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Dr. J. G. Mumford

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The Story of the Boston Society for Medical Improvement.

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BY

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BOSTON.

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J. G. Mumford
Apr. 19, 1901

THE STORY OF THE BOSTON SOCIETY FOR MEDICAL IMPROVEMENT.¹

BY J. G. MUMFORD, M.D., BOSTON.

THE story of the Society for Medical Improvement is not so much a history as it is a series of biographies. As a history, it is commonplace enough, and interests us because it runs back nearly three-quarters of a century, and contains the names of a good many well-known men. Indeed, we may divide its life into three generations. To do so gives it a rather personal and family interest. A number of us can actually point to a grandfather among the early members. It is none the better for this, perhaps, but it is better than most societies, I believe, and I hope to show some reason for this belief. Its history has been sketched briefly more than once before. They used to have anniversary dinners in the old days, when men would talk, sing songs and poetize. The story of the founders was often told. On the fortieth anniversary, Dr. Spooner, a surviving founder, wrote a letter about it. That we have. In 1880 Dr. J. C. White made a careful and concise statement of the aims and the work accomplished; and in 1894 again there was an overhauling of accounts, when the Observation Society joined us; but now we are at the beginning of a century, and setting up in a beautiful new hall, so that I am moved to write down in

¹Being the Story of the Society, read January 21, 1901; the occasion, the opening of Sprague Hall in the new Medical Library Building, The Fenway.

some sort of order the tale of the years that are past, and of the men who lived through them.

It is easy to think of the life of this society as composed of three generations, and it is a rather striking fact that with the passing of each generation there does indeed appear a new era. First there were those ancient men, our professional grandfathers, with their limited ideas of science as we know it; their strenuous gropings in the dark; their earnestness in small things; their blind pathology; their empirical therapeutics; their almost pathetic struggling toward the light. Then there came the second generation, growing out of this first one, the adolescence, the development of it, as it were. The sudden leap forward is amazing, even to one reading these stately old Records of ours. In ten years' time, from 1845, a whole new vocabulary appears. First there came statistics. Then there came the microscope; then there came ether; then there came a burst of scientific enthusiasm and progress such as, up to that time, the world had never seen. This second period, the period of our fathers, extended down to our own time. It saw the development of anesthetics, and of the new pathology. It lived through the Civil War. It reaped the benefit of the great forces which made neighbors of the most distant scientific communities, and stimulated the expansion of modern knowledge.

And so we come down to our own era. What shall we call it? Many great names claim it—Listerism or Pasteurism; or the Age of Antiseptics; or Bacteriology—whatever else it may be, it is certainly the age of surgical expansion. And

to no age has belonged more pre-eminently the motto, *Magna est veritas et prevalebit*. It is through all this, as it was manifested here in Boston, that the Records of the Improvement Society lead us.

There is no mystery or tradition about the beginnings of this society. It started in full-fledged, with a beautifully-written constitution and by-laws, on the 19th of February, 1828. There were eleven members. They met at the house of Dr. John P. Spooner, and they proceeded to organize themselves into a society with as much solemnity and earnestness as the Federal delegates from the thirteen States. Years afterwards Dr. Spooner used to say that he started the society. At any rate, it was a Boston affair, pure and simple. It was not the outgrowth of French ideas, as was the Observation Society, started later. Eleven young gentlemen, recently established in the practice of medicine, (on the suggestion of Drs. Spooner and John Ware) thought they would meet together on a sort of medico-social basis twice a month. These gentlemen were Zabidiel B. Adams, John P. Spooner, George W. Otis, Jr., Joshua H. Hayward, D. Humphreys Storer, Horatio Robinson, James M. Whittemore, J. G. Stevenson, Joseph W. McKean, Enoch Hale and John Ware. To this company were added fourteen others in the course of the year. So with a membership of 25 the society began its career. James M. Whittemore was the secretary, and his beautifully kept records run through the early months of the society's life. In those days the proceedings were delightfully informal, as one would expect. The men were

mostly young and well known to each other; there was no president, or permanent chairman. There were no regular written papers, as has been the custom for so long now. When the members met together, each apparently bursting with his desire to impart knowledge, they were called on in alphabetical order for their communications; and to judge from the written record, each man availed himself of his opportunity.

