

# DR. GEORGE HENDERSON OF CHIRNSIDE (1800–1864)\*

by

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THE interest of the medical historian is apt to be concentrated on great names or spectacular discoveries, but a study of the humbler members of the profession should not be disdained, since much may be learned of their day to day lives, of their thoughts and aspirations. The byways of history may be no less interesting and instructive than the highroads.

I have recently had the opportunity of perusing two volumes of manuscript journals, or commonplace books written by Dr. George Henderson of Chirnside in Berwickshire, which afford glimpses of the life and opinions of a country practitioner of a century ago. The author was the eldest son of John Henderson and his wife Frances Purves, and was born on 5 May 1800, in his father's farmhouse of Little Billy in the parish of Bunkle, two miles from Chirnside, and six miles east of Duns, the county town of Berwickshire in Scotland. Little Billy was one of several small farms, the buildings of which were taken down in 1813 when the farms were incorporated in that of Billie Mains, from which it was distant about half a mile, in prosperous agricultural lands in the heart of the Merse and commanding a magnificent view of the valley of the Tweed looking towards the Cheviot Hills. The name Billy, which is the Celtic *baile*, a dwelling place or village, occurs in Billy Castle, the ruins of which stand overlooking a stream not far from the modern farmhouse. The castle belonged successively to the Dunbar family, to the Earls of Angus and to King James V of Scotland. It was destroyed by the Earl of Hertford in 1544 during the 'War of the Rough Wooing'.

After being educated in the local schools of Bunkle and Lintlaw, George Henderson matriculated at the University of Edinburgh in session 1825–6, but he attended only one class, that of chemistry, before he transferred to the Royal College of Surgeons, whose Licence he obtained in 1829.

He returned to practice in Chirnside, where he remained for 35 years until his death in 1864. He married in 1836 Margaret Hood, who was twenty years his junior and who died in 1894. They had six children, of whom only one survived infancy; this was Robert Hood, who became Chemist and Registrar in Chirnside, and who died in 1915.

Dr. Henderson had literary inclinations and published two volumes, *Scenes of Boyhood and Other Poems*, Berwick upon Tweed, 1840, and *The Popular Rhymes, Sayings and Proverbs of the County of Berwick*, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1856, which is still worthy of perusal by anyone interested in local customs and folklore. His

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poetry may not be first class, but it does show a keen appreciation of the beauties of nature, particularly as exemplified in his native locality. Dr. Henderson was a founder member of the Berwickshire Naturalists' Club, and contributed several articles to the early volumes of its history; indeed, his *Rhymes of the County of Berwick* first appeared in this form.

The manuscript journals mentioned are in two volumes, totalling 653 pages bound in half calf, lettered *Nugae medici*, and with the ticket of George Johnston, Murray Street, Dunse (the old spelling of Duns, and one which more faithfully indicates the pronunciation). The author says in his preface, which is dated 13 July 1853, that he was inspired by reading Luther's *Table Talk* to write down 'some reflection or observation for every day during one annual revolution of the globe'. These were based on his 'Notes and Journals of Former Years', though these seem to have disappeared. He goes on to say that had a country surgeon of a hundred and fifty years previously compiled such a book it would have been eagerly read in his day, and he makes the true prophecy that 'a hundred years hence some one may turn over these pages with very great interest'. Throughout the journals there are many references to nature. He was a keen botanist, and he gives many lists of flowers he found in his wanderings.

There are some plants [he writes], which, though not noted for their beauty, are yet great favourites with me: among these are the *Typha latifolia* or *Reed-mace*, the *Bur-reed*, the *Water-bennet*, and some others. These were plants familiar to my infant years. . . . The localities in which the above plants are always found may conduce to render them, in some measure, more dear to us. . . . In such localities too, there frequently grows up and blossoms in luxuriance the tall *Willow-herb*, the *Bull-rush*, the *Common-rushes*, the splendid yellow *Iris*—and not far distant the fragrant *Meadow-sweet* with its floating snowy plumes—the wild *Angelica*—the *Hemlock Dropwort*, the spiky *Mint*—and the light waving hairgrasses, etc. In scenes like these we delight to revel! Our fancy haunts them day by day—and even in our dreams, they are frequently reproduced, in new and more varied combinations, and in more gorgeous, though oft fantastic bloom. (I, 80-1).

It need not surprise us that he mentions his idea of Heaven as a place where trees, shrubs and flowers abound.

