

Book Reviews

Michael Barfoot (ed.), *“To ask the Suffrages of the Patrons”: Thomas Laycock and the Edinburgh Chair of Medicine, 1855, Medical History*, Supplement No. 15, London, Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, 1995, pp. xv, 226, illus., £25.00, (USA) \$38.00 (0-85484-062-1).

In August 1855 William Pulteney Alison, Professor of the Practice of Medicine in the University of Edinburgh, was obliged to resign due to ill health. This created a vacancy in what was, in the eyes of many, the most prestigious medical chair in the British Isles. Several distinguished members of the Edinburgh medical community quickly presented themselves as candidates; these included John Hughes Bennett who, as Professor of the Institutes of Medicine, felt he had a special claim upon the position. In the event, however, the Patrons of the University chose none of these local candidates. Instead they opted to appoint a rank outsider—someone who, in his own words, was “a provincial physician, and a lecturer in an obscure school in England” (p. 59). Thomas Laycock did not even have the advantage of being Scottish.

This book is an edition of Laycock's own account of this strange turn of events. He began to compile this history exactly five years after he embarked upon the professorial contest. The final result of Laycock's efforts as a chronicler is a complex and curious document. As well as the narrative proper he scrupulously appended correspondence and other documents to which he alluded in his main text. He even included photographs and engravings of some of the protagonists in his tale. Yet, as far as one can judge, Laycock never intended to publish his account (had he done so he would certainly have risked multiple libel suits); it was compiled solely for his own satisfaction. In particular, he seems to have been concerned to vindicate himself against various imputations that had been made during and more especially after the contest, and to provide a statement of his grievances against various of the individuals involved in

these and subsequent events.

The end result is, in truth, a rather sad and unedifying document which leaves the reader profoundly grateful never to have made the author's acquaintance. More by accident than design Laycock has, however, done a considerable service to historians concerned with the history of the Edinburgh medical school. His efforts have ensured that the 1855 contest is among the best documented of nineteenth-century academic appointments in Edinburgh.

The timing of these events also makes this episode of particular interest. The vacancy in the Chair of Practice of Medicine that occurred in 1855 was one of the last occasions on which an academic post in the University of Edinburgh was filled under the old system of patronage. Before the 1858 Universities (Scotland) Act most Edinburgh professorships were in the gift of the Town Council: the university was truly the “Town's College”. The Council that discharged this responsibility in 1855 was not, however, the same body that in the 1820s had slavishly followed the dictates of the ruling political faction. Reform in municipal government combined with a more clement political climate ensured that a genuine, if circumscribed, form of local democracy prevailed.

Most of the thirty-three Councillors were tradesmen from the middling sort of Edinburgh society. Some observers, such as James Syme, were scornful of the capacity of such men to make competent judgments about academic appointments. The prevailing view, however, was that the members of the Town Council discharged their duties as patrons of the university in a scrupulous and efficient manner. Self-interest played some part in their approach to this task: Edinburgh's commercial community had a vested interest in the maintenance of a flourishing medical school in the city. They relied in particular on the testimonials that candidates mustered. But they were also concerned with the moral and religious character of the individuals who presented themselves. At least one elector was moved by the piety of Laycock's dedication of

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one of his papers to his mother.

The candidates themselves did all in their power to manipulate what they saw as the patrons' concerns and priorities. To this end they employed the full range of personal, family, and religious interest at their disposal. Much of Laycock's account concerns the mechanics of campaigning; in his case he was advised and materially assisted by James Young Simpson, the Professor of Midwifery. The complexities of the struggle are illustrated by the fact that Simpson was for much of the contest also to some degree an advocate for one of Laycock's rivals. Laycock discusses at some length the complex reasons that underlay Simpson's ambivalent, if not duplicitous, stance.

Michael Barfoot has done a splendid job of editing Laycock's baroque production. His introductory essay provides, moreover, a comprehensive context for the primary materials reproduced in this volume. He might perhaps have dwelt more on the peculiarities of Laycock's text itself. It is in many ways novelistic—as in the use of an omniscient third person narrator, its discussion of motives, and even occasionally in its description of landscape. Laycock may have been convinced that he was creating a record of historical truth. It is intriguing, however, to what extent he performed this task by resort to the tools of a writer of fiction.

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