THE BRITISH JOURNAL
OF
OPHTHALMOLOGY
MAY, 1928

COMMUNICATIONS

WILLIAM COWARD, 1658-1725

BY

R. R. JAMES

LONDON

THOUGH Coward's contribution to ophthalmic literature consisted of one small volume only, he published a good deal of matter; some of it medical, but for the most part metaphysical. One of the latter works was ordered to be burnt by the public hangman; and as few if any ophthalmologists can have ever been placed in a like situation, he deserves a place in the gallery of British ophthalmologists.

He was born at Winchester in 1658 and was educated at Winchester College. Kirby's *Winchester Scholars* gives the following note under the year 1668: "William Coward (10), St. Peter's Cheeshill, Winchester. To Wadham Coll." It might be assumed from this entry that he was the son of the parson of the parish mentioned, but the entry in Foster's *Alumni Oxonienses* helps to correct this assumption; but if the ten in brackets refers, as it almost certainly does, to the age on entry there can be no doubt that he was born in 1658. This does not quite correspond with the date in Foster, in which he is said to have been aged 18 years in 1674, which would make the year of his birth 1656.

It is not easy to reconstruct his school history for the series of rolls is incomplete, and, moreover, another William Coward

entered the school in 1667; but in Holgate's *Winchester Long Rolls* it is possible to identify the two boys with fair certainty. In 1670 the senior Coward was high up in 5th Book, and was of 3rd Chamber; while our ophthalmologist *in posse* was Coward junior, a member of 5th Chamber and low down in 4th Book, *i.e.*, very low in the school. Further search establishes the fact that a Coward was on the roll *ad Winton* in 1668, thus agreeing with Kirby's statement. In the next extant roll, that for 1672, a Coward is high up in 5th Book and still in 3rd Chamber; while in 1673 a Coward of 5th Chamber is low down in 6th Book (the senior form), and is on the roll *ad Oxon* for the same year. In 1674 Coward is 8th in the school and again is on the roll *ad Oxon*.

Foster's *Alumni Oxonienses*, 1st Series, Vol. I gives the following: "Coward, William, son of William of Winchester, gent. (the *of* in Foster always means that the boy was born *at*); Hart Hall, matriculated May 21, 1674, aged 18 years; scholar, Wadham College, 1675. B.A., 1677; Fellow of Merton College, 1680; M.B., 1685; M.D., 1687. In practice at Northampton and later at 93-94, Lombard Street, London. Candidate of the College of Physicians, 1695, etc., etc.

Munk's *Roll of the Royal College of Physicians* tells us that he took his M.A. in 1683, and that he moved to London in 1694. Haller (*Biblioth. Med. Pract.* 4, 177) dismisses him summarily as "*non utilissimus scriptor*." In 1682 he translated into Latin, Dryden's *Absolom and Achitophel*, but this performance was "surpassed by the rival translation of Atterbury." On his arrival in Town he attracted considerable attention by his work entitled "Second Thoughts Concerning the Human Soul," in which with great learning and metaphysical knowledge he united sentiments repugnant to the opinions of the best divines. This book, as well as another entitled "The Grand Essay," in defence of it, not only drew the attacks of several writers, but the animadversions of the House of Commons, which on March 17, 1704, ordered the latter book to be burnt by the public hangman: "as containing doctrines contrary to the Articles of the Church of England, and opposed to the Christian religion." Dr. Coward remained a candidate of the College to the last; and died in 1725; having, it is said, resided for some years at Ipswich. His professional writings were as follow:

De Fermento Volatili Nutritio Conjectura, 8vo., Lond., 1695.

Alcali Vindicatum, 12mo., Lond., 1698.

Remediorum Medicinalium Tabula, 18mo., Lond., 1704.

Ophthalmiatria, qua accurata et integra oculorum male Affectorum instituitur Medela, 8vo., Lond., 1706.

A short account of Coward appears in the *Dict. Nat. Biog.*, and also in the two great French Dictionaries of Medical Biography, but he is not included in Hutchinson's *Medical Biography*.

Jourdan, *Biographie Médicale*, 1821, gives him half a page. The full titles of some of his metaphysical works are worth quoting.

1. "Thoughts concerning Human Soul, demonstrating the notion of human soul as believed to be a spiritual immortal substance united to human body to be a plain heathenish invention and not consonant to the principles of philosophy, reason, and religion, etc.," 8vo., Lond., 1702.

2. "Further Thoughts concerning Human Soul, in defence of Second Thoughts," 8vo., Lond., 1703.

3. "The Grand Essay, or a vindication of Reason and Religion against impostures of Philosophy, proving that the existence of any immaterial substance is a philosophical imposture and impossible to be conceived; that all matter has originally created in it a principle of internal or self-motion; that matter and motion must be the foundation of thought in man and brutes," 8vo., Lond., 1704.

4. "The Gust Scruting or a serious enquiry into the modern notions of soul," 8vo., Lond., 1706.

Dezeimeris in *Dictionnaire Historique de la Médecine ancienne et moderne*, 1831, gives Coward a whole page, with the same Bibliography. "The Gust Scruting" becomes "The Just Scruting" (an obvious misprint for "Scrutiny"). A note is given to the effect that the "Grand Essay" was a reply to Broughton and his school of psychology; Broughton having attacked his previous works. The bibliography ends as follows: "*Coward a en outre publié divers ouvrages de littérature et de poésie, dont quelques-uns ne sont pas indignes d'estime.*" Poor old man! his philosophy was too much for the ecclesiastics, while his poetical effusions were not worthless. I suspect that this is a polite way of hinting that they were.

OPHTHALMIATRIA.

