1771 he sailed for Virginia, to a land filled with the dangers and hardships which characterize any new frontier.

The rigours of the new land had a very early effect on young Currie. Soon after his arrival he caught an intermittent fever which returned to plague him throughout his stay in America, and which several times brought him close to death. His merchant-benefactor failed to carry out the promises he had made to the boy's father, and the work in commerce was not fully to Currie's liking. Despite these disappointments and misfortunes, he attempted to make the best of the situation, as he later recorded in a journal which he kept while sailing to Martinique:

Saturday, Sept. 21 (1776)—Towards evening I recollected that this was the anniversary of my arrival in America, being the very day of the month in which the ship Cochrane, five years ago, cast anchor in Hampton Road. This brought on a long train of thoughts; I reviewed my five years servitude, and found, as I thought, the good and ill pretty exactly balanced. On the one hand, I remembered the many gloomy hours I had passed when labouring under the effects of pain and sickness—I remembered the hard usage and numberless mortifications I had undergone during the first part of my apprenticeship, and the misfortune I had of living with a man from whom nothing could be learned that belonged either to the man of business or the gentleman;—and I did not forget that when I was on the point of being highly promoted, and of obtaining an establishment, perhaps for life, my hopes had been blasted, and I was again thrown on the wide world to buffet against the stream. On the other hand, I found that my

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† Yale Medical School, New Haven, Connecticut.

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misfortunes had, perhaps, hardened me to the sense of future ones. I found, upon the whole, that my situation had been much more agreeable than that of other young fellows in my way;—that I had the happiness of living in a place famed for its politeness [Richmond], where I had kept the first company—where I had enjoyed numberless scenes of innocent mirth and festivities—and where I had formed connections which ought to have been of service to me at the time, and the memories of which would give me pleasure while life lasted. I also reflected that I was happy enough to have my conduct highly approved of by my employers;—that though my schemes had been frustrated, yet no prudence of mine would have prevented it; and though I had many things to blame myself for, yet, upon the whole, the reflections of my own mind were not very severe.¹

Two years after Currie arrived in America his father died. This event was of great concern to him, not only because of the loss of a parent that he loved very much, but also because it left his surviving sisters poorly provided for. However, having no means of returning to England, he remained in America, leaving his sisters in the care of his aunt, Miss Christian Duncan.

Engaged in a profession which did not altogether suit him, Currie turned his active mind to other pursuits. Literature occupied a great deal of his time, but the political events which began to explode around him soon captured his full attention, and at an early age Currie demonstrated his ability as a political commentator and spokesman. From this time onward, the many demands of his varied life were never so great that the political events of the moment did not receive his closest scrutiny. In the following passage from a letter to his uncle, the Rev. George Duncan, we can see that at eighteen Currie had already developed the ability to maintain a level objectivity in the face of his own emotional involvement and his own loyalty. It also demonstrates that he arrived at what history has proved to be a highly realistic evaluation of the situation around him, an evaluation at which many older and supposedly wiser heads were unable to arrive.

As the present unhappy disputes between Great Britain and the colonies have arisen to such a height, that they in some measure interest every individual of both countries, you, perhaps, may wish to know my sentiments regarding them. I will not enter into the merits of these disputes; it is too ample a field for discussion and I am a very poor judge of matters of this kind. Suffice it to say that I think administration has been and is undoubtedly much to blame, and that the colonies have certainly carried things to a very extravagant height in consequence of it. But what-ever the cause may be, just or unjust, the spirit of enthusiasm is certainly gone forth, and God only knows when it will be laid. The people of this country are bred up to the gun from their infancy; without dispute they are as fine marksmen as any in the universe. The face of the country is entirely covered with woods, consequently excellently fitted for ambuscade, and a single gun can be fired at a body of troops without their being able to discover their enemy. For these, and a number of other reasons, which I have not time to enumerate, I am clearly of the opinion that though the colonies may be distressed, they never can be conquered; and that if matters should ever get to that height, it would probably end in the utter ruin of the mother-country.²

As war between England and her American colonies became closer to a reality, life for loyal British subjects living in the colonies became more and more difficult. In a letter to his aunt, Miss Christian Duncan, dated Cabin Point, 1 September 1775, Currie indicates the change that had occurred from

the relatively peaceful state of affairs before revolution filled the air to the turbulence of the months preceding the open rebellion:

. . . now the scene is changed;—the nearer approach of the horrors of a civil war (more particularly dreadful to my countrymen in their particular situation) has thrown a gloom upon every face, and cast a damp upon all our enjoyment. This colony exhibits at present a surprising scene of uproar and confusion—all law or government is in a manner abolished, except the law of force which, I believe, will soon be the universally established law of the land. How it may end, God alone knows; I pretend not to conjecture, but of this I am well satisfied in my own mind—that the British ministry must give way, if ever matters are again accommodate. . . . The flame of liberty in this colony has been productive of many irregularities—men of zeal without knowledge seldom know where to stop, and acts of cruelty and oppression have been exercised on some of my countrymen which are a disgrace to the noblest of causes. . . .³

It was in protest against these acts of cruelty that Currie wrote to the *Pinckney Gazette* on 14 March 1775, and became, at eighteen, an eloquent defender of the rights of man.

Currie was not entirely without relatives in the New World, as he had a cousin, Dr. James Currie, who was the principal physician of Richmond, the capital of Virginia. Dr. Currie of Richmond was a learned man, and was later to become a friend and correspondent of Benjamin Franklin. When life at Cabin Point became impossible for a loyal British subject, Currie went to live with his Richmond cousin. Dr. Currie had a great deal of influence on young James, encouraging him to broaden his knowledge, and his library allowed the youthful Currie to devote much of his time to literature. Being dissatisfied with the mercantile profession, Currie decided to undertake the study of medicine, and made plans to attend medical school at Edinburgh as soon as possible, with a view to returning to America to practise upon the completion of his studies.

