HISTORY OF CANADIAN SURGERY

LORIMER JOHN AUSTIN, M.A., M.B., M.Ch., F.R.C.S.[C], F.A.C.S. 1880-1945


"... TURN DOWN AN EMPTY GLASS."
—Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám

This is the story of a warm-hearted, generous, tolerant man, sometime Professor of Surgery at Queen’s University. It is about a man whose name has become a legend to medical students at Queen’s. It is an attempt to recreate, in part at least, a controversial personality who in one way or another affected the lives of many hundreds of Queen’s medical students over a period of nearly a quarter of a century. It is not the story of a scientist, a researcher or an author but rather that of a good doctor, a good teacher and a good friend.

Lorimer John Austin was an able man, an excellent teacher with a great gift for imparting knowledge, and, for his day and generation, an accomplished surgeon. He was a salty character, and not only was he earthy, he was very down to earth in his opinions of men and their customs. There was nothing ethereal about “Blimey”. He lived his life as he saw fit and cared not a whit for the conventions.

John Austin was in some ways like the comic-paper characters in “Pogo”. You were either very fond of him or unable to understand him. He had a multitude of friends, and one feels sure that he never had a real enemy. His students were extremely fond of him, as he was fond of them. Some owed their very university existence to him, for in those days (which included the great financial depression) when scholarships and bursaries were few, and when no paternal government helped to finance a student, Blimey was often the source of those dollars needed to bridge the gap of financial disaster which threatened to separate them from the completion of their medical course.

Just who first called him Blimey is now forgotten, but it is of course easy to understand why he received the nickname. Arriving from England just after the close of the First Great War, and finding the medical classes filled with veterans of the war, how could he have escaped it? At any rate the name stuck. It was a well-deserved token of affection and, blimey, if he didn’t wear it with equanimity and fortitude all the rest of the days of his life! At The London Hospital in former days he was suitably and affectionately known as “Tubby”. There too he is fondly remembered. Mr. Montagu Jupe, F.R.C.S., late radiologist-in-chief of The London Hospital, writes, “He was quite a bit senior to me, for I was a very junior house surgeon when he was registrar. We juniors were, all of us, very fond of Tubby. He was a most likeable

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man, always cheerful, always even-tempered and, to the young, extremely kind and helpful. When one got into a difficulty, which of course we all did, we would sneak off to Tubby to get a line on whether we had been stupid and how best to proceed. He always helped, and one's morale always improved after a few words with him. I was always struck by the fact that whatever time it was and whatever one called on him to do there was never the slightest indication that it was troublesome. Another thing was that he did not seem to tire and was always exactly the same after three or four emergency operations as he was before he started. His surgical opinion was excellent and the patients upon whom he operated did very well, which after all is the great test. My memory is of a very kind, humane, even-tempered man, who was extremely good company and who was a great help and support to us juniors.”

He was born in London, England, on September 20, 1890, son of Mr. Justice James Valentine Austin and Annie Lorimer Austin. His sister, Margaret Austin, states that the birth took place in the home. The obstetrician came clad in a black frockcoat, which he presumably wore during the delivery. Austin’s mother was ill for three months thereafter. He was raised in Bristol and educated at Clifton College, Bristol. His sister states that he studied Greek at the age of 10 and could read the Greek Testament at 11 years of age. He attended the same college that Oliver Cromwell attended, the Sidney Sussex College at Cambridge, attaining the degree of Bachelor of Arts in 1903. He graduated Bachelor of Medicine in 1906 and in 1908 was awarded the degrees of Master of Arts and Master of Surgery. Later he passed the examinations of and became a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of England.

After qualifying he served as a house surgeon and later as a registrar in The London Hospital. He was already an accomplished surgeon when August 4, 1914, ushered in the First Great War. Instead of joining the Royal Army Medical Corps he decided to throw in his lot with the British Red Cross. He did this because he thought that he could get into the midst of action more quickly and make use of the surgery for which he had been so well trained. Time was to show that he indeed did get quickly into the midst of things and his book “My Experiences as a German Prisoner” tells of his adventures. He and a Dr. Elliott were the first British prisoners-of-war. He had very little to do in the way of surgery but he did learn a good deal about the Germans. Curiously enough his book, while quite interesting, is a very factual statement of his adventures as a prisoner. Austin had to talk to really tell a story, and those of us who were fortunate enough to listen to him, got a much more vivid and enlightening account of his experiences than he ever committed to print. Indeed, this was one of the outstanding characteristics of this man. He never kept notes and seldom made notes, but inside that wonderful head of his he had everything tabulated and ready to offer at a minute’s notice. All of the fascinating talks that he gave on historical subjects and all of the many practical and instructive lectures that he gave to his students, which flowed from him so stimulatingly and entertainingly, he could turn on and off as though turning the switch for a current of electricity. The information was always there ready to be revealed and no reference notes were required.

