HISTORY OF CANADIAN SURGERY

JOHN STEWART

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It is now more than a quarter of a century since Dr. John Stewart died, yet his memory has remained as an inspiration to those who knew him, and his tradition has lived on in his native province and in the medical school to which he gave such exemplary service.

Dr. Stewart was born on July 3, 1847, at St. George's Channel, Richmond County, Nova Scotia, where his father, the Reverend Murdoch Stewart, was the Presbyterian minister. He attended the Model School in Truro, Nova Scotia, and later the Provincial Normal College in the same town. After graduation he taught for one year in Sydney Academy, and then resolved to study medicine. He entered Dalhousie College for this purpose but because the future of medical education there was at that time uncertain, he transferred to Edinburgh. He graduated M.B., C.M., on October 6, 1877, at the age of 30.

Immediately before Stewart's graduation, Professor Joseph Lister had been invited to accept the Chair of Clinical Surgery at King's College Hospital, London. The story of events which preceded and followed this is part of well recorded medical history. Suffice it to say that Lister chose John Stewart as one of his house surgeons, familiar with his technique of antiseptic surgery, to go to London with him. In later years he used to recall vividly how he rode to Lister's first lecture in a cab, carrying with great care the culture tubes demonstrating the presence of living organisms. It was a day of days, and one on which the sun rose to give new light and hope to a suffering world.

If Stewart thought about his future at all at that time it would have seemed bright to any ambitious young man. True, Lister was not accepted in London with open arms or with immediate acknowledgment of the greatness of his discovery, but he had supreme faith in its value, a faith amply justified by its use. He was a son of a wealthy family; he could afford to wait a while. In the meantime, his house surgeons knew that they were standing with him on the brink of an epoch. All that was necessary was to work well and wait. Stewart, a man over six feet tall, handsome, dignified and of gentle bearing, could look forward to a career full of honours and achievement. Within a year, if such a dream existed, it vanished, at least for the moment. His father had died and family needs required his presence in Nova Scotia as head of the family. If he had regrets nobody knew of them. He returned to Canada and began to practise in Pictou where his brother was a lawyer.

Those were days of a great educational awakening in Pictou. The college, founded there in 1816 by Thomas McCulloch, D.D., had vanished and left in its place a struggling Academy to recall its former glory, which now seemed in revival. George Munro, a native of Pictou County had made a fortune as a publisher in New York, and, not forgetting his old school, he created a number of scholarships and bursaries available to its graduates, which enabled many to secure a

university education. Students came to it from afar, the quality of its teaching became unsurpassed in the Maritime Provinces at that time, and its fame returned. Dr. John Stewart was deeply interested in the school and its students. He was single, he lived near the Academy and rejoiced in associating with the students and members of its faculty. He was a naturalist and his love of the beautiful countryside around Pictou made it easy for him to steal away from a busy practice for long walks with a friend. In later years he was regarded with some wonder as a botanist and ornithologist. Dr. Stewart's extensive and accurate knowledge in both of these sciences was gained almost unconsciously in the pleasant school of friendly and cultured associations.

Meanwhile his brother's family was growing and as he was unmarried, Dr. Stewart gave them the affection his own children would have won. He was an inspiring uncle. Football and lacrosse were popular games in Pictou in those days, and in these he excelled. The Pictou County Artillery Company was organized and he became one of its officers. As a younger man he had held a commission in the Third Regiment of Richmond County. As a surgeon he was gaining a wide reputation.