He was widely read, and quotes Latin and Greek, French, German, English and Scottish authors, as well as the classical medical authors such as Hippocrates and Galen. He was interested in the history of medicine; he mentions Freind's *History of Physic* and wishes that there were a better and more up to date one. To judge by his wife's complaints (which he records) he devoted too much money to buying books, and too much time to reading them. He not only read—he learned by heart poems to repeat on his journeys. He writes:

When riding by night, either to or from my patients, I find it a good plan to prevent me from wearying on the journey, to keep repeating some piece of poetry. On coming home this morning I repeated aloud for many times, Addison's beautiful hymn 'The spacious firmament on high', etc. 'Tam o' Shanter' is an excellent poem to recite on a night journey also Gray's 'Elegy'. Thomson's 'Hymn on the Seasons', etc. Such an exercise keeps you warm and comfortable. In a rough tempestuous night it is particularly pleasant to recite aloud some sublime strain of

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the olden time. I would recommend every country surgeon to commit to memory one at least of the books of Milton's 'Paradise Lost'—and use it as a stimulus in a cold night journey. (I, 28–9).

His library, amounting to about 2,500 volumes, was sold by auction in Duns on 15 and 16 December 1864, and there is a copy of the sale catalogue in the library of King's College, Newcastle upon Tyne. It appears to have been a good collection, larger than one might expect to have been collected by a country practitioner of the time. His medical books show no great rarities, but they include Freind's *History of Physic*, Hunter *On the Lues Venerea*, Whytt *On the Nerves*, and several Latin works, together with a number of runs of periodicals, including the *Edinburgh Medical and Surgical Journal*. His general collection is fairly wide, with the works of many poets, much biography and many works on botany and natural history.

His journals are reflections on life in general rather than a picture of his working life, but nevertheless certain glimpses of his lot are given. He worked long hours, riding in all weathers to visit his patients over a wide area. One of his recurrent worries was how to obtain payment from his patients without bullying them. His fads and fancies were numerous: he abhorred not only alcohol, but also tea and tobacco; he hated draughts, and once came out of church during a service to avoid one. He would have preferred to live as a vegetarian, but in this he was thwarted by his wife.

I have no doubt that vegetarians have the true side of the question—the fact is, without flesh as a food, we would be much stronger, healthier and livelier than we are. I am convinced that all flesh-eating, even in small quantities, is injurious to us. But custom is strong and inveterate, and the very prevalent, but utterly fallacious idea that *animal food* is more nutritious than vegetable, has so fastened itself in our minds that we cannot get rid of it. I am very much inclined to be a Vegetarian, though I cannot yet go the whole hog: and the women-folks are so most atrociously opposed to it, that I shrink from their reproaches. (II, 3).

He disliked the use of such 'popular' medical works as Buchan's *Domestic medicine* and the *Receipts* of Moncrieff of Tippermalloch.

From the Memoirs of *Mr. Wm Smellie*, the printer, I learn that though *Dr. Buchan* was the originator of the *Domestic Medicine*, it was entirely written by *Mr. Smellie*—a work which has done an immense amount of evil in the world. But no matter!—it was the source of much wealth and fame to the reputed author, and to the publishers;—and to this day it, and similar works, bring much profit to publishers and booksellers—and go on propagating mischief among the multitude. In so far as the real good of mankind is concerned, popular medical works are complete humbugs. (II, 28).

He is no less outspoken on the use of patent medicines:

Mrs. B., who is in a condition of chronic weakness, languishing and nervous irritability, has used *Holloway's* pills for six months past. She often took ten pills for a dose! No wonder she is weak: such treatment would kill a horse. The doctor is of little avail to such a person—she has run down the vigour and power of her system by these cursed Pills, and medicine will

not build her up again. It is shocking that so many fools and idiots make their bowels a thoroughfare for Morrison's, Holloways, Paris and American sugar-coated Pills!—or even for *doctor's* Pills. I maintain that nothing deranges, undermines and destroys the health so effectually as a long continued course of drugs, take them in what form you please. Such means do frequently adjust the machinery of life, and set free the else clogged wheels—but a long use of those Pills destroy the wheels altogether, so that no after patching, cleaning and oiling can renew or set them to rights again. (I, 210).

Among the folk cures recorded by Dr. Henderson are two for whooping cough.

There is a popular remedy for Hooping [*sic*] cough, sometimes practised in the country, of which I cannot find the origin. It consists in putting the patient *nine times* through below the belly, and over the back of an ass—and this process to be repeated for nine successive days! Whether the ass must be a male or female I have not learned. (I, 38).

Nine, or three times three, is, of course, a favourite number in spells or incantations, and Dr. John Ritchie, of Edinburgh, has mentioned to me that this particular 'cure' had a religious basis in that there is a cross on the back of an ass, an animal associated with the Saviour; he also states that the ass had to be of the opposite sex to the patient to be treated. The second 'cure' is perhaps even more curious:

An individual told me today, that when a boy, ill of Hooping-Cough, at the recommendation of an old wise woman, his mother, for the cure of that disease, tied round his neck a number of 'hairy oubets'—(the larva of the common red butterfly [*or rather of the tiger moth, W.S.M.*]) sewed up in a piece of cloth—and with evident success! (II, 170).