The first regular meeting for the discussion of medical topics was held on the 10th of March, 1828, and Dr. James D. Stevenson opened the highly important proceedings of this society, which have gone on for seventy-three years.

Dr. Stevenson's proposition was this: In the case of a child born while the mother is in a standing position, with rupture of the cord, "Is there any special danger to mother or child?" They began by having a regularly appointed subject for discussion, in addition to the more informal communication, and the first important topic was, "What are the earliest diagnostic symptoms of croup?" And these two topics, the one obstetrical, the other dealing with infectious diseases, have been always the leading topics of discussion throughout the life of the society. On this first evening the conclusions were that the croup subject was an interesting one, and that it should be continued at the next meeting. Out of this custom of calling on members alphabetically grew the practice of recording accurately the attendance at each meeting; so that to this day the actual attendance at every individual meeting for seventy-three years is on record.

Two other events of interest connected with the

society occurred in this year of 1828: The starting of the Anatomical Cabinet by the society, and the founding of the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* by gentlemen who were members of the society. The cabinet was an ambitious project. It continued to grow for many years. It was fostered mostly by the enthusiasm of one man; it published a printed catalogue; and it lies buried in the Warren Museum of the Harvard Medical School. The *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* was not an original endeavor. It arose out of two other journals—the *New England Journal of Medicine and Surgery* (1811), and the *Boston Medical Intelligencer* (1823), which were consolidated under its name; and it owed its initial success to the editorial endeavors of Walter Channing, J. C. Warren and John Ware.

During those early years members of this society met at each other's houses, and owing to this agreeable arrangement, doubtless, I find that the total expenses of the society for the first year were \$7.50. It soon became evident to our progenitors that a more systematic method of work would improve the meetings; and with that in view, standing committees were appointed, whose duties were to present reports on divers topics of medical interest. In the same year of 1829 the society resolved to publish Transactions. These ambitious extensions in no long time brought about the necessity for larger accommodations. Therefore, in 1830, two years after the founding, a room was hired for the meetings, and for the cabinet, over the shop of Smith & Clark, druggists, on Washington Street, the price paid being \$25 a year. In those new surroundings there seems to

have been the same difficulty in finding readers of formal papers that we sometimes experience now; so that it was even found necessary to impose a fine of \$2.00 for failure to read.

As one plunges through the sea of old Records one is constantly tempted to seize upon some fine old medical name, bring it to the surface and exploit it. One could gossip for days about those old times and men and things. I will mention a few of the men in their order. There were those who founded the society, whom I have named. Then in 1829 came John Homans, Sr., John D. Fisher and Francis G. Higginson; 1831, John B. S. Jackson; 1832, Charles T. Jackson and Joseph Roby; 1833, Charles G. Putnam and John C. Hayden; 1834, Henry I. Bowditch; 1835, Henry G. Clark and J. Mason Warren; 1836, George C. Shattuck, Jr., Oliver Wendell Holmes and George H. Bethune. In 1837 this society of young men took unto itself as honorary members three distinguished gentlemen of a former generation: George C. Shattuck, Sr., James Jackson, Sr., and J. C. Warren; in 1838, Jacob Bigelow as a regular member, and Edward Reynolds, S. D. Townsend and Jeffries Wyman; in 1839, Samuel Parkman. I believe every one of these names is well known to all of us, and to the older members of the society must call up a flood of interesting reminiscence and anecdote. Now there is a curious thing about the steady, undeviating progress of this association of ours—it is ever unemotional, unruffled by stirring events and men. Though Charles T. Jackson and J. C. Warren and Henry J. Bigelow were members, the discovery of ether raised scarce a ripple in their debates.

These men themselves, and their sons and brothers, went into the army and navy in war times. Yet this is all the official note we see, written three months after the fall of Sumter, that, "owing to the disturbed political condition of the country, the society judges it wise that the meeting of the American Medical Association be postponed for one year." And through all this time, in its quiet way, the machinery of the society and its habits and its traditions were gradually crystalizing. The first prudential committee is mentioned as a creation of 1837. It consisted of Messrs. Ware, Fisher, Gould, Palmer and Roby — five in all; a committee of five it has remained ever since. For more than forty years its duties seem to have been largely perfunctory, certainly not onerous, consisting for the most part in approving the names of candidates for membership. And during all those former years it was composed of some of the oldest members of the society — Dr. Jacob Bigelow and Dr. D. H. Storer served until extreme old age; also Dr. Ware and Dr. Gould for many years.