The title-page of this work is as follows:

OPHTHALMIATRIA : /Qua Accurata & Integra/OCULORUM
/Male Affectorum Instituitur/MEDELA. /Nova Methodo
Aphoristice/Concinnata. /Authore GUL. COWARD, Coll./Med.
Lond.M.D./*Ars Longa, Judicium Difficile.* /Hippocrat. Aphor.
I. /Impressit J. G. Impensis Joannis Chantrey e Parte/Postica
Hospitii Lincolnensis; Et Tho./Atkinson ad Insigne Cygni Albi
in Divi Pauli/Caemitaerio, Bibliopolarum, London, 1706./

There is a copy of this rather scarce work in the library of the Royal Society of Medicine but the Bowman Library has no copy. The contents are entirely in Latin; the title-page sufficiently explains that the subject is treated in an aphoristic manner; and we gather that Mr. Chantrey had his shop near Lincoln's Inn Gateway, while Mr. Atkinson had his in St. Paul's Churchyard.

The book is an octavo of 188 pages. Besides these there are four pages of dedication "Viro Doctissimo et fidei integerrimae Amico Manuelli Sorrel* Armigero, S.T.D."; one page of Latin verse, "In Authorem Ophthalmiatriae. Anonymus"; seven pages of preface; one page of "Index Capitum et Morborum"; and one page of "Errata."

It was common practice at this date, at least I think so, for an author to dedicate his book to some patron, and I suppose that Manuel Sorrel, Esq., stood in this relation to Coward. Whether the reverse was ever common, *i.e.*, for an author to dedicate his book to a medical man, I do not know. It is very rare nowadays, and the only examples that occur to me in recent times are Thackeray's dedication of *Pendennis* to Dr. John Elliotson, which will preserve his name for all time, in spite of his having dabbled in mysticism and magnetism, which wrecked his medical career; and Stevenson's dedication of *Underwoods* to Dr. Bodley-Scott.

Coward's chapters are arranged as follows: De oculo, ejusque partibus, occupying 67 pages, a sort of ophthalmic anatomy; de visus hebetudine; de albugine, leucomate et macula corneae; de Hypopio et Pterygio; de Phlyctaenis, Ruptura, Tumoribus, ulceribus corneae; de Rhyade et Eccanthide, de Aegilope, seu fistula lacrimali; de epiphora; de ophthalmia; de suffusione seu cataracta; de amaurosi seu gutta serena; and lastly, de Tinctura N. Basilica.

It hardly seems worth while to extract much from this old work; I like the visus hebetudine, the dull sight. Some of the prescriptions are worth quoting as a specimen of ophthalmic practice more than 200 years ago. The treatment was, of course, local and general; of the latter, phlebotomy, diuresis, sweating and purgation were much in the ascendant; for instance the wretched sufferer from "hebetudo" got instead of the spherical reading-glasses that he probably wanted, the following astounding prescriptions:

"R. Pil. Aurear. 3ss., Resin Jalap. gr. viii., Calomelanos. ʒi., Ol. Succin. gutt. ii., Tart. Vitriolat. gr. iv., Bals. Peru. q.s. S.A.F. Pil.

* The Sorrels were an old Ipswich family. Manuel, or Emanuel, was a son of Andrew Sorrel, bailiff of Ipswich. He was of St. John's College, Cambridge, and died in 1707. His grandfather, Emanuel Sorrel, of Ipswich, was knighted in 1660. (Le Neve's Pedigrees of the Knights, Harleian Soc., Vol. VIII, Venn's Alumni Cantabrigienses, Vol. IV.)

quarum 4 vel 5 die quolibet tertio a Phlebotomia prima cum regimine." "Quibus Potio magis arridet." "R. Aq. Euphrasiae, Faeniculi D.a.a, ʒiiss, Epilept. Langii ʒss, Syr. Domest. ʒx, S.A.F. Potio Purgans."

Poor fellow! His treatment must have been a perfect nightmare, and I think that most of Coward's patients would have preferred his aphorisms to his purgation. The following is a good example of a contemporary eyewash.

"R. Aq. Euphrasiae, Faeniculi Verbenae. a.a. ʒiv., Succu Chalidonii, Rutae, a.a. ʒii., Piperis Longi, N.M. Garyophyll. Croci opt. a. ʒi., Anthos m.ss. Fellis Perdicis, vel Agni ʒi. Incidenda incidantur, & tum omnia probe mixta Alembico Vitreo distillantur, ut Tinctura extrahatur, que saepius in die Oculi abluantur."

Hirschberg, in the *Geschichte der Augenheilkunde in der Neuzeit*, page 121, devotes half a page to Coward. He considers the "Ophthalmiatria" the work of a charlatan, though the author "full oft speaks of Agyrtæ, swindlers." The contents are extremely poor and exception is taken to the last chapter on Tinctura Basilica Nostra; but as I read it, the old gentleman is here giving direction for the proper manufacture of this nostrum, which is the last thing a true quack ever does; he likes to keep the manufacture of his noted salves and eyewashes a secret. It must be remembered, however, that the ophthalmologist of even a hundred years ago was very poorly equipped; treatment was almost entirely empirical, his knowledge of anatomy was moderately good, that of pathology poor, while his methods of examination were limited to inspection with the unaided eye, and palpation.

Repeated search at Somerset House has failed to find a copy of Coward's will. There were two ecclesiastical probate courts at Ipswich, but these were very small "peculiars." Unless Coward died in the Close, his will would not have been proved at Ipswich. Mr. Gibbons, a very experienced record searcher, tells me that many wills in olden days were never proved at all. He thinks it possible that as Coward made himself so objectionable to the Church, they probably would not prove his will; a sorry form of revenge, truly.

The date of his death, 1725, is pure conjecture; his last published work was issued in 1706 and his name drops out of the Roll of the Royal College of Physicians in 1725; probably he died some years earlier, and the Registrar was not informed of his death.