Having made this decision, Currie petitioned the Convention of the Colony of Virginia in the spring of 1776 for leave to return to Great Britain. The Convention gave its permission, and Currie and forty other young men soon sailed from Virginia. However, before clearing land, an armed vessel seized the ship in the name of the Convention and confined all of the passengers. Currie was appointed by the other passengers to make a protest to the Convention. This protest being of no avail, Currie returned to the ship, where all the passengers' belongings were taken from them and the men turned out to forage for themselves. Currie returned to Richmond, but was soon drafted into the army and ordered to New York. After supplying a substitute he was drafted a second time, and again attempted to leave the country. He eventually contracted to be put in charge of a vessel sailing for Martinique, and after several delays caused by the Convention, another attack of fever, and a close escape from drowning, finally sailed from Nixonton, North Carolina, in September 1776.

Thus, at twenty, Currie left America, having gone through disease, personal misfortune, and political persecution during his years there. However, several aspects of his future life were already determined. His personal experience with disease combined with the influence of his cousin had led him into the field of medicine. It is probable that the many bouts of fever that he suffered and that

he watched others suffer, prompted him to concentrate on fever in his future medical life, a life in which he was to become a pioneer in the development of the clinical thermometer and a major figure in the history of hydrotherapy. The experience of living in a land as its national consciousness was emerging had given Currie a fascination with politics which was to remain with him for the rest of his life, while the experience of much ill-treatment at the hands of others had much to do with his later dedication to social and political reform. In addition, during his stay in the colonies, he developed his consuming interest in literature.

Later Life

Soon after his return to England in the spring of 1777, Currie travelled to Edinburgh where his aunt and sisters then resided. He entered the University of Edinburgh Medical School during the winter, and, in the course of the next four years, earned the respect of his professors, including the famous Dr. Cullen. During his student years Currie demonstrated his interest in the effects of temperature on the human body, and he read before the School two papers on the effects of cold on the living body in health, its operation in inducing disease, and its influence as a remedy.⁴ He also became a member of the Speculative Society, and continued to read avidly in literature and philosophy.

Having completed his medical education at Edinburgh he decided to take a medical appointment in the army, and accordingly obtained an introduction to General Sir William Erskine, who nominated him for the position of Surgeon's Mate in his own regiment. Before joining the regiment, Currie heard that the government was planning to form a medical staff in Jamaica, and he became interested in joining this expedition as a physician. He was given to understand that the expedition would sail before the date for granting medical degrees at the University of Edinburgh, and he therefore travelled to Glasgow where, after certain formalities, he received his diploma in April 1780. However, upon his arrival in London he discovered that another physician had received the position he desired. Despite this disappointment, he continued in his resolve to go to Jamaica, but friends and relatives pressed him to remain in England, and after visiting several cities in search of a favourable place in which to settle, Currie chose Liverpool, where he arrived in October 1780.

Something may be gleaned of the force of Currie's personality from his rapid acceptance into the cultural and social life of Liverpool, despite the fact that he came as a complete stranger. He soon became a close friend of William Roscoe, one of the most gifted men of letters of his time. The author of *Leo X* and *Lorenzo di Medici*, Roscoe carried on a correspondence with almost everyone of importance in the fields of politics, literature, and reform. Together with Roscoe, Currie established the Liverpool Literary Society, which soon included in its membership most of the culturally prominent people of Liverpool. Currie was elected President of the Society and, during the nine years of its existence, delivered papers on such topics as 'The Division of Legislative Powers', 'On Eloquence', 'On Physiognomy', and 'Effects of the Different Branches of Cultivation of Mind on the Individual'.

Like Roscoe, Currie was an avid correspondent, and his letters kept him in touch with such men as Erasmus Darwin, who refers to Currie in his *Zoonomia*, William Wilberforce, Sir Joseph Banks, Thomas Creevey, Gilbert Burns, Thomas Percival, Dr. Bell, Sir Walter Scott, and many others.

As a physician, Currie soon won an outstanding place for himself in Liverpool. Arriving unknown in 1780, he was called upon during a smallpox epidemic in 1781 to draw up an address to the inhabitants of Liverpool advocating a general inoculation. In 1786 he was appointed physician to the Liverpool Infirmary; in 1790 he was elected to the Medical Society of London; in 1792 he became a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh; and in 1793 a Fellow of the Royal Society.

Currie remained active in all his fields of interest until 1804, when his health became significantly worse. He regretfully left Liverpool in search of a more favourable climate, and settled down at Bath, where he became a great favourite of the people of the town, and where he resolved to resume his practice. However, during a trip to Sidmouth he was taken severely ill, and died there on 31 August 1805. His son reported that 'his disease proved an enlargement of the heart, with incipient ossification of its adjoining vessels, accompanied by extraordinary wasting and adhesion of the right lung'.⁵ Thus James Currie died at the age of forty-nine. During his life he had become one of the most prominent practising British physicians and researchers of his time, a perspicacious political critic, a leader of social reform, a pioneer epidemiologist, prolific author and critic, and a prominent biographer. Just as his early concern for the rights and improvement of others had moulded much of the personality of the young Currie, so this same concern had moulded his later life into one of enormous scope.

Medicine

Referring to the work of John Hunter, Dr. Currie wrote in the *Philosophical Transactions* of 1792:

In his masterly 'Experiments and Observations on Animals Producing Heat' Mr. Hunter has objected to taking the heat of the human body by introducing the bulb of the thermometer into the mouth because it may be affected by the cold air in breathing. The objection is well founded if the bulb be placed on the upper surface of the tongue, but if it be under it and the lips shut, the effect of respiration may be disregarded, as I have found from many hundred experiments.