Dr. Jacob Bigelow was constant in his attendance at the society meetings. Already of mature age, vast experience and deeply learned in the natural sciences, his presence was a great stimulus to his younger companions; and, unlike his distinguished son, he elicited, rather than depressed discussion. In that first era, which for convenience is limited to the years before 1846, one of the most conspicuous figures was Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes. For two years he was secretary, and the volume of his records, in his beautifully precise, feminine handwriting, makes

glad the eye of the reader as much as his quaintly delicious phraseology warms and uplifts the heart.

I suppose that to the older members among us the name of Dr. J. B. S. Jackson, more than that of any one man, stands for the work of this society. Elected to membership three years after the small beginnings of 1828, he continued active in his interest until 1879, only twenty-two years ago, and during all these forty-eight years his enthusiasm in the study of morbid anatomy seems never to have flagged. Wherever one opens the old Records, there will be found a paragraph devoted to Dr. J. B. S. Jackson and his unfailing specimen. And, especially in the first twenty years of the society's life, his enthusiasm for the autopsy room might be described in the gamin language of today as something fierce. Of course, in those days, pathological surgery supplied little material, and it is a curious commentary that when one reads in the Records of one day some surgeon's clinical account of a desperate case, one may expect to find in a subsequent Record *not* the story of the operation, but Dr. J. B. S. Jackson's account of the autopsy. Indeed, in those early years, the number of morbid specimens shown was astonishing.

The vigorous growth of the young society suffered little abatement up to the time of the Civil War. It was small, as we reckon figures; it was somewhat exclusive; it was composed of busy workers in all fields of medicine; it afforded them all their equal and almost their only opportunity for speaking and publishing. It printed "transactions," it represented teachers, practitioners and

hospital staffs; and in a very real sense it controlled the practice and the medical fortunes of this community. In the very early years, social features of these meetings were not lacking. The members celebrated an anniversary day in February; and annually, for about twelve years, dined together at each others' houses. Here is Dr. Holmes' account of one of these gatherings: "The Anniversary Meeting of February 7th, 1838, Dr. Ware in the chair. At 7 o'clock the society disposed itself at table, animated by the presence of the dinner, which, by its outward arrangement and intrinsic excellence, did honor to the taste and judgment of its providers. Dr. Roby favored the society with an ingenious, pointed and witty address, touching the peculiar disposition of the mind required on entering on the study of medicine, and the effects which the practice of this society exercises upon our intellectual and social condition." Dr. Holmes then read a poem. "No incident occurred to interrupt the festivities of the evening, with the exception that a couple of our most efficient members were interrupted for a short time by accidents too frequent on these occasions. An amiable indiscretion, dating undoubtedly from some bright May morning, was visited upon the heads of Drs. Ware and Adams, by a midnight call into the midst of a February snow storm. The hilarity of the company was temporarily diminished, and the census of the city permanently increased during their absence."

So the society was small, more like a club. Of the 35 members, usually 25 attended. Admission to membership was difficult. All were friends.

The minutes, written with the greatest care and detail, covering sometimes eight or ten pages of a large sheet, give an idea of the daily life, pursuits and purposes of the various members; allowing, of course, for the point of view of the individual reporter. But there is no disguising that ancient courtesy of the formal type, which we expect and which still lingers obscurely among us; known better, perhaps, to our profession than to others. The spirit of these ancient times still pervades the pages, and as one reads, the men themselves become very real and present.

These social features and small friendly gatherings did not last many years. After 1840 the record of anniversary dinners ceases, though an occasional sporadic festivity occurred from time to time thereafter. The nineteenth anniversary of the founding was celebrated at the house of Dr. Reynolds, and a poem was read by Dr. Holmes. And again, more than twenty years later, on the fortieth anniversary of the founding, a very real and serious jubilation took place. Dr. D. Humphries Storer, an original member, and now growing old, entertained the society at his house. Doubtless some of our present members recall the occasion. A delightful account of the evening is given in the Records, and a copy of a letter from Dr. Spooner, then living, in which he tells the story of the founding. But after all, social matters have concerned us little for the last sixty years. It was toward the end of this first period in our history, August 14, 1843, that a gentleman was elected who is now, and has been for many years, the Nestor of this society, Dr. Samuel L. Abbott. His sponsor was Dr. Storer.

