

**THE HARVEIAN ORATION  
DELIVERED BEFORE THE ROYAL  
COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS,  
OCTOBER 18TH, 1890**

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The Harveian oration delivered before the Royal College of Physicians, October 18th, 1890 by  
James Andrew

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**JAMES ANDREW**

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THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS

OCTOBER 18<sup>TH</sup>, 1890.

BY

JAMES ANDREW, M.D. OXON. F.R.C.P., *1829-1891.*  
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DEDICATED

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TO

SIR ANDREW CLARK, BART. LL.D. M.D. F.R.S.  
PRESIDENT OF THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS,

BY

HIS GRATEFUL FRIEND

THE AUTHOR.

## THE HARVEIAN ORATION.

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THE pleasure, Sir, with which I learnt from your lips that I had this year to discharge the time-honoured functions of "Harveian Orator" was largely alloyed with dismay at the difficult nature of the task before me. My predecessors have been so numerous (this commemoration of benefactors is held to-day for the 172nd time), they have also been so well equipped for the work by literary skill, by training and by knowledge, that it might well be thought that nothing could be easier, or more certain to be successful, than to follow faithfully in their steps. But, unfortunately, the very number of my predecessors and their individual excellence render this course impossible: for, it is one thing to imitate with more or less success the style and method of a great writer or speaker, it is another and a very different matter to reproduce his actual words and facts, to publish, so to speak, a new edition of his work with no real change except in the title page. Now, Harvey's shield has been burnished so often and with such sharp-sighted devotion that no spot or stain remains upon it,—

his claim to be the discoverer of the circulation of the blood has been fully established, his writings have been found to be pregnant with the ideas and discoveries of later generations;—nay, more, the man himself has been proved to be not less than his work. His great discovery was no chance find, no mere lucky hit, but the natural outcome of his genius and of his time. How then can the belated Harveian Orator of the present day hope to add even one fresh pebble to the cairn which the love and the labour of generations have raised over the “immortal” Harvey.

On beginning my quest for something new it soon became clear that, of the two fields more especially open to me, Sir James Paget had practically exhausted that of St. Bartholomew’s Hospital in his ‘Records of Wm. Harvey in extracts from the journals of St. Bartholomew’s Hospital; with notes by James Paget,’ published in 1846, but I still hoped to discover, by the help of learned friends, some hitherto unnoticed records of Harvey’s life in Oxford. Nor, indeed, is it impossible that such do exist although I have failed to unearth them. The sole result of my search, and this I owe to the kindness of the present Warden of Merton College, is the following brief report, in the Register of Merton College, of Harvey’s speech to the Fellows on April 11th, 1645, two days after his admission to the Wardenship.

“Dominus Custos, Convocatis in Altâ Aulâ Sociis, hæc verba ad illos fecit. Forsitan decessores Custodiam Collegii ambiisse, ut exinde sese locupletarent,



se verò longè alio animo—nimirum ut Collegio lucro et emolumento potius foret ; simulque socios, ut concordiam amicitiamque inter se colerent, sedulò sollicitèque hortatus est." This fixes the exact date of Harvey's admission to the Wardenship, viz. on April 9th, 1645—O. S. : and there is another reason for my dwelling on what may seem to be a matter of but small importance. On the strength of this short entry in the College register it has been stated that Harvey delivered a somewhat "Pharisaical" speech to his Fellows. Now, if we bear in mind the violent passions aroused on both sides during the Civil War, nay even if we judge his words by the modern standard of parliamentary language as established during this last session, Harvey can scarcely be held to have indulged in excessive abuse of his predecessors, including Sir Nathaniel Brent, or to have said too much in praise of himself. The exhortations to concord and good fellowship come with double weight from a man who cared first for learning and science and then made provision also for a "general feast once every year," and, "at every meeting once a month, for a small collation, as the President shall think fit, for the entertainment of such as come."

By a very natural feeling on the part of the College the lecture and feast, which Harvey guilelessly founded in commemoration of the benefactors of the College, have come to be devoted almost entirely to the commemoration of the most illustrious benefactor of them all, himself.

The value of Harvey's great discovery can scarcely

be exaggerated, either in itself, or as an illustration of scientific method and work, or in its effect on the course and development of physiological studies. There is no need to dwell on points such as these before this audience. We are all of one mind in the matter.

But, besides these great things, Harvey's writings contain also many things, of less importance indeed, but yet well worthy of our consideration, *e.g.* we may find in them no doubtful indications of the wise and prudent advice which he would have given us for the abatement of some at least of the evils under which our Profession labours at the present day. Let me give one or two illustrations of my meaning, taken from the first sixteen chapters of the treatise on the motion of the heart and blood.\*

In the first rank of the ills which beset the profession I do not hesitate to place the enormous amount of so-called medical literature. Were it all good there would still be quite enough of it. But could we get rid of the vain repetitions of all those books which contain little or no original work, and are too often the damaged seed, not the fruit, of practice and of a ripe experience—could we get rid of all the clinical observations with the idle theories based upon them, which from their imperfections are simply misleading—could this be done, the residue would no doubt be small, might, indeed, bear much the same proportion to the original mass as

\* The works of William Harvey, M.D.Eng., translated from the Latin, with a life of the author, by Robert Willis, M.D.Eng., Sydenham Society, London, 1847.

fine gold does to the ore from which it has been extracted, but it would be far more valuable than anything which medical literature in its present form can offer to us. There is one publication which I regard with especial horror, the "invaluable" 'Index Medicus.' I find that the volume for 1889, the last completed but not the greatest of eleven volumes, contains the names of not less than 13,870 contributors. Now the index of the 'Index' fully bears out the supposition that each pair of contributors represents not less than three communications, and thus we have a total of not less than 20,000 contributions to medical science for last year. I have much pleasure in admitting that many of them are short, but then it must not be overlooked that very many of them are substantial treatises in two volumes or more. That one volume of the 'Index' alone contains sufficient material for a small library of monographs and systematic treatises, which a very moderate amount of mechanical industry could easily put together. I venture to think that no small part of medical literature would never have been written had its authors given heed to Harvey's words at the end of the Dedication of his 'Treatise on the Motion of the Heart and Blood.' "My dear colleagues," he writes, "I had no purpose to swell this treatise into a large volume by quoting the names and writings of anatomists, or to make a parade of the strength of my memory, the extent of my reading, and the amount of my pains; because I profess both to learn and to teach anatomy, not from books but from dissections; not from