Thus, the practice of placing a thermometer under the tongue was established by Currie. It is characteristic of Currie's medical work that this method was based not only on theoretical conjecture, but also on exhaustive practical experience. Throughout his medical career Currie subjected his theories to carefully controlled experiments, and accurately and systematically recorded the results of those experiments. It was through this insistence on the scientific method that Currie came to use the thermometer at all, as he introduced it clinically as a reliable means of evaluating the effects of his hydrotherapy in cases of fever. In this manner he converted hydrotherapy from a haphazard mixture of theory

and practice into a scientifically based field of medical treatment. In the process he became probably the first British physician to make any extensive clinical use of the thermometer.

Hunter had helped to initiate the use of the thermometer in Britain when he used the instrument in his investigations of animal heat in 1766. Hunter, however, made little clinical use of the thermometer, and the almost complete absence of the thermometer for following the progress of fever patients before Currie is demonstrated by the fact that one of the authoritative books on fever of the period, *An Outline of the History and Cure of Fever*, written by Robert Jackson in 1798, contains not one mention of any measurement of temperature throughout its three hundred and thirty-eight pages. It was to such an approach to the problem of fever that Currie referred when he said that without making direct measurement of the patients' heat, researchers were doomed to 'walk in darkness'.⁶ In adopting the thermometer to clinical use, Currie modified the mercurial thermometer of Hunter by bending it off behind the patient, so that the temperature could be read from behind, thus avoiding the patient's breath. This type of thermometer was constructed for Currie by Jesse Ramsden. It was not a self-registering thermometer, so that it had to be read while still in the patient's mouth. Since many of the patients Currie was treating were suffering from infectious diseases, he developed the above-mentioned bend to avoid contamination.

However, despite his revolutionary introduction of the clinical use of the thermometer, Currie's main interest was not in this instrument. From his earliest days in medical school, Currie had been fascinated by fever, perhaps because of his personal experience with this malady when he was in the American colonies. Liverpool was an ideal city for further stimulation of this interest, as it was a seaport which often raged with fever epidemics brought in on the many ships. Following the suggestions of Dr. William Wright of Jamaica, Currie came to believe that one of the most effective methods of treating fever was by the affusion of water. He then set out to test this belief, using the thermometer to aid him in making his observations.

To say that Currie was a pioneer hydrotherapist is somewhat vague unless we are more exact about the term 'hydrotherapy'. The term, of course, literally means treatment with water. However, by what means and to what specific end the water is to be used has varied tremendously throughout the course of medical history. Water, hot and cold, has been used to drink and to bathe in, to cure ailments from gout to syphilis. Hydrotherapy in the form of baths appears to have been an important part of the treatment administered by the physicians of the Temple of Aesculapius on the Island of Cos in the third century B.C. Roman culture continued the emphasis on hydrotherapy, and the baths of Caracalla and Diocletian had accommodations for sixteen hundred and three thousand persons respectively. The value of hydrotherapy was also highly esteemed in Italy in the fifteenth century, particularly after the work of Savonarola and Christopher Barzizio. In more modern times baths have been very popular in France and Germany. Physicians in Britain have also shown a great interest in hydrotherapy, and between 1697 and 1722 Sir John Floyer produced

eight editions of his book, *Inquiry into the Right Use of the Hot, Cold and Temperate Baths in England*. It is, therefore, obvious that James Currie's interest in the use of water as a treatment for illness was not a revolutionary one. Currie did not, however, see water as a non-specific cure-all for various diseases. He saw it as a possible treatment for the specific type of disease in which he was interested. He was faced with the fact that the medicine of his time had no reliable method of treating fever, and he systematically set out to find one. What was revolutionary about Currie's approach is indicated in the following statement from the preface to the first edition of *Medical Reports*:

About eighteen years ago, when I was at Edinburgh, it fell to my lot to write a paper on the influence of cold on the living body, for one of the societies of students, of which I was a member. In defending my speculations against some ingenious opponents, a perpetual contradiction occurred as to facts, which a reference to original authorities did not enable me to remove; for I discovered that the accounts given of the temperature of the system under disease, even by the most approved authors, are, with a few exceptions, founded, not on any exact measurements of heat, but on the sensations of the patient himself, or his attendants.

[I have been] . . . impressed with the belief that till more accurate information is obtained respecting the actual temperature in different circumstances of health and disease, no permanent theory of vital motion can be established, nor any certain progress made in the treatment of those diseases in which the temperature is diminished or increased.⁷

Currie thus introduced the concept of making direct and exact measurements of the symptom being treated, that is, of the patient's temperature. He not only theorized the need for this method, but proceeded to make such measurements and to record and analyse them.

Following the example of Dr. Wright's work in Jamaica, Currie used the technique of affusing water over his patients, or of immersing them in a cold or warm bath in order to reduce their temperatures. His first use of this technique occurred in 1787, during an epidemic of a contagious fever in the Liverpool Infirmary. This fever was most likely either typhus or typhoid. Currie used his affusion technique on two of the patients, and when they improved, extended it to five others, all of whom improved soon after. This led Currie to make greater use of the technique in treating other fever patients, and by the time of the publication of the first edition of *Medical Reports* in 1797 he had utilized this technique in over one hundred and fifty cases. His record of one of these cases follows:

Jan. 17, 1790. A. B., aged nineteen, a pupil of the Infirmary, caught the infection in attending the fever-ward. When I saw him, seventy-eight hours had elapsed since the first attack; he was, of course, in the fourth day of the disease. He had all the usual symptoms—head-ache, thirst, furred tongue, pain in the back and loins, with great debility. His heat was 101° and his pulse 112 in the minute.

A bucket full of salt water was poured over him as usual at noon on the 17th. A profuse perspiration followed with the cessation of all his feverish symptoms. This intermission continued for several hours, during which he enjoyed some comfortable sleep; but at five in the afternoon he was again seized with feverish rigors, followed by heat, thirst, and head-ache, as before. An hour afterwards, the hot stage was established; his heat was 100°, his pulse 100. The same quantity of cold water was again poured over him, and with similar effects. His pulse fell immediately to 80 and became more full, his heat became natural. The following night he took twenty drops of laudanum and slept well.

