

## **Sir John Forbes (1787-1861) and Miss Florence Nightingale (1820-1910): an unlikely association?**

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### Summary

This year marks the 140th anniversary of the death of Sir John Forbes, a distinguished Victorian doctor, Physician to the Royal Household and medical journalist. Sir John's career is outlined in relation to his lifelong friendship with Sir James Clark. Although there is no record of a meeting between Sir John and Florence Nightingale, they corresponded towards the end of his life: Miss Nightingale's letter as well as their views on patient care, at a time when medicine was emerging into a more scientific era, are discussed.

### Résumé

Cette année marque le 140ème anniversaire de la disparition de Sir John Forbes, le brillant docteur de l'époque victorienne, médecin de la famille royale et journaliste médical. La carrière de Sir John est présentée en rapport avec la relation amicale qu'il entretenait avec Sir James Clark tout au long de sa vie. Bien qu'il ne soit pas fait mention d'une rencontre entre Sir John et Florence Nightingale, ils s'écrivirent vers la fin de sa vie; la lettre de Miss Nightingale ainsi que leurs opinions sur les soins des malades, à une époque où la médecine entrait dans une ère scientifique, sont examinés.

The career of Sir John Forbes has been fully documented in the *Dictionary of National Biography* (1) and also more recently (2,3). Similarly, the life of Florence Nightingale has been described in detail (4). In order to establish a link between these two notable Victorians, the one famous as the translator of Laennec and Auenbrugger into English, the other well-known as the modernizer of the nursing profession, it is necessary to look again at some aspects of their respective careers: let us start by re-considering that of Sir John Forbes.

### **Early years and education :**

John Forbes was born on 17 December 1787 in a village near the northern coast of Banffshire in Scotland (5). In the Scottish tradition, he received a sound primary education at the local parish

school, where he distinguished himself by winning a scholarship to Aberdeen Grammar School. John had been joined at the local school by the young James Clark (1788-1870), who became his lifelong friend: both graduated MD at Edinburgh in 1817. Clark was appointed Physician to the Royal Household of Queen Victoria (1819-1901) and created a baronet within a year of her accession to the throne in 1837 (6). It was James Clark who encouraged Forbes to translate Laennec's *De UAuscultatione Mediate* into English in 1821 (7).

Forbes had left his local school at the age of 15 and, after further grounding in English, French and the Classics at Grammar School, entered the Arts Class at Marischal College of Aberdeen University. He attended this course for two years but left in 1805 without having graduated. He developed a medical interest by being apprenticed to two Banffshire practitioners (8). Possibly from patriotic motives, the war against Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821) was then raging, Forbes

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now decided to enlist in the naval medical service. After tuition in Edinburgh, he obtained the Diploma of the Royal Collège of Surgeons there in February, 1806 (9). Owing to a shortage of naval doctors at that time, he was able to enter the Royal Navy as a Temporary Assistant Surgeon in 1807(10.)

### **Naval career and Edinburgh (1807-1817) :**

In January 1809 Forbes was promoted to Full Surgeon: he served in various ships and shore establishments including Haslar Naval Hospital. He also saw action in the Caribbean (11). During spare time at sea, he improved his basic knowledge of French and other European languages and there are anecdotes about how he saved the lives of shipmates from drowning as he was a strong swimmer (12).

In April 1814 he was appointed flag surgeon and secretary to Rear Admiral Philip (later Sir Philip) Durham (1763-1845), who flew his flag in HMS *Vénérable* (74 guns) as Commander-in-Chief of the Leeward Islands station. Forbes was present and played an important part as Admiral's secretary in the capture of Guadeloupe from insurgent French Bonapartists in August, 1815 (13). He left *Vénérable* and the Navy on arrival home in Portsmouth at the end of May, 1816.