Dr. Samuel Cabot, Dr. G. Wiley and Dr. William S. Coale were elected in the same year, and their names seem to carry us back to a very early era. Besides being a scientific and social society, this organization attempted to meet other needs in those early days. It was a journal club. It started a library. It collected a museum. And in other ways that I have named, it flourished as a centre of medical life in Boston.

The second era or generation in the life of our society is so full of interest, and to many of us is so familiar, either by experience or story, that it is not easy to condense it into a few dry words. I have characterized it as the age of ether. It was that; it was much more. Strong names blazon its course, many of them coming down through the years. At the very beginning of it, and perhaps more conspicuous than any other one man, comes Henry J. Bigelow — leaping upon the stage, as it were. That capital piece of memoir writing, I think the very best medical biography known to me, Hodges' Life of his great colleague, has reached us recently, and the tale he tells of Bigelow's career renders futile my feeble words here. But there were others: Samuel Cabot, Jeffries Wyman, Clark, Lyman, Townsend, Gay, Derby, Minot, Williams, Thorndike, Homans (John and Charles), Hodges, Borland, Reynolds, White, Green, Blake, Channing, Cheever, and more if one were so minded; for who may say what name will live through this and future generations? Certain names, then, and certain events dominate the Record: following the years, one sees a man's entrance, his feeble beginnings, and

his increase in force and courage. Then his youthful modesty thrown aside, his earnest setting forth, his dominating tone; and then suddenly, mostly, he disappears from our pages. In the first era it was Storer and Ware, James Jackson, J. C. Warren, Jacob Bigelow who successively engrossed us. Now these names cease mostly, and Henry J. Bigelow, J. Mason Warren, Cotting, Calvin Ellis, George C. Shattuck and their like hold the stage. And through it all, year in and year out, generation after generation, sounds the steady, persuasive voice of J. B. S. Jackson—pathologist, scholar, teacher. Through many of these years, the clerkly hand of William M. Morland traces the Record—a name now only to most of us; notable to me for the scolding given him by Henry Bigelow, asserting that his part in the discussions was constantly inadequately reported; the careful scribe, himself, bearing witness to the chastisement. Thereafter Dr. Bigelow's words were most faithfully and accurately recorded.

I have mentioned the all-embracing functions of the society. Until near the beginning of this era it was the only one of its kind. The programme of each evening we should consider enormous in variety and extent. Here is a sample day, taken from the Records of 1848. In addition to numbers of pathological specimens, presided over by J. B. S. Jackson, the programme read: (1) "Oil from Fatty Liver," (2) "Frogs with Additional Extremities," (3) "Diverticulum from Small Intestine," (4) "Intestinal Calculus from a Horse," (5) "Cast of Thorax to show Cardiac Enlargement," (6) "Necrosis after Amputation," (7) "Compound Fracture of Thigh,"

(8) "Cauterization in Croup" (oral), (9) "Double Urethra," (10) "Convulsions in Typhoid," (11) "Fatal Hemorrhage in Dysentery," (12) "Abscess of the Ear," (13) "Asiatic Cholera."

Now, as early as 1845, Henry J. Bigelow's voice was heard in this assembly, and the next year he began to publish that series of papers on ether, scarcely mentioned here, which gained him so great a notoriety. Other gentlemen, conspicuous in the ether controversy, were members of this society at the time; notably, J. C. Warren and Charles T. Jackson. Of them we hear not at all on this subject. George C. Shattuck was secretary then, and a careful reading of his elaborate Minutes gives no inkling of the raging of the ethereal storm. In November, 1846, it is recorded that "Dr. H. J. Bigelow read a paper on the recent discovery and practice of the inhalation of a vapor so as to produce insensibility during the performance of surgical operations and the extraction of teeth." The amazing fact in regard to this famous communication is not a rising storm of criticism and interest, or any slightest evidence of appreciation of what it all meant, but that it was dismissed with a few languid comments by Drs. Hayward and Hale on the propriety of hospital surgeons using a secret remedy, as Morton's "letheon" then was.

