

News, Notes and Queries

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THE BACKGROUND OF LAËNNEC (WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO KERLOUARNEC)*

SOME time ago the Osler Club had a very interesting meeting on the subject of medical monuments. Among the many which were not mentioned that evening was one which I saw in the market place outside Quimper cathedral in Western Brittany two years ago. It shows Laënnec holding a stethoscope. At the back is the following inscription:

A l'Inventeur de l'auscultation—Laënnec René Théophile Hyacinthe né à Quimper le 17 Février 1781 mort à Plouaré en 1826 Professeur à la Faculté de Médecine de Paris et au Collège de France Membre de l'Académie de Médecine. Ce Monument a été élevé par l'Association Générale des Médecins de France par la Bretagne et par les Médecins Français et Étrangers. Mai 1868.

The sculptor was E. Le Quesne and at the base is a copper plate which states:

À Laënnec. Centenaire du Traité de l'Auscultation. Le Conseil Générale de Finistère. La Ville de Quimper. La Société Archéologique du Finistère. Les Médecins du Finistère. 1919.

It is quite clear from holiday brochures, issued in Brittany, that Laënnec is regarded as the most eminent Breton of the last few centuries. This is not only because of his great contribution to medicine but also because he became an authority on the Breton language, literature and folk songs. He was not born, however, into a Breton-speaking family but gained this knowledge in later life, especially from his relative, Madame de Pompéry, with whom he spent a holiday in 1805. He took every opportunity to widen it; if he saw a Breton patient in hospital, he always spoke to him in that language, and this was much appreciated.

* A paper read to the Osler Club of London on 16 June 1966.

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If you take the boat from Benodet, up the river Odet, you tie up in Quimper almost opposite where Laënnec was born. The house in the rue du Quai has been demolished to give a better view at a busy traffic junction, but others in the block are still standing. Nearby are some very narrow streets leading to the cathedral.

Laënnec did not stay long in his home town. His mother died when he was five. His father was a gay and witty lawyer, but always in debt, and so relations looked after the children. Théophile first stayed with an uncle who was a priest and later with another uncle in Nantes who was a doctor, and who influenced him greatly. These were troubled times and the whole family would watch the guillotine at work from their window. This uncle supervised Laënnec's early training in medicine and in 1801 eventually persuaded his father to allow him to go to Paris. Here he worked under Dupuytren, Bayle and Corvisart. He qualified in 1804 and quickly made his name.

From time to time Laënnec left Paris to visit his beloved Brittany and to do a round of visits to relations. Among these homes was a house called Kerlouarnec, just outside Douarnenez. Owing to the extravagance of Laënnec's father, there was a court case over the ownership of various family properties and in 1810 this house was handed over to the doctor by his mother's family. He wrote to a friend:

Give me your estimate of the repairs to be made at Kerlouarnec. This kind of expense is one that I undertake with the greatest pleasure. I am most anxious that this property should not become neglected. I hope to go there one day and forget the whirls of Paris and I intend investing therein as much of my savings as I can.¹

In 1814 Laënnec visited the property for the first time since he had become owner. He found that it had been neglected. 'Everything was crumbling. The animals were in the farmhouse and the Lamboutins, the farmers, lived in the manor. The land was in the same condition, banks crumbled, ditches filled in, walls fallen down, meadows neglected.'² 'Laënnec dealt with these problems with the same method he applied in his scientific work.'³ He stayed with friends at Douarnenez, discussed the matter with them and drew up plans for repairs, planting, draining and reconstruction. In 1815 he wrote to his tenants there a long letter in Breton, giving details of a new lease which was to give them a better return on their land and also to ensure that they kept the place in good order.

In 1816 he first rolled up some sheets of paper into a tube and, putting one end on the chest of a stout young lady, listened to her heart beat from the other end of the tube. The result was much clearer than if he had put his ear directly on the spot, and he felt that it was less offensive to the patient's sense of modesty. This was the start of the work on medial auscultation, and an important paper on the subject was presented to the Académie de Médecine on 28 February 1818. However, Laënnec became very ill, and left again for Brittany.

Here he stayed at Douarnenez for several months to supervise the work at Kerlouarnec before returning to Paris. His famous book *De l'auscultation médiate* was published on 15 August 1819 and the publisher held a stock of stethoscopes. Dogged as always by ill health, the author left Paris the following October for Brittany. Kerlouarnec seemed to be in a worse state than before, and he thought of

pulling it down. But he decided to complete the repairs. It was September 1820 before he could make it his home.