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On the 18th at noon, his pulse was 96 and soft; his skin moist, but a little above the natural heat. His tongue was a little furred, and his head ached; he also complained of thirst; the heat at the axilla was 100°. The same remedy was again applied. He was greatly refreshed by it. The pulse fell to 90, the skin became cool, the thirst went off, and all the feverish symptoms vanished.

On the 19th his pulse was 88, his heat natural, the thirst and head-ache gone, and his appetite improving. The ablution was repeated for the last time at the same hour of the evening.

On the 20th his pulse was 78 and soft, his tongue clean and his appetite farther improved. He had still some remains of debility on the 21st, but on the 22nd was free of complaint. This patient during his fever took no medicine but the effervescing mixture, the dose of laudanum excepted. The affusion was used four times.⁸

Carefully observing and recording temperatures with his thermometer, Currie became convinced of the beneficial results of his affusion treatment, and decided to publish his results. Thus, in 1797 he came out with the first edition of *Medical Reports on the Effects of Water, Cold and Warm, as a Remedy in Fever and Febrile Diseases*. This three-hundred-page book contained the details of Currie's observations and recordings, and his theories about the treatment of fever.

To place the publication of *Medical Reports* in perspective with the rest of Currie's life, it appeared just as Currie was becoming involved in the immense task of writing the biography of Burns and editing his poems for publication. However, Currie still managed to find time to continue his medical research and writings, and in a letter concerning the forthcoming volume of Burns to Cadell and Davies, his publishers, he wrote, 'Please to let me know if you think I ought to prepare immediately for another edition of the "Reports". I wish to correct it a good deal in one or two particulars.'⁹ At the same time, Currie was involved in establishing the Liverpool Athenaeum, a literary and scientific library and institution, and was carrying on an active medical practice in Liverpool. The first edition of *Medical Reports* met with such success that the proposed second edition was published the following year, 1798. Despite an equally enthusiastic reception to this volume, Currie's work on Burns and his embroilment in the affair of the condition of the French prisoners prevented him from publishing another edition for some years. A third, of two volumes, appeared in 1804, followed in 1805 by a fourth. However, during this period he continued his research and carried on a vast correspondence with prominent physicians all over the world concerning his treatment of fever. His work was translated into French and German, and had a great influence on the physicians of both of these countries. It particularly influenced Ernest Brandt (1835–1907), of Stettin, who developed a water treatment of typhoid fever which was used well into the twentieth century.

However, it is not really in the development of any particular treatment that Currie's work in hydrotherapy is most important. Rather, it is the careful, scientific method of experimentation, observation, and accurate recording of data, which he welded to the study of hydrotherapy, that makes him important in the history of that field. Currie was thus another in the line of scientists who fought against untested theories, against poor experimental methods, and

against inaccurate recording of data. His clinical use of the thermometer was a milestone in the history of medicine.

Currie's great concern with fever led him to examine the disease not only from the point of view of treatment, but also from the point of view of prevention, and as a result he became interested in epidemiology and the development of fever hospitals. The desirability of hospitals devoted to the isolation of patients with contagious fevers had already been discovered by physicians in Manchester where a fever hospital had existed since 1796. However, despite the great incidence of contagious fevers in Liverpool, the population was not easily convinced of the need for a house of recovery or fever wards, although Currie had proposed them as early as 1796. In the face of opposition he continued his drive for the establishment of such facilities, and in *Medical Reports* he writes:

Hospitals for such disease [contagious fevers] stand pre-eminent in point of utility over all other hospitals. . . . The benefit derived from hospitals in other cases consists in removing disease, and is confined to the patient himself, but in cases of contagion, the evils prevented are much greater than those remedied, and their benefit is by this means extended from the patient himself to the circle by which he is surrounded.¹⁰

Currie's long fight was finally successful and in 1801 his plan for the erection of a house of recovery in Liverpool was adopted. This same concern for the well-being of all people led Currie to take an active interest in another project in Liverpool, the establishment of a lunatic asylum.

The eighteenth century was notorious for the poor conditions in which the insane were kept. Squalor and brutality prevailed in the buildings in which they were herded, and treatment was almost non-existent. The medical profession in general took very little interest in the insane, and looked on the mentally ill more as objects to be kept out of the way of sane members of society than as people to be treated and, if possible, cured. That Dr. Currie's attitude toward the mentally ill was far different from this prevalent opinion is demonstrated by the following extract from a letter to the printer of the *Liverpool Advertiser*:

Of the various evils to which men are subjected there is indeed none so dreadful as insanity. Other calamities are exterior, and pass away with the flight of time; or if they are mental, they yield to the constant succession of external impressions. If human nature is unable to throw off other evils, it happily sinks under them, and death presents itself to the good and brave, as the termination of calamity. But madness, while it hastens not the approach of death, destroys all that makes life valuable. It is not a single blessing that it carries away. It preys not on the gifts of fortune, but on the attributes of reason, and strikes at once at all the powers and privileges of man!

Yet if the victims of this fearful malady were incapable of relief, as some rather imagine, we should have only to tremble at their fate, and to mourn over the degradation of our nature. But while experience teaches us that their situation is by no means hopeless, as men and as Christians, we are called on to exert ourselves in their behalf. If affliction of any kind engage our compassion, let not those be denied our pity and our succour, whose affliction is the most deep, and whose disease is the most terrible.¹¹

This letter was written to support the proposal for the establishment of a lunatic asylum in Liverpool. Largely through his efforts the resolution for the

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asylum was passed and Liverpool became one of the first cities in England to possess an institution devoted to the humane care and treatment of the insane.