Having returned to Edinburgh as a 29-year-old mature student on half-pay from the Navy, Forbes studied hard at the Medical School and University; he graduated M.D. in Edinburgh on the same day, in August 1817, as James Clark. The title of Forbes' MD thesis was *Tentamen Inaugurale de Mentis Exercitatione et Felicitate exinde Derivanda* reflected his philosophy of life in general. Always a diligent student with wide interests, he had attended lectures in geology by Professor Robert Jameson (1773-1853), while studying medicine. By chance, a vacancy had occurred in a practice in Penzance, Cornwall, for which Jameson was asked to recommend an Edinburgh physician with an interest in geology. Dr John Forbes was

appointed and moved to Penzance in September, 1817. The change to the milder climate of the extreme south-west of England may also have been for health reasons (14).

Forbes worked as physician to the Penzance Public Dispensary and also in general medical practice throughout Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. During his five years there, he became skilled in the use of the newly-invented stethoscope of René Laënnec (1781-1826). Encouraged by Dr James Clark and with only his 'schoolboy knowledge' of French, Forbes set about the task of translating and shortening Laënnec's monumental work *De L'Auscultation Médiate* into English. The first of his four translations appeared in 1821(15) and was a great success; it inspired three further editions in 1827, 1829 and 1834 roughly corresponding to the years when successive editions of Laënnec's classic appeared in Paris following the death of the author in 1826. It was in the 1834 edition that Forbes changed the translation of Laënnec's 'râle' from the English 'rattle' to the Latin 'rhonchus' (16). These translations, however imperfect they appeared at the time, were fundamental in spreading the teachings of Laënnec to the English-speaking medical world. Five hundred copies of Forbes' *Treatise on Diseases of the Chest* (1821) were sold by the end of 1823 (17).

As a physician in Penzance, Dr Forbes took a keen interest in local affairs and helped to found the Public Library in 1818 (18). He also developed his interest in geology, acting as secretary of the Royal Geological Society of Cornwall (19). He published several papers on local geology, climate and working conditions in the local tin and copper mines; in particular, he described the stethoscopic signs of pulmonary tuberculosis in Cornish underground miners, a group in which that disease was then prevalent (20).

Later, when working as a physician in Chichester, West Sussex, he published further pioneer studies on the diseases of miners (21).

Fig. 1. John Forbes MD as a physician in Chichester. (Portrait by a local artist, James Andrews). With acknowledgements : Editor, <<Journal of Medical Biography^

While at Penzance, he married Eliza Mary Burgh: one son was born in Chichester on 18 April 1824, who was named Alexander Clark Forbes (22).

### Chichester (1822-1840):

In 1822, Dr Forbes and his bride moved to Chichester, then a small cathedral city noted for the numbers of genteel retired army and naval officers, and which the poet John Keats (1795-1821) had visited in early 1820. Forbes' activities - and there were many - have been described previously (23,24). Within two years of his arrival he had written a seminal work on the diagnostic use of the stethoscope, which was published in London in 1824 (25). In addition, it contains the first translation into English of the *Inventum Novum* of Leopold Auenbrugger(1722-1809)

There are descriptions of the case histories and physical signs of 39 patients seen at Chichester by Forbes personally; these vital signs were verified at post-mortem in those whose disease proved fatal. The book was well received as there was a need, at the time, for a reliable work of reference on the practice of auscultation in a medical world still sceptical of the value of stethoscopy - a view initially held by Forbes himself! (26)

### Medical journalism(1832-1847) :

Dr. John Conolly (1794-1866) had been a friend and colleague of Forbes in Chichester but, in 1823, he had left to seek his medical fortune elsewhere. They had kept in touch and, together with another Edinburgh graduate, Alexander Tweedie (1794-1884), they combined to produce the *Cyclopaedia of Practical Medicine*.

John Forbes was its main editor - his first venture into medical journalism. Published monthly, both in the United Kingdom and in America, it appeared between 1832 and 1835. When it was sold off, Forbes compiled an excellent bibliography of its contents, which was



regarded by many as a yardstick of excellence in medical literature (27). In 1836, Forbes and Conolly embarked on a new and more ambitious publication entitled the *British and Foreign Medical Review, or a Quarterly Journal of Practical Medicine*. After three years, Conolly returned to full-time work in psychiatry leaving Forbes as sole editor. They remained good friends and were granted the Fellowship of the Royal College of Physicians of London on the same day in 1844 (28). It has been suggested that Forbes' *Review* did more to enhance the reputation of British medicine, both at home and abroad, than any other journal (29). It became accepted and read all over Europe and America as the articles it contained helped to promote more rational methods of treatment than the bleeding and purging still prevalent.