Last summer I had another holiday in Brittany and I stayed at Douarnenez. So I made some enquiries and through the courtesy of Général des Essars and his wife I was able to visit Kerlouarnec and take some colour photographs. I am also indebted to Monsieur A. Halna du Fretay, the owner of the property, for some additional information and for two black and white photographs which illustrate this article. The property belonged originally to the du Fretay family. After the death of Madame Laënnec it was purchased back by that family, to which Madame des Essars belongs. The house is a noble manor of the sixteenth century and was a single storey; Laënnec added another storey. Fig. 1 shows the front of the house taken from the park. The upper room on the left was Laënnec's study. Underneath was a stable; there was a trapdoor in the floor between, which was opened sometimes, because the doctor thought that the fumes from the stable were good for chest troubles. His bedroom was on the right; it was in this room that he died. Fig. 2 shows the back of the house. The tower was built by Laënnec to house a staircase; but he changed his mind and put the latter in another position. However, he took great care over the building of the tower because it made the house look like a 'petit Château'. The two windows on the left were those of Madame Laënnec's 'salon de verdure'. The floors at ground level are still made of stone flags, but the old stable is now a living room; central heating is being installed. When Laënnec inherited the house the vegetation was very sparse, but he had a lot of planting done and there are now plenty of trees. The climate here is warm and damp; frost is rare. Among the plants which grow in the kitchen garden is the coelecanth, which is rather like a marrow and has a highly coloured and decorative fruit. Général des Essars, no doubt exaggerating, said: 'My wife just puts one as a table centre with a cherry on it, and everyone says "what a lovely decoration" '.

When Laënnec left Paris in 1819 he thought he would never return and so he dismissed his housekeeper Angélique; Dr. Kervran says that he feared that she would not adapt herself to life in Finistère. I think that the main reason was probably that she could not speak Breton and therefore would be unable to supervise the servants. In 1821 Laënnec was persuaded to go back to Paris. At first he lived in lodgings, but later took a house. Now he needed a housekeeper again. This time he chose Madame Argou (Jacquette Guichard) a widow whom he had met in 1805 while holidaying with Madame de Pompéry, who was her godmother. Madame Argou was forty-two. But, of course, eventually tongues began to wag, and so in 1824 Laënnec married her.

He wrote many articles for the *Journal de Médecine* and for the *Dictionnaire des Sciences médicales*. He held appointments at the Necker and later at the Charité hospitals. But many prizes and senior posts eluded him. Eventually he was elected a professor and royal lecturer at the Collège de France in 1822, and became a full member of the Académie de Médecine in 1823, and was made a Knight of the Legion of Honour in the next year. Madame de Staël and Madame de Chateaubriand were among his patients, and Récamier was one of his friends.

He spent much of his spare time both in Paris and on holiday in studying Breton culture, Latin and Greek, and in playing the flute. But he was constantly dogged by

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ill health. After completing the second edition of his book in 1826, he left Paris for the last time and died a few months later at his beloved Kerlourarnec.

If you leave this quiet spot and go back towards the town, you come to the church at Ploaré, where Laënnec used to worship. It is famous for its gargoyles, and when I visited it, someone was practising a Handel organ concerto. I was disappointed, however, because I could not find anything in the church connected with Laënnec. However, I think that this is typical of Breton churches. None of them contains the kind of memorials which we have in this country, although there are a great many pictures and statues of religious subjects.

From the church to the centre of Douarnenez runs the rue Laënnec downhill. About halfway is the entrance to the cemetery, and the sea can be seen in the distance. Visitors must often come to see the grave, because when I asked one of the gardeners where it was, he told me at once. You go down the road to the next entrance, turn left up the main path, and it is at the first main cross path. The stone says:

ICI REPOSENT René Théophile Hyacinthe LAËNNEC médecin de S.A.R. Mme Duchesse de Berry; docteur et Profeur Royal en médecine au Collège de France; Profeur de clinique à la Faculté de Paris de l'Academie Royale de médecine; Chevr de la lég'n d'Honneur, né à Quimper en 1781 mort à Kerlourarnec le 13 Août 1826 ET Dme Jaqte GUICHARD son épouse née à Brest en 1779 morte à Kerlourarnec le 2 Août 1847. Priez pour eux.

If you look at Douarnenez from the harbour wall, Kerlourarnec lies over the hill which faces you. Some miles away to the left lies the famous village of St. Anne la Palud where there is a Grand Pardon every August. There is an outdoor mass, partly in Breton with a sermon in French, and after lunch there is a wonderful procession. Further along the coast is the village of St. Nic Pentrez, which I hope to visit another time, because Laënnec sometimes worshipped there at a chapel dedicated to St. Cosmas and St. Damian.

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THE HISTORY OF PHARMACY CONGRESS, ATHENS 8TH—14TH APRIL, 1967

This was the seventeenth congress of the Internationale Gesellschaft für Geschichte der Pharmazie, an active society with particularly large numbers of German (over 900) and Austrian members, but with poor support from the English-speaking world.

The 23 conference papers—to be published in the *Veröffentlichungen der Internationalen Gesellschaft für Geschichte der Pharmazie*—when heard and discussed in the space of a few days produced an impact which will certainly be missing from the printed volume of papers. It seems timely to mention the impact of the conference