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After Henry Bigelow and J. B. S. Jackson, the most conspicuous contributor to the meetings of this middle era was J. Mason Warren. His remarks were nearly always on surgical cases—many of them of great interest thoughtfully and

forcefully presented. To judge from the accounts in the Records, Dr. Warren must have taken a keen interest in curious and unusual subjects; freaks of Nature, monstrosities and the like, were collected and reported by him. He showed the society the Scotch Giant and the Aztec Children, and among other surprising cases, reported at length this one of extraordinary fecundity: A woman living at 100 West 27th Street, New York City, gave birth in 1858 to a boy; July 30, 1859, boy and girl; March 29, 1860, boy and girl; March 1, 1861, two boys and one girl; February 13, 1862, two boys and two girls—twelve children within five years; and they all lived.

It would be extremely interesting to take any single subject, or series of cases, and trace it through these eighteen volumes of Records: Erysipelas, puerperal fever, the radical cure of hernia, the treatment of ovarian tumors occupied successively the attention of the society, and as men and methods changed, came to be looked upon very differently, as we may suppose.

It is interesting, too, to note the repeated demonstration of the well-known medical truism that rare cases seldom come singly: Dr. Jacob Bigelow shows a thoracic aneurism; at the next meeting, Dr. Jackson shows two. Dr. Samuel Cabot reports a foreign body in the trachea; at the next meeting, Dr. Henry J. Bigelow reports another. Dr. Warren reports a death from chloroform; Dr. Bethune reports a second. Then there are to us the provokingly suggestive discussions hovering around some subject now made complete by scientific demonstration. The beginnings of bacteriology flash upon us as out of the Middle Ages;

to be succeeded only by guesswork and darkness. In 1862, for instance, Dr. Jeffries Wyman reported observations on dust, and pointed out its composition as shown by the microscope; spores, hairs, minute eggs, pus corpuscles. And Dr. J. C. White said that while in Germany he had seen pus corpuscles from the air caught on plates in the hospitals. Then about the same time, the frightful extent of hospital gangrene in army hospitals exercised the profession, and the almost intelligent use of antiseptic dressings became especially noticeable. So it was with the recollection of these frightful surgical conditions fresh upon them, that American surgeons welcomed the principles of Lister, even more eagerly than did their European colleagues. The early carbolic method was urgently advocated in 1867 by Drs. George Derby, J. C. White and Upham; and Dr. John Homans spoke of the common use of permanganate of potash in the maternity wards at Vienna in 1865. Curiously enough, as illustrating the familiar scepticism, born of sad experience, Dr. Hodges heard with incredulity their enthusiastic claims. The inception, too, of many medical and surgical methods for long years familiar to us is seen to grow out of these debates: Dr. Samuel Cabot was the first to point out and insist upon the value of ether in the diagnosis of obscure abdominal tumors. Dr. J. B. S. Jackson repeatedly asserted the identity of diphtheria with membranous croup? Dr. Jacob Bigelow showed the value of the clinical thermometer in estimating the range and course of the temperature in typhoid fever. Dr. Coolidge urged the importance of carbolic acid and glycerine for preserv-

ing dissecting-room subjects. Dr. Fifield pointed out that a twisted ovarian tumor may be the cause of an acute peritonitis. And on January 11, 1864, Dr. H. G. Clark reported a successful case of ovariectomy with recovery of the patient. On the other hand, many of our younger members of the profession are apt to forget how extremely recent are some of our most important therapeutic agents. Thus in 1870, Dr. Francis Minot stated that the treatment for rheumatism was colchicum; the salicyllates being unknown; and in 1884 anti-pyrine and cocaine were suggested for the sake of their now familiar properties. What we call "teno-synovitis" is a condition in the daily experience of every out-patient surgeon; yet thirty-five years ago Dr. Fifield reported a case of painful crepitus in the tendons, and inquired into its cause and treatment. I suppose that no one surgical subject, after the discovery of ether, has attracted more wide-spread interest and controversy in our community than the disease which Dr. Fitz has called "appendicitis"—and the interest in this condition is by no means recent. Cases of tymphlo-enteritis appear on our Records so long ago as 1836. And towards the end of the second era in the life of the society Dr. J. B. S. Jackson presented a communication on the prevalence of this disease from 1840–1867. It had been asserted that the condition was more common in ancient times, but Dr. Jackson found in our Records the reports of 16 cases quite evenly distributed, and covering a period of twenty-seven years, an average of much less than one a year.