By the end of the 1830s, Forbes was deeply involved in his single editorship of the 'Review'. He made the big decision to exchange the tranquil surroundings of a cathedral city for the hazards of medical journalism and private practice in the Capital. Before leaving, he was persuaded by friends to sit for his portrait by a local artist, James Andrews, who has succeeded in depicting his intelligent bespectacled features precisely. (Fig 1)

The move from Chichester to London was to prove a turning-point in Forbes' career. It was also an anxious time for his wife, Eliza, and 18-year-old son. At this critical stage, they were helped by John's old friend and schoolmate James, now Sir James Clark, whose own medical career had barely survived the 'Lady Flora Hastings scandal' at Court in 1839 (30). Clark, as Royal Physician and a baronet since 1837, was able to use his influence with the young Queen Victoria to have John Forbes appointed as "Physician to the Household - in ordinary to Her Majesty in the room of Sir James Clark Baronet M.D. resigned» (31). This timely honour took effect from 15 February, 1841.

Forbes now concentrated on the editorship of the *Review* and established his high reputation in medical journalism. Sadly, his success was marred by the chronic ill-health of his wife: Eliza died in 1851, aged 64. He continued to write for his publisher, John Churchill; publications include '*Illustrations of Modern Mesmerism, from Personal Investigation*' (1845) and an article on '*Somnambulism and Magnetism*' in collaboration with the Austrian author von A. Hummel in Vienna in 1846 (32). In the previous year, the Scottish physician was conferred with the honorary Fellowship of the Imperial Society of Physicians of Vienna (33).

Forbes published, not only his sceptical views on Mesmerism but he also ridiculed clairvoyance (34). Then, as now (35), the medical world was intrigued by 'complementary/alternative medicine'. As editor, Forbes felt it his duty to report current fads. All might have been well had not an article - unsigned, but almost certainly written by the editor - appeared in the *Review* on 'Homeopathy, Allopathy and «Young Physic»' (36). In twenty sections, nine articles by various British and Continental authors are reviewed and the editor sets out the case for the «*vis medicatrix naturae*» and the avoidance of polypharmacy, especially by young inexperienced doctors. To quote from page 255 :

«*For Nature has room to work her way;  
And doing nothing often has prevailed,  
When ten physicians have prescribed and failed.*»

These opinions were not shared by the medical establishment in London, who asserted that Forbes' views favoured the system of Samuel Hahnemann (1755-1843), although this was not the author's intention. Indeed, he appears to have kept an open mind on the principle that 'like cures like' but certainly he had no time for quackery.

In spite of unfavourable reviews, his reputation as an unbiased editor and his integrity as a physician were not impugned as, in the same year 1846, Forbes was appointed as one of the first two consulting physicians to the Brompton Hospital for Consumption and Diseases of the Chest (37). Nevertheless, his polemical article on 'Homeopathy', which was much more than a review, may have led to Forbes' resignation as editor of the *Review* in the 61<sup>st</sup> year of his life. As a token of their affection, he was presented, on leaving, in the names of the 264 physicians and surgeons of Great Britain and America, many of whom had been past contributors and remained his friends with a splendid candelabra, as well as with his portrait painted by John Partridge (38).

#### **Retirement years (1848-1861):**

In the summer of 1848, Forbes was able to relax on holiday in Switzerland. He published an account of this in the following year (39). It was so successful that he was encouraged to describe two other visits, one to Ireland in August 1852(40) and a second to Germany and the Austrian Tyrol in the autumn of 1855 (41). His visit to Ireland in the aftermath of the famine years has been described elsewhere (42). Forbes had returned to Chichester in 1850 to lecture at the local Literary and Philosophical Society, which he had founded in 1831. His subject was the theme of his Edinburgh MD



• Fig. 2. Florence Nightingale (1820-1910). Photograph of portrait of Florence Nightingale; taken by the London Stereoscopic Company at the request of Queen Victoria in 1856. Credit: Wellcome Library, London.

thesis (1817) : 'Of Happiness in its relation to work and knowledge'. In 1852, was conferred to him the honorary degree of Doctor of Civil Law by the University of Oxford and, in 1853, he was knighted by Queen Victoria (43).

