



THOMAS REID, M.D.  
(1830-1911)

THE BRITISH JOURNAL.  
OF  
OPHTHALMOLOGY

JULY, 1919

BRITISH MASTERS OF OPHTHALMOLOGY SERIES

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THOMAS REID was born in what is surely the highest and sternest part of lowland Scotland, and one cannot help thinking that the place left its mark on the child and the man. His life was a strenuous one from beginning to end, and his constant endeavour was to get at the truth of things.

His father was a farmer in the neighbourhood of Shotts, in upper Lanarkshire, and continually impressed on his children the necessity of work, both mental and physical, as a training for the struggle for a place in life.

Early in life, far too early as we would say now, the boy was sent out into the fields in the morning to assist the men who were building, digging, reaping, and threshing; and then, having worked for an hour or two, he went to a school where the "three Rs" were taught.

Having done his daily task in school, he came home to assist again in the fields, and finished the day in preparation of lessons for the morrow.

Later in life, when the village school could not teach him all

his studious mind desired, he was sent to teachers of mathematics, Latin, etc., to enlarge his scope and encourage further learning.

The literature of the home was of the sterner type, such as old Scottish people loved, and was read aloud at the fireside, each member taking a night to read a portion of a work like Gibbon's "Decline and Fall," or Rollin's "Ancient History." Scott's, Thackeray's, and Dickens's works and the Penny Cyclopaedia of the early decades of the nineteenth century were read as light literature.

Thus, from his early years, the serious side of life was looked upon; and as Reid was born in the year of the "Short Corn," 1830, it may be said that he came into a world of stress and endeavour.

When about 12 or 13 years of age, Reid was "put to" a trade, but it was little to his mind, and he attended courses in botany, chemistry, physics, and other branches of science in his hours of leisure. He was led by these studies towards medicine, and ultimately attained his desire when he graduated M.D. in 1857 at the University of Glasgow.

A student from beginning to end of his life, he soon got in touch with the scientific side of medicine and surgery by his interest in pathology, and, whilst practising his profession kept constantly in view the fact that there was infinitely more to learn than had yet been taught. He spent his leisure hours in investigation of unusual histological tissues, and thus laid the foundation of the wide knowledge of pathology and histology which he undoubtedly possessed.

He first went to the Glasgow Eye Infirmary in 1861 as clinical clerk, and saw the practice of Mackenzie and George Rainy, and ultimately was appointed assistant surgeon, and, later, surgeon in association with George Rainy. When Mackenzie died in 1868, the Waltonian Lectureship in the University of Glasgow was filled by the appointment of Rainy. The latter had only occupied it one year, when his early death again left the post vacant, and Reid was appointed. Gradually the general practice which Reid had accumulated was put aside, and he gave his whole attention to ophthalmic medicine and surgery.

Reid's reading was of the widest and most catholic description, and everything in the scope of ophthalmology was his field. He had a quite phenomenal memory, and took no notes of cases or people, yet rarely forgot a patient's case or a word which he had read. He had an extensive and well-chosen library, which he made thorough use of, since he never would allow anything to remain at all ill-defined in his mind. He would hunt everywhere until he found the precise significance to be attached to a word, new or familiar to him, in any given connection. Languages and sciences were Reid's favourite studies, and his knowledge of the former was being extended in his last years when he was working

enthusiastically at Italian. All branches of science were of interest, but botany and geology were probably his favourites. He could converse with astronomers, Egyptologists, or zoologists, and had views upon all questions of importance in most of the sciences.

Much of Reid's knowledge was, of course, derived from reading; but he was an observer also, and studied nature by means of the best telescopes, spectroscopes, and microscopes, etc., which he could procure.

As he had a high opinion of the value of mathematics, especially in relation to physiological optics, Reid worked out, and took great interest in the questions in ophthalmology involving the use of the science.

Unfortunately, he had but limited experience of travel in earlier life, and even his few holidays were for many years spent in one watering place on the Firth of Clyde, until he reached quite an advanced age. In his later years, however, Reid visited many continental cities, and toured in Norway, Switzerland, and Italy.

As an ophthalmic surgeon Reid was constantly a student. He was never quite satisfied about a subject and pursued his researches, especially in histology, until he died.

He was, perhaps, too much the reverse of Mackenzie, for although he had a wide and thorough knowledge of the clinical side of ophthalmology, he was more deeply interested in the pathological anatomy of eye disease than in its symptomatology.

As an operator Reid was extremely dexterous, and his manipulation, especially in cataract cases, was beautiful to watch. He was one of those who hold the view strongly that the less one touches an eye the better, and consequently was extremely careful in selecting cases for operation.

Reid was never a man to seek publicity, and the various devices which he invented or designed for the exact investigation of ophthalmic conditions were not familiar to most ophthalmologists. Probably the most ingenious of these was his colour perimeter in which he used the true colours of the diffraction grating as a source of light. This instrument, described and shown with others at the Ophthalmological Society in 1886, is extremely clever and exact, and its only fault is that it is somewhat too difficult to work with in practice. Thanks to the gentle pressure of various friends, Reid's portable astigmometer is more often used, being one of the most exact of keratometers. He would have been much more widely known had he been less retiring and diffident, but he would not publish anything unless he was satisfied that he had got to the bottom of the well where truth hides.

As a teacher Reid was certainly deficient, in that he could not come down to the level of his students. He assumed a knowledge in his hearers which they, too often, did not possess. For advanced

pupils, however, it was a great pleasure to sit by the fireside and hear his views on various subjects, for he could talk over a case of interest and throw light on many obscure points there, as he could not in a class-room or lecture hall. It is not surprising that he could not condescend to the level of junior students, for he himself had, besides originality, a prodigious grasp of the mass of human knowledge such as is possessed by few.

He was always an enthusiastic histologist and photo-micrographer and it may be said that he died working, for, in his eighty-second year, he rose from bed twelve hours before his death to look at some photographs which he was printing.

It must be very rarely indeed that a man possesses such truly encyclopaedic knowledge as did Reid. No subject from ancient history to modern electricity escaped his notice or was too great or small for his interest. If he had a fault, it was that he was too widely read, and that, in consequence, no one subject was studied in such detail that it could be said to be his speciality.

Being a very sensitive man Reid took no active part in public affairs, rather taking care that no one knew what he was doing or thinking. He was really most generous and kind-hearted as many of his patients can testify, but he did not like to appear so.

One of the most pleasant traits in Reid's character was his simple friendliness. The writer will always retain happy memories of those evenings by his fireside when he would show his latest histological material or take a photograph of some microscopic object which had specially interested him. No less happy are the memories of country walks, in the course of which the theme of conversation would be the botanical features or the geological characteristics of the countryside; or again, possibly, its historical interest. Under starry skies of an autumn evening the conversation turned to astronomy, of which science Reid had more than passable knowledge, and on which his conversation was interesting and instructive.

He delighted too to talk of books and of people he had met. He revered the giants of his early days, men like Sir William Bowman, and, generally speaking, his estimate of a man corresponded with the evidence shown of being a searcher after truth.

Yet, Reid's conversation was not always of a serious type. He had a fund of humour which was sometimes surprising to those who did not know him well. He would, and often did, tell an amusing story, albeit the manner of telling it might be somewhat quiet and dry.

If, through his retiring disposition, Reid failed in some degree to reach his proper place in the world of science, it may be said most truly that, by a very wide circle of friends and patients in the West of Scotland, his name and fame will never be forgotten.

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