Now, the two great events of this second era were the introduction of ether, and the Civil War.

Their effect upon the lives and practice of our fathers must have been enormous; and if one could blot out this era, skipping from the year 1845 to the year 1868, the advance of Science in the interval would seem to us still more startling. Yet those two great events, as I have said, are little more than touched upon in the Records. Their overwhelming presence seems to have been so great, and their importance so obvious, that secretaries referred to them no more than they would have referred to the changes of the seasons.

Indirectly, however, the presence of war and the use of ether had their bearing on the type of subjects discussed. Matters pertaining to surgery and to camp sanitation had a large prominence; while certain other subjects were conspicuously lacking: Thus the great class which we include under the names neurasthenia, neuroses, hysteria, and the various forms of mental disease were rarely mentioned.

Noticeable, too, is the influx of new words—diagnostic and therapeutic—which flood the Records at definite periods, corresponding to the introduction of new members to the society. The resounding terms of dermatology come prominently to the fore with the return of Dr. J. C. White from Europe; and speculation as to the causes of infectious processes becomes rife after the Civil War. Many of our members, more especially Henry J. Bigelow, R. M. Hodges and George H. Gay, bestirred themselves actively as surgical advisers and hospital inspectors at the front, and their published reports are full of interest to us in these days of renewed warfare.

The limits of time and space prohibit my more

than referring to the numberless interesting cases and discussions which fill the Records and measure the progress of advancing Science: the early operations on the ovaries; for abdominal abscess; for hernia; the diagnosis and treatment of pelvic disease; operations on the joints; paracentesis; orthopedic surgery; operations on the eye; hygiene; statistical reports; public health — all these, and a hundred kindred matters, occupied earnestly the men of that time, and their discussions developed always more and more on lines with which we are today familiar.

During the past seventy-three years, we have had many domiciles. At first the members met in each others' houses. Then they met in the Washington Street rooms, over Smith and Clark's drug store; then they met in the Tremont Street rooms, over Burnett's (or Metcalf's) shop; then in Temple Place; after the removal of the Medical Library to Boylston Place they followed it there; and now to this distant Fenway.

For the beginning of the third era in the life of the society, I have chosen the year 1868. This was the fortieth anniversary. It marked approximately our first appreciation of aseptic surgery and bacteriological studies. And beginning with this year, there came to join the society a number of those men who now, in their very prime, we recognize as our most conspicuous representatives. It is for this very reason, because this third era is our own era, that one must limit oneself to brief and formal words in dealing with it. Even the naming of names is invidious, except so far as, from time to time, they conspicuously cumber the Records.

However, early in this era, coincident with changes in our personnel, there began one of those declines which every generation has known. The old men ceased to speak; for a time their juniors failed to take their places. And this has always been noticeable to me, that the modest, rising practitioner will surely restrain himself until increase of stored-up knowledge bursts forth to the enlightenment of his fellows. So these men, now our seniors, then young, appear seldom upon our Minutes, and for a space of several years an apparent pause came over our discussions. Yet those were not inactive days. Many men, fresh from the universities of Europe, were developing our laboratories; a new impetus was given to therapeutics and surgical endeavor; Bigelow was perfecting and publishing the two works which especially have made him famous, on the "hip" and "stone"; hospitals were growing; the university was expanding; and new methods of teaching were absorbing the profession. It seemed almost as if men were too busy to attend meetings so largely clinical as ours. So it came about that in 1880 the society found itself in a condition of semi-decline, and a strenuous effort was made to re-establish it in its ancient vigor. The man of the hour was our distinguished friend and first president, Dr. James C. White. Dr. White had been a member of the society for twenty-one years. He had known well most of its older members. Its objects and traditions and successes were familiar to him, and the authorities therefore resolved to invest him with the office of permanent chairman or president.

Thus, for the first time, the society became pos-

sessed of a responsible head. On taking the chair, Dr. White addressed to the meeting a few pithy, statistical words. He reviewed briefly the history of our organization. He showed the work done in former years, as measured by printed pages of Transactions, and the recent work. He called to the attention of members how great had been their influence upon practice, teaching, study and writing; and how deterioration had come with time. Not that work done was less or of poorer quality, but that less eagerly was it given to a listening world. And he enjoined them to reassert themselves, to publish again the results of their labors, and again to push to the fore the position of Boston medicine.