When Dr. Stewart began his practice there was but one general hospital in Nova Scotia, the Provincial and City Hospital in Halifax, which was over 100 miles from Pictou by road or rail, and much farther by water. As a result, and in keeping with good practice of that day, operations were done at home. If antiseptic surgery seems archaic in our day, it must be admitted that it lent itself admirably to the kitchen table era. Provided the surgeon had instruments and linen, the average household supplied all other needs but a few ounces of chloroform and a bottle of carbolic acid crystals. Stewart had taken a Lister spray from London and it is now at Dalhousie University. That took care of the operation field. Instruments were immersed in 1:20 carbolic acid. Hands were scrubbed and immersed from time to time in the same solution. Linen, sponges and sutures all went through the same process. Any inadequacies were taken care of by the acquired resistance of members of the household to their native bacteria. Chloroform, properly given, was a safe anesthetic. Dr. Stewart had been brought up in a school where speed and dexterity were highly valued. He made full use of these, but as he gained confidence in his developed methods he exhibited a wonderful degree of care and thoroughness. Fifty years after John Stewart began to practise in Pictou, I made the same attempt in the same town. There were men and women living to exhibit the honourable scars received at his hands and to attest to the greatness of his skill. At the same time there were physicians in practice who had worked with him during what we would now consider the pioneer days. One of these told me of a young man who had developed a tuberculous lesion of the hip joint with abscess formation. The narrator was asked by Dr. John Stewart to give the anesthetic. The room was prepared, the kitchen table draped and everything was in readiness. Before the anesthetic was begun, the surgeon gathered the family together in the kitchen and in a simple unaffected way told them what he was going to attempt and ended by asking God's help in the task before him. "Then", continued my informant, "we went into the improvised operating room. Dr. Stewart cut down on the head of the femur and curingtied away the last bit of necrotic bone. He swabbed out the abscess track with a sponge which had been wrung out of carbolic acid solution; then he closed the incision without drainage, all of which took about two hours. The wound healed by first intention." I asked, "What became of the patient?" He replied, "You see that man plowing over on that hill; he is the man." Forty years had passed!

It was during the Pictou years that Stewart was an unwilling participant in an episode that caused him much discontent and uneasiness. In 1885, owing to a dispute over an appointment at the Provincial and City Hospital in Halifax, the entire visiting staff resigned. As it was the only teaching hospital then available, the Halifax Medical College decided to
Inadequate as his early education was, it held to the end, a profound and properly cultivated appreciation of the Stewarts, and, if not a little too high, where it was necessary to be valued. This, and he had developed his degree at the University of the Arts after leaving Pictou, and the same independence and living which he had received of the greatness of the arts, were unimpaired. His work at the University of Edinburgh was of the same high order as that of his colleagues. He never turned aside from his original purpose, but continued to uphold the principles of his life-work, his art, and his aesthetic. The results were published in table and in syllabus. He was the author of the famous "The Original Halifax Medical College.

suspend operations as well. The entire matter was fully investigated and administrative matters at the Hospital were the subject of severe public criticism. Since Dr. Stewart had a comprehensive knowledge of hospitals in both London and Edinburgh, as well as of some on the Continent, his opinion was sought and given. It was a time when feelings ran high, and no opinion was likely to meet with universal favour. In any event, his was a fair and honest appraisal of the situation as he saw it. Eventually a solution was reached which removed the hospital from joint ownership by the City of Halifax and the Province of Nova Scotia, and conferred its sole ownership upon the Province. The bed capacity was increased by 100, and the institution was renamed the Victoria General Hospital in 1887, Queen Victoria's jubilee year.

In the same year the Sisters of Charity, at the suggestion of Dr. Stewart, opened a small hospital on Barrington Street in Halifax which they named The Victoria Infirmary. It was the beginning of the present Halifax Infirmary.

By 1894, Dr. Stewart decided that there were no immediate prospects for the erection of a hospital in Pictou County, and that he could pursue a career of greater usefulness in the province's capital city. He was at once appointed to the Faculty of Medicine at Dalhousie University, but did not choose to become a member of the staff of the Victoria General Hospital. As long as he continued in active practice the greater part of his work was done at the Infirmary. By this time aseptic surgery was replacing antiseptic surgery. It was difficult for him to change from a method which he had seen at its birth and which he had used so successfully for many years of practice. There was also a feeling of transcendent devotion and loyalty to his old teacher Lord Lister, that made him loath to relinquish his methods. He changed slowly and reluctantly, and when called out of Halifax to operate, as occurred constantly, he
would revert to former techniques if the local circumstances permitted.

It is almost impossible today for a younger member of the medical profession to grasp the spirit which pervaded the practice of medicine and its evolving specialties in Nova Scotia from 1894 to 1914. Those who aspired to recognition in a special field had emerged, almost without exception, from a background of general practice. Sometimes the transfer to specialized practice was heralded by a period spent in one of the large centres in the United States, the British Isles or Germany; in other instances it would be founded upon local success and experience. In most instances the arrival of a new surgeon on the scene was not greeted with applause by his new associates. All were rugged individualists, accustomed to working alone. They were resourceful and aggressive. In Halifax, practice was highly competitive. The poor were treated, and well treated, free, and there were many poor. Consequently the paying patient was jealously watched. The “little books” on ethics were frequently consulted and unethical conduct was a common accusation levelled in official conclaves. Into this professional maelstrom came John Stewart. Where most others would have failed, he succeeded beyond the most sanguine hopes.