Medicine was Currie's main interest, and to this field he brought the characteristics which he had developed during his early life—the concern for the rights of others, the ability to maintain a level objectivity, and a willingness to stand up against prejudice and ignorance for what he felt was right. Underlying these qualities was one basic drive, one constant aim, one persistent quest—the quest for the improvement of the human condition and it was only natural that this quest should lead him into the field of social reform, even when it was divorced from medicine.

Social Reform

In 1800, when the physician in charge of the prison hospital which housed a number of French prisoners-of-war became alarmed by the increase in disease in the hospital which he felt was due to a deficiency in the allowance of food and want of clothing, he wished to have Dr. Currie's opinion on the matter. As the war between France and England dragged on, both nations became less willing to bear the expense of feeding and clothing enemy prisoners, particularly since each felt that it was treating the other's prisoners better than their own countrymen were being treated when taken prisoner. As a result of the mounting expense and of some poor harvests, the food rations to French prisoners in Liverpool were cut down. They soon took to trading their clothing for food, and in a short time were suffering from malnutrition and exposure. Such was their condition when Dr. Currie was called in to make his examination. After a personal visit to the prison, Currie became convinced that the prisoners' food and clothing rations were drastically below what they required, and set out to do something about the situation. When his request for more food and clothing for the prisoners was turned down by prison officials, Currie, together with some of his friends, collected a temporary supply of food and clothing for the prisoners. When officials refused to accept this offer, Currie wrote a letter to Sir Joseph Banks, President of the Royal Society, protesting about the situation. Currie knew that Sir Joseph was personally acquainted with some of the members of the Board of Sick and Hurt, who had the superintendence of the prison hospitals, and he hoped that Sir Joseph might use his influence with them to effect a change for the better. Instead, Banks had the letter brought to the notice of William Pitt, the Prime Minister. The letter was referred to the Board, and an investigation begun.

To understand the reaction of the Board, it must be remembered that Currie had earlier published the 'Jasper Wilson Letter' in protest against Pitt's policies towards France. The political fervour of the time had led many people to charge Currie with being a Jacobin, and Currie's plea on behalf of French prisoners was looked on in the same light. The Board claimed that his charges were unfounded and that the prison conditions were adequate. The affair, however, began to attain some prominence, and the Mayor of Liverpool made a personal inspection of the prison and asked the Government to intervene on behalf of the prisoners. Eventually there was an increase in their food and clothing

allowance, and a general improvement in their condition. Looking back on the affair in a letter written to his good friend Thomas Creevey, M.P., Currie wrote, on 20 October 1804:

The whole of that story is a curious episode in the history of Pitt's administration; and tho' I acquit the man himself of intentional blame, yet the base minions under him starved many a poor prisoner. They wanted to bear me down by their Satanic yell of 'Jacobin! Jacobin!', but I was prepared for the scoundrels by documents which they durst not challenge to the light. . . . So they clothed those hungry wretches whom hunger had compelled to sell their covering, and made some reform in their diet. . . .¹³

In 1926 Alfred de Curzon, the French Consul in Liverpool who unearthed the letters on behalf of the prisoners-of-war, wrote this tribute to Currie:

In conclusion of this study of some months in the life of a beneficent man, let us class him with Ambroise Paré, Howard, Nightingale, and devoted physicians of all ages who had as their motto before the Red Cross began, its own device *Inter Arma Caritas*, and who, amongst, their fallen enemies, saw not adversaries, but patients to tend, men.¹³

Currie laboured not only on behalf of people who were ill-treated because of their nationality, but also for those who were persecuted for their religion. In 1790, the Dissenters of Great Britain made a general request to Parliament for the repeal of the Corporation and Test Acts. These Acts, passed in 1661 (Corporation Act) and 1673 (Test Act), prevented anyone from entering public office without receiving the Sacrament according to the Anglican rite. Such provisions were distasteful to someone who had defended the rights of man throughout his life, and as such a person Currie opposed these Acts. Although raised in the Church of Scotland and the son of a minister of that Church, Currie had a great many friends who were Dissenters, and when, in 1790, the Dissenters of Liverpool passed a resolution for the repeal of the Corporation and Test Acts, it was Currie who drew this up.

His careful maintenance of objectivity in a highly emotional situation is once again demonstrated in this affair. In writing to Thomas Percival of Manchester about his disagreement with some of the Dissenters in whom emotional fervour had replaced reason, he says:

. . . zealous as I am in favour of universal toleration and equal right, I am but a cold advocate of any particular system of doctrines. I detest oppression in every form, and especially religious oppression, but I want the assistance of that fiery zeal which contends for its own opinions as for indisputable truth and which considers all opposition to them as demonstrable error.

In full conviction, however, that the maxims of complete toleration require only to be examined without prejudice to be received with conviction, I am especially anxious that our proceedings should be directed by candour and moderation. By such means we shall find the understanding of our adversaries permeable to the truth. . . . But some of the advocates of the repeal of the Corporation and Test Acts are guided by a warmer, and, it may be, a more enlightened zeal. They contend for almost any means that may bring the subject into notice; they fear no violence; and they almost court opposition; as if the object were rather to excite, than to remove prejudice—rather to inflame, than to allay animosities—rather to connect a band of sectaries together by a sense of mutual wrongs, than to unite a whole nation in the bonds of equal freedom and universal good will . . .¹⁴

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Thus Currie found himself not only opposing the Corporation and Test Acts, but also opposing the over-zealous advocates of their repeal.