Austin was released by the Germans in 1915 and went to England on sick leave. He then returned to France as a Major in the Royal Army Medical Corps. He served the rest of the war as a surgeon at No. 2 Officer’s Hospital, Rouen Base. He returned to The London Hospital after the war, and in 1920 he came to Canada to join the Faculty of Medicine of Queen’s University as Professor of Surgery. Almost at once he became extremely popular with the students and with his fellow members of the faculty. Indeed, ever since the advent of Austin, whenever two or three of Queen’s graduates of the years-between-the-wars get together, the name of Blimey inevitably crops up, and many are the stories told, and many are the words of appreciation of this remarkable man. “Good old Blimey, do you remember when” — “The last time I saw him” — “What a guy, there’ll never be another like him.” One day in the Kingston General Hospital, he suddenly roared for Willis, his intern. “I say, Willis, are you a sailah? Are any of the interns, sailahs? I’ve got to have a sailah. I’ve joined the yacht club. They’ve given me a boat. I don’t know what kind of boat, but it’s entered in a race and I’ve got to have a sailah”. The record does not tell whether he won the race. For many years yet to come, Blimey will be one of the biggest conversation pieces of the medical alumni gatherings of Queen’s.

Austin was one of the nearly extinct species of people known affectionately on the University campus as “characters”. It is said of him, that at a Principal’s reception in Grant Hall, he and an arts faculty professor (a character in his own right) were found to be solemnly discussing, deploiring and regretting the fact that universities no longer produced characters.

When Austin arrived in Canada he made a real job of becoming a Canadian. As a surgeon, he soon got over the stumbling block of being called “Doctor” instead of “Mister”. He adopted Canadian habits rapidly and took part in many extra-campus activities. He was a past president of the Kingston Kiwanis Club, a past president of the Cataract Golf and Country Club, a past president of the St. George’s Society, a past master of Queen’s Masonic Lodge and a member of the Scottish Rite of Freemasonry.

He lectured far and wide throughout Canada and in the United States on surgical subjects. Lectures by Austin on historical personalities and their times were looked forward to by all of us. He could make characters and events real and vivid. As a professor of history he would have been well in the van. Some of his most popular addresses were: The Knights of Malta; King John; The Lives and Deaths of the Kings of France; The First Appearance of Syphil-
is in Europe; Medicine in the Eighteenth Century as shown in Hogarth’s Prints, and Napoleon. While lecturing to students on surgery, he would finish driving a point well home. Then suddenly he would take off his coat, roll up his sleeves, sit down and say, “Now let’s talk about something interesting.” And away he would go. One of his students well remembers such a talk on lues, the bad leg of Henry VIII, and the many abortions of his many wives. Then he expounded on the relationship of lues to the history of the establishment of the Church of England.

It might be of interest to present-day residents in hospitals to know that for three years Blimley received for his services as surgical registrar the sum of £100 ($290) a year along with “bed, board and washing.” Some of his former students might also be interested to learn that when Blimley was on the hospital “midwifery service” in the slums of London, he often had nothing to wrap around the new-born babe, but a newspaper. Some wag once said it was “The Daily Cry.”

Austen never married and seemed almost a misogynist, but he was very fond of children. This fondness he demonstrated not only by his kindness and interest in them in the hospital wards but in his interest in children’s activities generally (he loved to play Santa Claus at Christmas), and his well-concealed charitable help to the less fortunate ones. In these charitable works Austen was ably seconded by his sister Margaret, one of the kindest of women, with a personality all her own. It is said of her that she is the only woman in the world who can walk down the street holding two dogs on a leash, knit a sweater, read a book (all at the same time) and know all that is going on around her as well. She is almost as well known as her brother. The two of them took many a student into their home to help him on his way through University, and Austen kept himself poor helping others. His sister says, “He was rich one month, poor the next, and he never spent a cent on himself. He wouldn’t dare tell me how much money he gave to others to help them along.” Just before he died he gave a cheque to the Red Cross, and said “You had better cash it right away, I won’t be here in ten days.”

Once after Austen had been away for a few days he found his dog in the pound. He had to pay a fine. As Austen described it, his dog was prosecuted for conduct unbecoming to a dog and a pure-bred in a public place, and the judge sentenced him to a fine. The plea “he had been away” was not acceptable. Austen’s actual words were earthy and short, but more revealing.