The reasons for this success were many. In the first place, his training and skill as a surgeon were first class. In the second place he had no desire to make money—a modest competence was all he asked. Finally, in every word and action, he was a man above the crowd. There was no malice in his being, and he was never known to speak unkindly of anyone. Though deeply religious, he did not force his opinions or beliefs on anybody but was a living example of the strength of his faith. Where his skill alone might have failed, his lack of self-seeking, and unassuming upright character won. He remained stately and serene above his bickering associates who soon grew to trust and love him.

He was elected President of the Canadian Medical Association in 1905. In 1906 he was appointed to the Provincial Medical Board and later became its president. In 1913 he became Professor of Surgery at Dalhousie University.

Then, in 1914 came World War I. In 1915 the Dalhousie University Number 7 Stationary Hospital was organized for service overseas. In spite of his 67 years, John Stewart was placed in command by unanimous consent. The unit reached France early in 1916 and remained there until the end of the war. On July 3, 1917, the Hospital was at Arque, and on that day it was visited and inspected by King George V. His Majesty spent some hours there in conversation with the staff and Colonel Stewart, who afterwards said that it was only by a great effort of restraint that he refrained from telling the king that it was his seventieth birthday. In March 1918, he was transferred from his command to Canadian Army Medical Corps Headquarters in England as Consulting Surgeon.

On his return to Canada on January 6, 1919, Dr. Stewart was tendered a banquet of welcome by educational, business and professional men of Nova Scotia. On October 6, 1927, when he celebrated 50 years of practice he was again honoured at a banquet and presented with a purse of gold.

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Fig. 3.—Lister spray which Dr. Stewart used in his operations.
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Following his return from overseas Dr. Stewart began to retire gracefully. In 1919 he was made Dean of the Faculty of Medicine at Dalhousie University, and the cares of an expanding school occupied much of his time. However, he was Consulting Surgeon at Camp Hill Hospital, and would from time to time see old friends in consultation, but his active days of practice were over.

Honours began to almost crowd upon him. He had retired from active service in the Army with the rank of Colonel and was made a Commander of the British Empire. In connection with the Lister Celebration in 1927, the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh bestowed on him their Honorary Fellowship, which is the highest award the College is able to bestow and which is awarded very sparingly. He was also given the honorary degrees of Doctor of Law by both Dalhousie and McGill Universities. He was twice President of the Medical Society of Nova Scotia; once, as previously noted, of the Canadian Medical Association, and once of the Medical Council of Canada. He delivered the first Listerian Oration to the Canadian Medical Association in 1924, which revealed his unexcelled mastery of the English language.

In the spring of 1932 Dr. Stewart led his last medical class to graduation. A few days before, he had heard them subscribe to the Hippocratic Oath. It was an event to remember, the tall bearded figure unbent by his 85 years, standing before them. It must have recalled to his mind a similar scene in his own day. He told them in simple language of their obligations to themselves and to society. He ventured the hope that they were going out with some inspiration, to live full and useful lives. Then in tones which at times were almost a whisper, so deep was his emotion, he recalled that day in London, 55 years before, “when I rode with my great master to his first lecture,” and how supreme the influence of that acquaintance with Lister had reigned over his whole life thereafter. With this over he wished them well.

During the year that followed, his health slowly deteriorated and he went out very little. Gradually he became bedfast and died shortly before 9 p.m. on December 26, 1933, in his 87th year. He was buried at Pictou, near the scene of his early work.

Tributes from persons in all walks of life were forthcoming when his death became known. Dr. Murray MacLaren, then Minister of Pensions and National Health said in part: “His refined mind and tastes led him to be associated with all that was good, all that was patriotic, all that was noble.”

The minutes of the Board of Governors of Dalhousie University used these words: “Dr. Stewart will be remembered as the surgeon who, in the Province, by his skill, raised the practice of that profession to a high plane. When he was in active practice he was the most highly respected and the best loved man in this Province.”

In his memory, the Provincial Medical Board of Nova Scotia founded and endowed the Dr. John Stewart Memorial Lecture, given each year at the Dalhousie University Medical Refresher Course in Halifax. It was a humble but fitting tribute to a man, who by his character, high ideals and great professional skill, raised and ennobled the medical profession in his native province and far and away beyond its boundaries.