Sir John's final publication was a philosophical work, a "little book" *Of Nature and Art...* (44) based on the author's favourite theme of the *Vis medicatrix naturae*. This was well received, not only at home but also in the United States of America. First published in 1857, it ran to a second English edition in 1858 and a Swedish translation was published in the same year. Although long-winded in the Victorian fashion, the book could be read with advantage by modern doctors as well as by the general public.

Forbes was a prolific letter writer to his contemporaries: the more famous, the better! Correspondence with such celebrities as Sir Walter Scott (1771 -1832), Charles Dickens (1812-1870) and Sir Robert Peel (1788-1850) is among his papers. Although apparently fit enough to undertake an extensive walking tour of Germany and the Tyrol for over eight weeks in July/September, 1855, he was unable, for health reasons,

to go out to Smyrna (Izmir) in Turkey to set up a military hospital towards the end of 1854 (45). He made some initial plans to do so in order to help to stem the egregious mortality resulting from the campaign in the Crimea (1854-1856) but finally backed out. This anomaly may be explained by speculating that his true reason was that he did not wish to involve himself in the squabbles surrounding the selection of medical and surgical staff for Smyrna (46).

This Scottish physician did not work there, nor at the Civil Hospital at Renkioi, which was opened in October, 1855, so did not share duties with its medical superintendent, Dr Edmund Parkes (1819-1876). Parkes had been editor of the *British & Foreign Medico-Chirurgical Review* from 1852 to 1855. [Formed by the amalgamation in 1848 of the *British and Foreign Medical Review* with the *Medico-Chirurgical Review*, edited by Dr James Johnson]. Parkes was later an outstanding and innovative army professor of military hygiene (47). He was author in the *Review* of the posthumous tribute to Sir John in 1862.

The British Civil Hospitals at Smyrna and Renkioi were staffed by female nurses independent of Florence Nightingale at Scutari (Fig 2). Unlike his friend, Sir James Clark, Sir John was never closely linked with her reforms in the living conditions of the British Army and her nursing standards (48). Nor is there any hint of personal correspondence between them amongst the numerous letters that she wrote home in relation to her Crimean War experience (49). (Fig 3) On her return home, in November 1856, (50) Miss Nightingale lived in rooms on the upstairs floor of a house next door to the Burlington Hotel in Old Burlington Street in the West End of London (51). This Burlington Hotel Annexe, (at number 30) was her headquarters in efforts to improve standards of hygiene in the British Army. She drew up a list of names of distinguished lay persons and doctors, including Sir James Clark, to help in a Commission of Enquiry (52). About this time, Florence Nightingale's life was being despaired

of due her tendency to lie all day stretched out on her sofa, but she recovered and, in 1861, moved house several times before taking up residence at No 35, South Street nearby (53).

In the meantime, Sir John Forbes' own health had been steadily deteriorating. In 1859, he decided to retire from public life and to live at the home of his only son, Alexander Clark Forbes, who was in the legal profession and who resided in rural Oxfordshire. Sir John had suffered from atherosclerosis of the brain causing gradually increasing attacks of giddiness and falls from 1857 onwards. He was also said to have suffered from a chronic breathing complaint and enlargement of the heart (54).

By May, 1860, he was unable to walk and was forced to resign from the *Comitia* of the Royal College of Physicians in London. His brain was sufficiently clear to write to her from his new home at Whitchurch-on-Thames, Oxon. congratulating her on her famous *Notes on Nursing*, which had been first published in December, 1859 (55). It is unclear from the letter whether Sir John had received a complimentary copy or had purchased one !