Currie's defence of man's rights embroiled him in another affair in Liverpool—the problem of the slave trade. During the last part of the 1780s the opposition to the slave trade in Great Britain became quite strong. The trade was, however, so important to the economy of Liverpool that the citizens of this town were strongly opposed to any measures that would control or prevent it. Currie, who was first and foremost a practising physician, was faced with the problem that he agreed with the general reaction against the slave trade, but made his living and had his friends in one of the largest slave-trading towns in the world. Despite the danger to his personal interests, Currie aided his friends, Roscoe and William Rathbone, in fighting for the abolition of the slave trade. In the course of his efforts, he entered into lengthy correspondence with William Wilberforce, M.P., and with Dr. Thomas Percival, who had done much to fight the slave trade in Manchester. He also collaborated with Roscoe in writing a poem, *The African*, which was written to protest against the trade, and which achieved considerable popularity. Although he did not live to see its complete abolition, Currie, in a quiet and moderate manner, did much to help the cause.

Literature

In his constant devotion to self-improvement, Currie had read widely in the field of literature. Throughout his stay in America and during his days as a medical student he found time to read widely in literature, and later, with Roscoe, founded a very active literary society in Liverpool. One of the authors to whom Currie often turned when he made the time to pursue his literary interests was Robert Burns. As early as 1787, Currie wrote to his friend, Graham Moore:

The poems of Burns have certainly great merit. An original poet, which he may be called, is most highly welcome to every man of taste and feeling, after the disgust which arises from listening to a long succession of copyers, who have inherited from each other the same thoughts, the same expressions, and even the same cadence. This West-country poet (the first, I believe, which that psalm-singing region has produced) has that admirable simplicity which is the attribute of true genius. His thoughts are natural and flow easily, and by turns he is humorous, pathetic and sublime.¹⁵

If Currie's interest in the events of the life of Burns, and his high opinion of Burns's poetry, induced in him an interest in writing the biography and editing the poems of this poet, the circumstances of Burns's death made such an interest almost a necessity to Currie. The death of the poet left his widow and children destitute and Currie wished to come to their aid. In addition, he saw that Burns's reputation was in a precarious position, as there were many to whom the poet's political opinions had given offence. Currie saw it as the responsibility of Burns's biographer and editor to put out an edition which would consolidate his reputation before some hack writer could publish unauthorized editions which might hurt the poet's reputation and divert funds from his family. Currie's concern for their welfare is shown by the fact that he

undertook to raise money for the widow and her children before he was selected as editor and biographer of Burns. Thus, in a letter to Burns's friend, John Syme, dated 15 August 1796, he indicates that he was in the process of sending forty to fifty guineas to the family. In the same letter he expressed his concern for Burns's reputation—'That an authorized biography should be fixed soon seems to me the more necessary because it is to be feared that volunteers may appear attracted by the popularity of a subject which they may deform and disgrace.'¹⁶ Syme was an old college friend of Currie and a constant companion of Burns. The task of finding a biographer for the poet fell mostly upon his shoulders, and he at first sought the help of several literary men who had known Burns personally, such as Dugald Stewart. When he could not get any of these men to undertake the biography, he offered the editorship and task of writing the biography to Currie, the invitation being backed by the publishers of the proposed edition, Cadell and Davies. After informing Syme that his work on a medical paper might delay the date of publication, Currie agreed to undertake the task, on the condition that Syme and Gilbert Burns, the poet's brother, would aid him.

He was well aware that his job would be a difficult one, but had not expected to encounter the many obstacles which were to fall in the way of publication. He had believed that Burns's papers were in some kind of order, but when Syme sent these papers to him he was overwhelmed by the chaotic condition in which he found them. Thus, he wrote to Syme on 8 February 1797:

Your letter of the 6th January reached me on the 12th, and along with it came the remains of poor Burns. I viewed the huge and shape-less mass with astonishment! Instead of finding, as I expected, a selection of his papers, with such annotations as might clear up any obscurities,—of papers perused and approved by his friends as fit for publication, or furnishing the materials of publication—I received the complete sweepings of his desk (as it appeared to me), even to the copy-book on which his little boy had been practising his writing. No one had given these papers a perusal, or even an inspection: the sheep were not separated from the goats; and,—what has, perhaps, not happened before since the beginning of the world,—the manuscripts of a man of genius, unarranged by himself, and unexamined by his family or friends, were sent, with all their sins on their heads, to meet the eyes of an entire stranger!¹⁷

With the help of Syme and Gilbert Burns Currie got the papers into order. Just as in his medical research Currie was able to bring order to a large mass of experimental data through his careful observations and analysis, so in his work on Burns's life he was able to take the chaotic materials which he had at his disposal, and from them form an orderly plan for his work. In his biography and edition of Burns's poems he refused to make statements about Burns's poetical merits and beliefs without supporting them with Burns's own words. Indeed, much as Boswell wrote Johnson's biography by recording Johnson's conversation, so Currie, to a great extent, wrote Burns's biography by recording what the poet wrote and said about himself.

Simultaneously, he had to devote much of this time to serving as a middleman in negotiations between the publishers and the trustees of Burns's family. Largely through Currie's efforts, these negotiations eventually resulted in the

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raising of nearly £1000 for Burns's family. Through all of these activities, Currie was hampered by ill-health, and on 18 July 1798 he wrote to Mr. Syme:

I am so weak with loss of blood that I cannot write without extreme langour. I have had and still have, a most severe cold, and have been obliged to submit to venesection again and again. Who knows but I may pay a visit to Burns instead of writing his life, and thus furnish an incident and a subject of reflection for some other, with which to eke out his biography?¹⁸

After illness, delays in printing, and delays in shipping had caused several postponements of the date of publication, *The Life of Robert Burns* in four quarto volumes appeared in May 1800. The edition was both a financial and a critical success. *The Critical Review* wrote in October 1800:

In every part of the work he [Currie] has exercised the discretion of sound judgement and the diligence of strict attention. The flowers which he has scattered over the humble grave of Burns will for ever bloom to his own honour; we cordially subscribe to the generally received opinion, that if the biographer have been happy in the selection of a poet worthy of the exertion of his talents, the poet is no less fortunate in the possession of a biographer competent to do justice to his various and surprising merits.

