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Two Hundred Years Ago

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M.B., Ch.B.

Abstract

An extract from the Senior President's Valedictory Address delivered before the Society on Friday, 6th March 1959.

The setting is Edinburgh in the second half of the eighteenth century, the era of the post-chaise, the phaeton and the sedan-chair, when the North Bridge had just been opened to traffic and Princes Street was scarcely built. The hero is a typical Edinburgh medical student, Sylas Neville by name. This young man combined few virtues with not a few of the vices of his age. He was neither rich nor brilliant but might be classed as comfortably average at most accomplishments. Indeed the only work he left was his Diary, which is of great value to posterity in that part of it comprises a frank and detailed account of his five years in Edinburgh as a medical student. His story is of particular interest to us because, in 1775, rather by accident than design, Sylas Neville became a President of this Society-yet to become the Royal Medical Society.

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TWO HUNDRED YEARS AGO

By JAMES A. GRAY

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The setting is Edinburgh in the second half of the eighteenth century, the era of the post-chaise, the phaeton and the sedan-chair, when the North Bridge had just been opened to traffic and Princes Street was scarcely built. The hero is a typical Edinburgh medical student, Sylas Neville by name. This young man combined few virtues with not a few of the vices of his age. He was neither rich nor brilliant but might be classed as comfortably average at most accomplishments. Indeed the only work he left was his Diary, which is of great value to posterity in that part of it comprises a frank and detailed account of his five years in Edinburgh as a medical student. His story is of particular interest to us because, in 1775, rather by accident than design, Sylas Neville became a President of this Society—yet to become the Royal Medical Society.

Sylas Neville's background is involved and not clearly understood. He was born in London in 1741 and may have been descended from the great Neville family. He died, a penniless bachelor, in 1840 in his ninety-ninth year. His father had died when he was young and apparently left Sylas with a considerable amount of money, most of which he squandered by living a gay life in London as a frequenter of race-course and theatre—"a devotee of music and the arts, an antiquary, a sightseer, a lover of natural beauty, a believer in fresh air and exercise, an outspoken censor of morals and often very indulgent in dangerous gallantries. Always ailing, or fancying he was, like the creaking gate, he hung long." By 1768 London was too expensive for him and so he decided to go in for "house-keeping." With this end in view he toured the West Country and South Coast and at Eastbourne engaged as house-keeper a girl (already with a child) Sarah Bradford—whom he later calls Sally Russell. This woman, who shortly became his mistress, dogged his footsteps wherever he went, first to Yarmouth where he was for a while a minor squire and thence to Edinburgh where he was to study Physic.

When Sylas Neville began his studies, Edinburgh University was in a state of rapid growth. At the beginning of the eighteenth century there were only eight Professors and 300 students in the University. By 1800 there were 21 Professors and over 1,500 students, 660 of whom were medical, the rest being arts and divinity. In 1726, Edinburgh could only claim to have conferred 21 medical degrees, but by the close of the century, on an average, 47 took the degree each year.

There was little corporate life for the students when Neville arrived in Edinburgh. Up till 1733 there had been accommodation for a few within the College precincts, but the rooms fell into disrepair and were let to miscellaneous members of the population. The advantage of this accommodation seemed to be only in as much as the Professors could keep a watchful eye on their charges, and this would doubtless have proved irksome to our friend

had these regulations still been enforced in his time. Neither, by this time, had the University authorities any moral or religious hold over the undergraduates.

On the advice of Dr Monro (Secundus), and Dr Joseph Black, Neville first took up Anatomy and Chemistry since neither of these subjects required any previous knowledge. Soon he was hard at work and complains in his Diary: "Did not get to bed till half past twelve o'clock. Extending my notes taken at the Chemistry and Anatomical Lectures employs my whole time and prevents my doing anything else. Tired, weary and low-spirited." He studied too under the excellent John Innes who was the dissector under Monro Secundus. By the next year, 1772, he was attending: "Dr Cullen's lectures upon the Institution of Medicine and those of Dr Duncan upon Therapeutics. The last is not a Professor in the University but a private lecturer and thought clever." This was a just reflection on Dr Duncan who was then an extramural lecturer prior to his becoming Professor in 1790 upon the death of James Gregory.

By 1774, Neville's time-table read as follows: "Institution of Medicine by Dr Duncan (for Dr Drummond) at 8 a.m., Practice of Medicine by Dr Cullen at 9 a.m., Chemistry by Dr Black at 10 a.m., and Anatomy by Dr Monro at 1 p.m. I have an immense deal to do this winter. May God enable me to go through with it."