Austen was called once into consultation on a small boy with appendicitis. He went into the room and after making a few faces at the small fry he examined the boy and confirmed the diagnosis. Coming out of the room he encountered the frantic and distracted mother. He speedily reassured the poor woman by saying “It’s all right, mom, your little lad has appendicitis. We shall take him up to the operating room and poison him, fall upon him and cut him open. We will fix him up for you.”

At an examination Austen showed a gastroenterostomy clamp to a promising young student and asked what it was. Quick as a flash the bright boy replied, “A J-R clamp.” “What for?” asked Blimley. “An elephant?”

Austen was a very informal dresser and cared little for appearances, but he could look smart in a dinner jacket or military uniform. A military uniform seemed to suit him well and he wore it often as the Officer Commanding No. 1 Field Ambulance. Lt.-Col. Austen also served with Queen’s Officers Training Corps for years. His most informal dress was the one he wore when playing golf, and he cut quite a characteristic figure on the course. He also had a very much educated slice on his drive, which had the merit of being always consistent. It would veer far to the left and finally land right in the middle of the fairway at least 100 yards from the tee. Despite this amazing slice however he usually managed to down his younger and more vigorous opponents and turned in quite a satisfactory score. He was of course a most companionable and entertaining member of any foursome. He was an ardent bridge-player and a great collector of stamps. On his death his stamp collection and the property, in which he had lived and in which they had fathered and mothered many a student, passed to the University. The faded old red brick house, containing Blimley’s famous study, has lately been torn down and part of the new Dunning Hall now stands on the site.

In the year 1929 a young girl received a chest injury in an accident. Austen opened the thorax to remove a quantity of blood from the pleural sac. Before closing the wound completely he had the girl brought out of the anaesthetic, allowing her to cough and re-expand the lung. This was before the time that positive pressure anaesthesia was in common use. This brought about an unusual sequel. The case went to court for litigation regarding the accident. During the trial Mr. Justice Logie remarked that it was unusual to congratulate a surgeon upon his skill while the court was in session but he could not lose the opportunity of expressing the warm appreciation felt by the public for the excellent work Dr. Austen was doing. This rather astonishing eulogy is possibly one reason why Austen thereafter revelled in the atmosphere of the court-room, sometimes to the confusion of members of the legal profession who were cross-examining him.

Besides his fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons of England, Austen was also a fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine and of the Hunterian Society. On this side of the Atlantic he was made a fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of Canada, and of the American College of Surgeons. He helped to organize the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada, and was for some years a member of the council of that body. He was a past president of the Ontario Medical Association.

His war and other military medals were: The Cross of an Officer of the Order of St. John; the 1914 Star; the British General Service Medal; the Victory Medal; the King George VI Jubilee Medal, and the Canadian Efficiency Decoration.

On May 14, 1944, Dr. Austen received the Montreal Medal for “meritorious contribution to the honour of Queen’s.” Mention was made of “the deep affection in which Dr. Austen is held not only by medical graduates, but all who knew him on the football field and at Queen’s student and alumni gatherings” and that the award was a sincere tribute from Queen’s people to one who had given 25 years of generous service to the University.

It is now 17 years since March 20, 1945, when this man died, but his memory lives on.

Dr. James Miller, his contemporary in the chair of pathology at Queen’s, writing about Austen after his death, paid tribute to his ability, described him as a kind and most unostentatious man, with a great capacity for living, and, with reference to his death, quoted the famous lines of Robert Louis Stevenson, Requiem, Stanza 1:

“Glad did I live and gladly die,
And I laid me down with a will.”

Many students will forever remember the blackboard and the chalk, and his inimitable method of imparting knowledge, nor can they forget these oft repeated aphorisms. “The patient must be adequately exposed.” “The reason God gave you two arms and two legs was to enable you to have good ones to compare with the injured ones.” Many a student who owes his career to Austen will remember him with gratitude. His friends, with the memory of the warm-hearted generous kind hearted man whom they once knew, say, “It is good to have known him.”

Three weeks before Austen’s death, when in Belgium with the Canadian Army, the author received a letter from him. Blimley wrote, “I am very ill, I shall not be here when you return. So just—turn down an empty glass.”

The first draft of this article has been written at sea, on the Eastern Arctic Patrol 1961. Here, on the edge of the Arctic Circle, Dr. J. D. Hermann, who was a former student of Dr. Austen and has just retired as professor of clinical surgery of the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Ottawa, and the writer, a former colleague of John Austin, are at this moment looking at the photographs of Blimley destined to illustrate this story. How happy we would be if he were here with us. We have just turned down an empty glass.

July 1961