Cadell and Davies, Currie's publishers, were equally pleased with his work, and on 21 May 1800 wrote to him: 'We have permitted two or three friends to look over the set of works which you were so obliging to send us and they agree with us in thinking it one of the most pleasing and interesting publications that has appeared for many years.'¹⁹ Gilbert Burns added his plaudits, and wrote to Currie on 24 August 1800:

I have read over the Life and Correspondence of my brother again and again; and am astonished to find so little to object to. On the contrary, I could not have supposed that the materials you were possessed of would have furnished so respectable a work. The Life, if I am not misled by my connection with the subject, is a singularly pleasing and interesting work. . . . I have no room, nor am I able to do justice to my feelings, to make acknowledgements to you for the singular obligation I and my brother's family lie under to you.²⁰

It would thus appear that Dr. Currie's four-year devotion to the establishment of Burns's reputation and his efforts to aid Burns's family were not unavailing, and that his work would be noted favourably by posterity. However, such was not to be the case. In 1816 William Wordsworth published *A Letter to a Friend of Robert Burns* in which he violently attacked Currie's *Life of Robert Burns*. Wordsworth's main claim was that Currie had injured Burns's reputation by including material in his work which defamed the poet's character. On reading through Currie's *Life* it is difficult to understand the reasons for Wordsworth's objections. As Currie had mentioned in his proposed plan of the *Life*, the greater part of it consists of Burns's writings concerning himself, combined with the writings of his brother, Gilbert Burns. The main portion of what Currie himself wrote could hardly be considered defamatory. The only two sections which indicate any faults in Burns's character are those dealing with the poet's politics and those which refer to his drinking in his later years. Currie went out of his way to excuse these and attempted to make them as favourable to Burns

as possible. As he wrote to Syme on 8 February 1797: 'The errors and faults, as well as the excellencies of Burns's life and character, afford scope for painful and melancholy reflection and observation. This part of the subject must be touched with great tenderness, but it must be touched. If his friends do not touch it, his enemies will.'²¹ What is perhaps most surprising about Wordsworth's letter is his implication that Gilbert Burns had great objections to Currie's handling of his brother's biography. If Gilbert Burns did have such objections, he certainly did not express them when he had a chance to do so. Along with Syme, he was in constant touch with Currie during the preparation of the biography and gave him much help with it. Indeed, if Gilbert Burns had any objections to Currie's handling of the biography, he did not make them known to Currie even after the appearance of the first edition, when he had nothing but praise for the work.

A later editor of Burns, R. H. Cromek, wrote of it: 'Whatever unhappiness the poet was in his life-time doomed to experience, few persons have been so fortunate in a biographer as Burns. A strong feeling of his excellencies, a perfect discrimination of his character, and a just allowance for his emotions, are the distinguishing features in the work of Dr. Currie.'²²

Other Activities: Correspondence, Politics, and Criticism

Currie was as prolific a letter-writer as almost any man of his time. One of the most famous collections of eighteenth-century letters is that of Thomas Creevey, and many of the epistles in the *Creevey Papers* are from or to Dr. Currie. Currie and Creevey ran the gamut of topics in their correspondence, but above all their discussions centred around politics, and a reader of their letters gets a candid insight into their views of men such as Pitt, Fox, and Addington. While Currie satisfied some of his political curiosity by corresponding with Creevey, he satisfied some of his scientific curiosity by corresponding with Erasmus Darwin. Currie's interest in fever led him to begin a correspondence with Darwin concerning the mechanisms of heat production, and this correspondence eventually included discussions of medical science and philosophy.

Literature was quite often a topic of Currie's letters, and in his desire to foster contemporary works he frequently encouraged the writers of his day and discussed theories of literature with them. One of the men with whom Currie corresponded was Sir Walter Scott, to whom he wrote on 28 November 1800: 'I have read your *Green Ladies* many a time. It is a very noble poem. I doubt since the days of Gray, if any thing has appeared of equal force and sublimity. . . . It is happily varied too. There is great beauty of description . . . correctness, as far as poetry admits, of manners, and a happy plane of versification. I long to see more of your poetry.'²³ As Currie's work on Burns had led him to do extensive research on the Scottish dialect, Currie and Scott corresponded frequently on the topic of Scottish literature.

The reform interests of William Wilberforce drew Currie into a prodigious correspondence with that political figure, and many letters passed between the two men concerning the best means of achieving the cessation of the slave trade.

Among Currie's other letters were those to John Kemble, concerning the re-development of the Theatre Royal in Liverpool, those to Dr. Thomas Percival, concerning fever hospitals and the slave trade, and the vast communications with his publishers, Cadell and Davies. In letters to Cadell and Davies we learn that Currie had intended to write a *Life of Milton* after he finished his work on Burns.

These letters give us a further insight into the character of Currie himself. Almost all of his many letters have to do with topics which involve the improvement of the human condition. It would seem unlikely that a man with as little time to spare as Currie had would carry on such a vast correspondence for want of something better to do. Rather, he was driven by the desire to find out what was going on in the world in the various fields concerned with human improvement, and he wished to learn directly from the primary sources just what progress was being made.

At eighteen, Currie had found himself in America, in a country preparing for war, and the events of that period had led him to publish an article in *Pinckney's Gazette*. At the age of thirty-six, he found himself in England, in a country preparing for war, and as neither his interest in politics nor his propensity for writing had diminished in the intervening years, he was once again to publish a political article.

Perhaps no event in modern history has had a greater effect on the world than the French Revolution. The entire social and political make-up of Europe was to undergo drastic rearrangement as a result of it. At the time of the Revolution, the political attention of every major European country was focused on France. The combination of Burke's writings, and the fact that political events in France were beginning to threaten the security of England, created a distinctly anti-Jacobin climate in England in the early 1790s. France declared war on England on 1 February 1793, and it is in this context that James Currie came to write the 'Jasper Wilson Letter'.