Neville took medicine very seriously and it might be of interest to us now if we followed him through the various stages of his degree examinations. Although he had a high opinion of his own capabilities, he was certainly well thought of by his Professors and particularly by the great Dr Cullen who remained his influential ally.

On completion of four years of study, Neville approached Dr Monro telling him of his intention of taking the degree. Dr Monro encouraged him in this and two days later he took his certificates of lectures he had attended to Dr Home, Dean of the College of Physicians, rather in the same way in which students of to-day present their 'D.P.' certificates. The following Friday, Dr Home examined him: "on the circulation and the diseases of the skin . . . Old Cullen took me next upon the insensible excretion or halitus from the lungs, catarrh, measles and the peripneumony, which is often the companion of that disease. He began by telling me that he was so well satisfied with the answers he had heard from me that he did not think it necessary to ask me further, but as it was the custom etc.—Dr Black, who, with Dr Monro, came in after the examination was begun, asked me the definition and symptoms of Diabetes. Dr Monro asked me some questions concerning the cure of the same disease. Dr Home then desired me to retire a little, and in about half a minute, being called in again, Dr Home told me after the specimen I had given of my erudition and knowledge in Medicine, the Faculty very willingly admitted me among the number of candidates. Thus the first step in this important business which has given me so much uneasiness, is over with credit, thanks be to God, who I hope will enable me to bring it to a happy conclusion . . . I drank a few glasses of port before going which was of great service to me, as I found myself more at ease after the hour came than I had done all day. The whole examination was in Latin, and I find that if the questions do not need very long answers, I can speak that language with tolerable fluency and correctness."

Only nine days after his decision to take the degree, he went to Cullen to ask his device upon a thesis and was encouraged to confine his remarks to the subject of 'Prognostic in Fever.' The Professor warned him that he had left himself far too little time in which to do it justice because the theses were to be handed in a fortnight later. However, Neville's was in very late. Cullen perused it and he was "pleased to say that he found no grammatical

errors and that I was so good a linguist he would rather ask my judgement in that matter . . ." A month after the entry date the rough copy was complete even though Dr Cullen was "fretful of the delay." With the help of a transcriber, Neville had a clean copy made and handed in three days later. Some nights he was up till three in the morning: "when my eyes hurt so much I could not see any longer."

With the thesis out of the way he was now ready to pass on to the second part of the examination. On August 7th, 1775, he was examined by Dr Hope (Professor of Botany and, incidentally, Founder of the Royal Botanical Gardens) and then by Dr Cullen on erysipelas. After a commentary on the second Aphorism of Hippocrates, he was then given two cases to write upon as a third and last exercise. Monro examined him on these cases and also upon "digestion." He handed them in on September 1st after they had been perused by his student friends and three days later was again examined on them by the Faculty of Medicine.

Next, with true 18th century politic, he went to call on Dr Hope on September 11th for the following reason: "As Dr Hope is appointed to examine me upon my thesis at the Graduation tomorrow, I thought it right to pay him the compliment of calling upon him today, and telling him that I was glad I had fallen into such good hands. He received me very politely, said that he was preparing to attack me, but found me so well guarded that he could hardly find anything to object to—that he had very little to say to me."

So, by September 12th, 1775, over two months after his decision to take the degree, Neville graduated with compliments from Dr Home that his dissertation was "*bene eleganter et erudite scripta.*" Eleven others graduated with him but at the end, after shaking hands with the Principal and the Professors, Dr Cullen singled out our friend and said "with usual affability, 'I must not forget you, Mr Neville'."

So much for the academic life—but what of extra-mural activities? When he was not hard at work, Neville enjoyed games of billiards, the races at Leith and the theatre. With his student friends, the licentious Dennison and the earnest but misguided John Brown, he partook of lengthy discussions on the subjects dear to all students' hearts—metaphysics, vice and virtue, religion and the bible. Dennison, too, encouraged him in less erudite pursuits like visiting the city's brothels and in heavy drinking. Apparently Neville was not an alcoholic and after each carousal he would have sad misgivings about his own conduct. On one occasion, a few days after Graduation, he remarked: "Dined at the Fox and Goose, Musselburgh, with Gerard and Shiel who have lodgings in that town. Lucky I did not go yesterday as a company of only 8 or 10, chiefly Shiel's friends, drank 27 bottles of claret and 12 of port besides Punch, and were all beastly drunk . . ."

These are but a few of the many accounts of life as an 18th century medical student to be gleaned from the pages of Syllas Neville's Diary. There are doubtless also great tracts of his journal, which, had they been printed, would have been of tremendous interest to the medical historian and to those of us who are fascinated by the early, formative years of the Royal Medical Society.