He mentions the custom of cutting the cheese on the birth of a boy, a duty which devolved on the physician present at the delivery.

The *first cut* of the cheese is divided into small square or oblong pieces—which are called the 'cuckolds cuts': I cannot tell for what reason. These pieces are used by the young unmarried females, friends or acquaintances of the patient as a sort of charm; they lay them below their pillows, that they may dream of *their future husbands*! (I, 318–19).

The memory of this custom remains in Berwickshire, but the custom itself seems to have died out some eighty or ninety years ago.

Dr. Henderson's dislike of tobacco has been mentioned; he several times refers to this, but one eloquent passage will be sufficient quotation:

What an awful, pestilent, monstrous and detestible system this puffing and smoking of Tobacco is! The solemn puff! puff! whiff! whiff, whiffing of a regular smoker is truly maddening to a person of unsophisticated mind. It is a real mystery of iniquity. But what would our government do were this smoking abolished? It profits largely by the delectable custom—it would be ruinous to put it down. It also makes work for the doctors. Tippling, feasting and tobacco-smoking and snuff-taking sow the seeds of disease on every side. The fruits are poverty, disease and death. It is a melancholy sight to see so many young persons engaged in the foul and pernicious practice of smoking: it is the first downward step to vice and misery. (I, 15).

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In one entry in his journal he breaks into verse on the subject of alcohol, giving ten reasons why it should not be taken:

There are I think  
Ten reasons why men should not drink—  
It hurts the health, depraves the taste,  
And sinks a man below a beast.  
It melts the purse; dissolves the tie  
Betwixt my dearest friend and I,  
It shuts out reason, lets in folly,  
And paves the way to melancholy.  
Excess in drink inclines to rambling  
Excites to whoredom, vice and riot,  
And banishes all peace and quiet;  
Excess of drink destroys our souls,  
Our death-bed's curse our flowing bowls. (II, 122).

He had original views on piles:

*Piles* are certainly a cause of longevity. I believe my father was an instance of this. In youth he was of a tender constitution, and was frequently ill, and all his brothers died in the flower of their age of consumption. About middle life he was attacked with Haemorrhoids, and till his death in the 83rd year of his age, was periodically affected by them. They seemed to be an outlet to some morbidity of constitution, and tended to keep him alive to old age. (I, 24).

His dislike of draughts was such that he once left the church during the service rather than endure one:

I can stand anything but a draught of air from a door or window. At the Meeting yesterday (Sep. 21) but stayed little more than an hour: the window opposite our seat being up half a foot at least, felt a cold stream of air blowing upon my right cheek, neck and shoulder, which became quite chilled in a few minutes—and I sat in pain—so at last I rose up and came out, considering that the good I might get from the sermon would never counterbalance a sore throat, a month's toothache, or a six weeks rheumatism. It is a deadly thing when a church or house is so absurdly ventilated that there are constant thorough draughts of air through it. I would rather sit on a mountain side, like the covenanters of old, than in a thorough draught in a church. (II, 25).

He records a link with the medicine of medieval times in the person of 'the water-doctor':

The *Merse* in the days of our great-grandfathers seems to have been deplorably destitute of doctors. *Old women* had all the practice then going. A *Dr. Blackie*, about 80 or 90 years ago, lived in Coldstream, who was called '*the Water doctor*', because he depended mainly on the inspection of the urine of his patients, as an indication of their diseases. How far he was successful in this mode we cannot tell, but he was popular in his day—and patients sent their *water* to him in bottles &c. from a considerable distance, and he frequently prescribed for them without seeing them in person. We believe that an epitaph in Rythme is to be seen on his tombstone in Lennel Church-yard—from which he seems to have been a very worthy individual. (II, 31).

*W. S. Mitchell*

Dr. Henderson devoted thirty-five years of his life to serving his patients in Chirnside and the surrounding district, and he died, according to the inscription on his tombstone, 'much regretted for his universal kindness and benevolence'. In a moment of discontent he wrote on one occasion:

Perhaps the three worst situations that a man can be in are to be at the head of a government, to be in jail, or to be a poor country surgeon. It requires many peculiar qualities to enable a man to be any way comfortable in the latter situation. (II, 198).

But it is pleasanter to take as his summing up of his lot these words:

True, I have had my cares, anxieties, perplexities and griefs—as who has not?—yet I do not think I could change my condition with anybody.