

**ADDRESS TO THE BRITISH
MEDICAL ASSOCIATION
DELIVERED IN THE HALL OF
CHRIST CHURCH, AUGUST 4,
1868**

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1868 by Henry W. Acland

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HENRY W. ACLAND

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TO THE

BRITISH MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

DELIVERED IN

THE HALL OF CHRIST CHURCH

AUGUST 4, 1888

BY

HENRY W. ACLAND

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AND

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THE MEDICINE OF MODERN TIMES.

THE meeting which was held last year by your Association in Dublin was attended by circumstances never to be forgotten. The great interest of that delightful metropolis, the fervent hospitality of our hosts, the pre-eminence of our President, bequeathed to his successor a task from which any man, however fortunately placed, might reasonably shrink.

Two motives only have induced me to accept the honour most graciously offered, of following him as your President: the one, the strong desire to help in carrying on his and your work of last year; the other, the conviction (more than justified by the great kindness already shown to me) that you will only require such hearty service as it is in my power to render. To all, whether to your distinguished Officers, to my valued co-adjutors in this place, to those

present from this or other countries, I look for a continuance of that kindness and support. Confident of this, I anticipate a useful and happy meeting, though we are shorn of some of the splendours of Dublin, and remote from the exhilarating buoyancy of Irish life.

It has been said that one chief art in a President's Address is to advance no serious opinions, and to provoke no criticism. A speaker cannot, however, speak with advantage unless he express thoughts which awaken a response in the head and the heart of his hearers. The test of the success or failure of his attempt must be their approval or condemnation.

Pleasant and bright as I hope our meeting will be, full as it should be of the double objects of such a gathering,—the advance of our common pursuits and the calling forth the kindly feelings of a common profession,—I much mistake your wishes if you do not desire that something more than an agreeable retrospect, more also than words of hearty welcome, should occupy us for a brief space to-night.

We are living in a critical period of our country's history ; in a new era in the history of Man. Every part of our social fabric is now undergoing scrutiny, revision, and reform.

Government, trade, institutions, laws, the artificial usages of society, the character to be given to our children by the method of their early training, are not only being criticised, but are most of them being changed—changed with unexampled rapidity ; and the change is, some think, a tendency to absolute perfection, or, according to one philosopher, a last plunge down the Falls of Niagara. The facility with which ideas are communicated through the whole human family, distinguishes our age from all that precede it. Our own profession is not exempt from these influences : even if it were, we are part of the body politic, and as wise men we might do well to look forth from the fretted shelter of this ancient Hall, itself a memorial of the ferment of the Reformation, and, scanning the clouds as they drift along, take the bearing of our own course in the stream of time.

The accomplished authors of the special addresses which you will hear at your general meetings, Professor Rolleston, Professor Haughton, and Dr. Gull, will bring before you abundant illustrations of the present state of three great departments of the science and the art we profess. While waiting for these addresses and for the other more technical

communications which you will hear, I propose to take a general survey of the position occupied by our professional knowledge in relation to other branches of knowledge, and to consider the objects which ought to be held in view when we discuss the temper required of us by our times, and the training proper for the formation of that character and temper.

No better illustration of what is meant by Medical character and temper can perhaps be found than in the words deep graven in the hearts of true Physicians for a hundred generations:—

ὁ καιρὸς ὄξυς· ἡ δὲ πείρα σφαλερῆ· ἡ δὲ κρίσις χαλεπή.

How may every age—some more than others, but yet every age—for itself exclaim, ‘Yes! opportunity fleets by and is lost. Old experience is a quicksand. Sound judgment is hard, above all things.’

The traditions of our present resting-place may well induce us to ask, in the language of this grey old aphorism:—

Are we losing opportunities now?

Is our experience fallacious?

Is not judgment in science and in art still hard?

Are we attempting what cannot be done? or spurning what can even now be accomplished?

What will our children's children say of us and of our day?

Will they bless us for the training we gave them, and the example we set? Or will they say that our conclusions were baseless or rash, the tasks we bequeathed to them unnecessarily difficult?

Now, in judging of the Medical character, we set aside of course all reference to individuals. We form an ideal character. And yet the ideal cannot be considered wholly in an abstract way. We have to judge of it in its relations,—first, to the condition of SCIENCE, and secondly, to the constant properties and the variable accidents of HUMANITY.

In the present age SCIENCE is advancing, and the means of its progress are increasing with altogether unexampled rapidity. No bounds can be set to its possible conquests. A profession dependent on Science must vary with that on which it depends; and if it does not advance with the advance of Science, that fact proves it to be in error.