Currie had been opposed to war with France all along, just as Pitt had been. He foresaw that such a war would bring much hardship to England. When war became unavoidable, he advocated the ending of it as early as possible, and when he felt that a suitable opportunity for ending it had occurred in the spring of 1793, which was ignored by Pitt, he was moved to write *A Letter, Commercial and Political, Addressed to the Rt. Honourable William Pitt; in Which The Real Interests of Britain, in the Present Crisis, are Considered, and Some Observations are Offered on the General State of Europe*.

The England which was to receive this publication was an England which was permeated with the zeal of loyalty that characterizes a country at war. Any opposition to government policy was looked upon as disloyalty; anyone who did not damn the French as inhuman monsters was subjected to the charge of Jacobinism. Suppression of human rights became common, and before the war with France was over, Great Britain was to see the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act and the passing of several Acts aimed at preventing treason and sedition. It was in this atmosphere that Currie came to publish his letter, thus putting himself in great danger by writing an article against the government

with only the thinnest of disguises to hide his real identity. What I think is significant about this letter in terms of Currie's life was that it demonstrated his willingness to fight for what he felt was right in the face of formidable opposition, and his ability to maintain a certain objectivity in the face of the emotional zeal and prejudices of others.

It may seem incredible that with such time-devouring activities as those already mentioned, Currie was able to achieve prominence in still another field. However, somewhere amid the medical practice and research, the social reform, the political activity, the literary work, and the correspondence, Currie found time to write as a reviewer for some of London's most important periodicals. So we find, in a 1788 edition of *The Analytical Review*, Currie's article on T. Reid's *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, and, over a two-year period (1794–96), a series of five articles by Currie in *The Critical Review*, reviewing Darwin's *Zoonomia*.

Conclusion

What was James Currie? He was a social reformer, biographer, political critic, literary critic, man of letters. But, above all, he was a physician, and as such devoted to the quest for the improvement of the human condition. His ability to carry on significant work in medicine while attaining prominence in his many other fields of endeavour is in part due to the fact that he was a man with remarkable talents. We realize more fully just how remarkable he was when we remember that he died at the age of forty-nine, and so ended his career when many men are just beginning to reach their peak. But Currie's diversity was a result of more than his remarkable talents. It was a result of a broad view of the quest of the physician. He refused to channel his attempts to better the future of mankind only into medicine, and the motives and methods which he used so well in this field spurred him on to other fields. After looking at Currie's life we must think twice before we say that the specialization of the modern age prevents physicians from excelling in other fields, and must ask ourselves if perhaps the real limitation is in ourselves, in our narrowing of the physician's quest.

In 1791, when political fervour raged through England, a crowd of zealous men in Birmingham destroyed many houses and buildings in a violent anti-Jacobin demonstration. Among the victims of this demonstration was Joseph Priestley, many of whose valuable papers and experiments were destroyed. At this time Currie wrote the following proposed draft of a letter to Priestley. I think that it throws so much light on his character and motivations that it is worth quoting in full:

At a time when the friends of science and of freedom are recovering from their astonishment at the infamous proceedings in Birmingham, permit us to offer you our congratulations on your escape from the savages there, and our anxious wishes for your future safety and health.

Differing from you as most of us do, in many of your theological, as well as of your metaphysical dogma, we entirely agree with you in that fundamental principle, the only one indeed in which it is important that men should agree, that truth has nothing to fear from the severest discussion, and that it is only for falsehood & error to involve themselves in night. With this

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principle we believe that the dearest interests of society are connected, and on this we conceive that the whole basis of religion rests, natural & revealed. A principle flowing directly from the God of light & truth, has in all ages of the world been peculiarly obnoxious to those ambitious & wicked priests, who have built their own consequences on the prevalence of their peculiar doctrines, who neglect the progress of knowledge, who defame the attributes of reason, and who would even control the excursions of mind. Hence, in the long period of fourteen hundred years that Europe has groaned under a domineering priesthood, the object of their persecution & the victims of their malice have not been found among the vicious & the profligate, but have been almost unanimously in the number of those enlightened & heroic minds who have felt & who have attempted to exercise the rights of conscience & the privileges of thought. We cannot therefore be surprised, if one who has so ably, so openly & so importantly attacked the prevailing opinions should have become an object of dislike to the established priest-hood, but we were not aware that there existed in the midst of our own country, and in the present day, a spirit of fanaticism so base, so wicked & so bloody, as to break forth into a frenzy of unprovoked violence, not only against the most respectable characters, but against knowledge & science themselves, & to have aimed particularly at making its victim the most ardent, the most successful & perhaps the most illustrious philosopher of modern times.

We however console ourselves that your spirit is not of a kind to sink under oppression—With a quickness & a clearness of apprehension given to few, with a perseverance & activity never perhaps surpassed, you join a strength and a fearlessness of mind that leave your enemies nothing to hope.—Go on then, in your career of exertions, fearless of consequences. Tho' you may not in some instant produce the truth, you may be the cause of its being produced by others. The blessings of the good & the admiration of the wise will attend . . . and your name be revered in future times as the luminary of your age, when the frantic wretches who danced round the flames of your laboratory & their instigations still more vile shall be remembered only for the mischief they have done.²⁴

If it is for any one thing that James Currie is to be remembered, let it be for these sentiments. The acceptance of the clinical use of the thermometer, the building of fever hospitals, the need for social reform, the recognition of the genius of Burns, these are all battles which have been fought and won. But the battle against ignorance and prejudice, the battle for freedom of thought and action, the battle for reliance on fact instead of on superstition, these are battles which must be fought in every century, in every generation. The quest for the improvement of the human condition, which is the true quest of the physician and of any man with a faith in the future of the human race, could never have any scope at all without such freedom, without which, to use Currie's words, we do indeed 'walk in darkness'.

* * *

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