COPY OF DR. J. C. WHITE'S ADDRESS GIVEN IN 1880.

Gentlemen of the Improvement Society:—At your last meeting you honored me with the chairmanship of the society until 1881. Permit me to thank you for it sincerely, and to assure you that I accept the position with full consciousness of the character of its duties. I accept it because I have entire confidence in the success of the plan you have adopted for the improvement of the society, knowing that it is upon your efforts, and not upon my own, that its future depends.

I have thought that the following brief historical data may be of interest at this time.

The society was founded in 1828, and incorporated in 1839. During its first year it had 25 members of whom but 1, I believe,—one still active and honored among us—survives. At the publication of its first catalogue in 1853 the number of members had increased to 60, of whom 3 were honorary and 5 associates. In 1876, the date of our last publication, the regular members had increased to 79.

The immediate roll of the society is: Active members 91, associates 8, total 99; number of new members elected in the last two years, 23.

The first published records of the society appeared

in the *American Journal of Medical Sciences* in October, 1848, during the secretaryship of Samuel Parkman, the twelfth in succession in that office. In January, 1855, their publication was transferred to the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*, with which it has remained.

		Pages.	Papers.	Pages.
1853, Vol. I.	1848-1853, Transactions,	358		
1856, " II.	1853-1856, "	354		
1859, " III.	1856-1858, "	313	21	202
1862, " IV.	1859-1861, "	258	34	259
1867, " V.	1862-1866, "	242	61	311
1876, " VI.	1866-1874, "	292	25	168
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		1817	141	940

The current volume, beginning in 1874, amounts at present to 150 pages of Transactions and 80 pages of paper. The first two volumes contain simply the records of cases presented and the discussions thereon. The subsequent volumes contain not only such extracts from the Records, but in supplement form also the papers read before the society, and published in the *Boston Journal* and elsewhere. The above synopsis of the publications will show the comparative activity of the society in various periods of its existence.

But this society, which bears upon its rolls the names of the most honored physicians of our city within the present century; which has done so much for the advance of pathology and practical medicine, of which its extensive museum and valuable publications are permanent mementoes; the membership of which has been regarded throughout its fifty years as a high honor by the profession, young and old; whose meetings were long so full of interest and instruction — why is it that this society seems about to perish of its own will? Why is it that in the decade, 1856-1866 the Transactions covered 813 pages, papers 116=772 pages? While in the thirteen years which have since elapsed, 1866-1879, Transactions only 442 pages and papers but 318 pages, the publications of the last thirteen years not amounting to one-half of those of the preceding ten years.

Certainly the days of usefulness of such societies have not passed away. In all our large cities, centres of medical learning and seats of instruction, we find them in active and successful operation — nurseries of

the most valuable scientific and practical contribution to our literature, arenas of truth-searching discussions. National and international societies, too, of the most important specialties, as well as general in character, have been organized within the last few years, and have contributed greatly to medical improvement, and have excited a good wide interest. All these bodies we find are incentive to the highest professional work, most useful stimulants to progress. In a neighboring city, in a select society like our own, the communications and discussions which characterize its meetings are of the highest excellence in points of originality and research, and exert a wide influence. Why is it that we in this society, its peer in quality of membership we ought to say, occupy a position so far, far behind? Is it indeed, as one of the leading Western journals has recently said, because we really are their inferiors, and in doing almost nothing are doing our best? It is true we are open to the reproach of being a very silent set here in Boston. We are not book makers, and those who know anything of the management of our journal will bear witness how difficult it has always been to obtain anything like a fair proportion even of papers from the local district it represents. But such reticence is only a fashion for which no better reason than influence of descent exists. It can be corrected not only for our own but for the world's good. Boston has, as she has always had, admirable physicians, who have no right to keep their stores of experience and learning locked up in miserly silence; who would find eager listeners anywhere. They are members of this society, and their eminence should not be confined to its consciousness. I am happy to be able to announce that I have met with the most hearty response from all with whom I have spoken of the claims of the society upon their tongues and pens. It signifies the sincere and active interest which still exists in it. It is this which places the success of the new departure beyond a doubt.

Let me state the plan of conduct of the meetings which it is my purpose to observe, if agreeable to you. At present the order of business is strictly fixed in accordance with the printed programme. I desire the liberty of changing this arrangement to suit the char-

acter of the communications as they may present themselves, that written or oral communications may take precedence at any time according to their respective importance. It is my intention that two communications shall ordinarily be presented, which shall be announced in the regular notices of the meetings; that these subjects shall be first discussed by one or two members whom I shall especially call upon, and that then they shall be open for general debate. Afterwards the reader will have opportunity of reply. In this way there will always be valuable matter before the society, and assurance that communications will receive proper attention. Such special discussions will add greatly to the interest of the meetings and to the development of truth. They will be conducted, it need not be said, with that observance of courtesy and mutual consideration which have always characterized the proceedings of this society. It will assist the chairman greatly in the arrangement of business if gentlemen will inform him at the earliest moment of their intention to make communications, or to exhibit specimens of importance, and of course it is not intended that formal papers and discussions shall prevent the freest presentation of incidental communications and general debate. I would suggest, finally, the propriety of changing the hour of meeting hereafter to 7.30 o'clock.

These words were spoken twenty-one years ago. The burst of scientific enthusiasm, the enormous progress in all branches of medical work which have occupied the last two decades here in Boston, tell their own tale.

Unfortunately, perhaps, for the completeness of our Records, much of the best work done in Boston in recent years does not appear in our Transactions. The rise of new societies, local and national, has drawn away from us numbers of epoch-making papers. But many remain to illustrate our annals. Here are a few, hastily gleaned from the Records: In 1873 Dr. Cheever showed

how the knee-joint may be opened for a loose body. In 1874 Dr. Thomas Dwight described his well-known method of freezing sections. In 1880 Dr. Hodges read his classical monograph on pilonidal sinus. In this year, also, Dr. Whittemore read a most valuable article on dispensary abuse—the first one published among us. In 1881 Dr. John Homans read his first series of ovariectomies, Dr. James J. Putnam his well-known article on locomotor-ataxia, and Dr. Hodges on railway spine. In this year, also, Dr. Calvin Ellis made his last public communication, “On the significance of albuminuria as a symptom.” During these years of the early eighties Dr. Homans constantly addressed the society on the subject of abdominal surgery, and illustrated the feasibility of laparotomy for other than ovarian disease. In 1887 Dr. Ernst’s paper on “rabies” is conspicuous. In 1889 Dr. Henry J. Bigelow appeared for the last time before the society to read an account of his identification of the famous Paré portrait. The extremely interesting series of debates on appendicitis began in 1887, and has lasted even to the present time, the early participants being Drs. Fitz, Cabot, Porter, Warren, Gay, Richardson, Homans, Elliot, Watson, and many others. Perhaps the most interesting and conspicuous meeting of the period was that of November 19, 1890, a memorial to Henry J. Bigelow. The profession gathered *en masse* to honor that distinguished man, then recently dead; addresses were made by R. M. Hodges, O. W. Holmes, Henry Lee, D. W. Cheever, Hasket Derby; and letters were read from R. H. Fitz and A. T. Cabot.

Thus we come down to the last event of im-

portance which concerns us as a society — the uniting with the Boston Society for Medical Observation in 1894. Perhaps many of us have already forgotten the existence of that most useful organization. Founded in 1835, by the younger members of the profession, it continued in active, separate existence for almost sixty years; until, finally, its objects, practices and membership became so nearly identical with those of the Improvement Society that it was deemed best to unite the two under the title of the older organization. And we now here represent these two famous institutions.

So much for our story as I read it in our Records. Eighteen manuscript volumes, numberless printed transactions and papers, taken from the *American Journal of the Medical Sciences*, and the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*, tell it in exhaustive detail. Its rolls are adorned with famous names. Its purposes have been of the highest. Its vigor has been wonderfully maintained throughout the years. In this society alone is there room for many men of many minds. Here all branches of medical science may be discussed and special research popularized. Here are brought the questions of broadest interest; public hygiene, medical education, medical and surgical advance in diagnosis and treatment, and numerous other matters in which every educated physician should take an active interest.

With such a past, then, and such evidence of present vigor, let us believe that the Improvement Society may impress itself on the future and the coming century.



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