Letter from Florence Nightingale  
to Sir John Forbes  
30 Old Burlington St., London W  
Feb 23/60

*My dear Sir*

*Nothing has given me half so much pleasure as a note from you about my little Nursing book. That you, to whom the world is so much indebted in the matter of its health, should endorse it with your imprimatur is a very great satisfaction to me. All I can say for the book is that there is not one word of theory in it. Every sentence otitis the fruit of bitter experience. That your experience as a Physician should coincide with mine as a nurse gives it value.*

*The great object I had in view was to recall the art of observation which has, I think, deteriorated, even in my day, under the load of supposed science. People have eyes «and they see not».*

*My conclusions were arrived at by looking at disease simply from the practical side. If people who have Science too, (which I wish I had,) would do the same, how much might not be done for the World's health!*

*I know your book «Nature & Art in the cure of Disease» well. But should it not be a trouble to you to send me a copy, as you so kindly offer, I should consider it a great honor (sic) to have one from you.*

*I should have answered your kind note before, had it not been for illness. Believe me I remain, dear Sir John*

*faithfully & gratefully yours*

*Florence Nightingale*

*P. S. You encourage me by your kindness to send you another little book of my Hospital experience.*

It is noteworthy that, in her letter (56), she requested from Sir John a copy of *Of Nature and Art in the Cure of Disease*. As she remarks, his book had reinforced her own views on the value of bedside observation of patients.

The second "little book" probably refers to Florence Nightingale's *Notes on Hospitals*, which was also published in 1859. This book drew attention to the unhygienic and overcrowded conditions in hospital wards of large cities, which gave rise to a higher mortality than in equivalent populations in the community (57). In her letter Miss Nightingale appears sanguine about the future of universal health by an alliance forged between clinical observation and «Science». It is interesting to note that, in spite of the dramatic improvements in health over the past 140 years, there are still those who are sceptical whether a medical Utopia has yet been achieved (58).

Forbes' career as medical journalist may have ended prematurely in 1847 but he will always be remembered for his translations of Laennec and Auenbrugger. He despised polypharmacy and «the nonentities of homeopathy and the too strong realities of heroic medication»; his views on the *vis medicatrix naturae* were respected (59).

**Fig. 3. Florence Nightingale (1820-1910). Florence Nightingale in one of the wards at Scutari Hospital. From *Illustrated London News*, 24th February, 1855. CREDIT: Wellcome Library, London.**



MISS NIGHTINGALE, IN THE HOSPITAL AT SCUTARI.—(from *ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS*)

Sir John Forbes, MD Edin., FRCP Lond., FRS, DCL Oxon., died peacefully at Swanston House, Whitchurch-on-Thames on 13 November, 1861, just before his 74th birthday.

#### Conclusion :

Although there is no record of a meeting between Miss Nightingale and Sir John, it is clear from their brief correspondence that she was much impressed by his medical expertise and by his philosophy of life. They might well have shared the sentiments of another Scottish physician, Sir Robert Hutchison (1871 -1960), who wrote in *The Physician's Prayer*:  
 «... from putting knowledge before wisdom, science before art and cleverness before common sense, from treating patients as cases and from making the cure of the disease more grievous than the endurance of the same, good Lord deliver us.»(60)

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### Biography

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## Lettre a l'éditeur

### Additif à l'article de Roger Mayer (Vesalius, VI, 1, 42-50, 2000)

Concernant le remarquable article de Roger Mayer, solidement étayé et documenté en précieuses références sur son sujet de *L'enseignement de l'Histoire de la Médecine en Suisse. Historique et état actuel*, nous devons faire remarquer au lecteur de notre revue qu'il existe un oubli gênant qui est celui du Privat-Docent interniste et auteur de l'article, car Roger Mayer mérite amplement d'être inscrit avec ceux qui enseignent actuellement l'histoire de la médecine

en Suisse. A l'Université de Genève, son rôle est éminemment certain mais il faut ajouter ses nombreuses contributions et articles dans les diverses revues volontiers francophones. Il convenait donc d'ajouter son nom à cette actualité, même si sa modestie doit en souffrir. Sa grande sagesse et sa fidélité lors de toutes les réunions du conseil d'administration de la S.I.H.M. en font un membre actif fort apprécié de tous.

*Alain Ségal, Vice Président*

## Information

### Un site internet sur l'homéopathie et son histoire

M. XXXXXXXXXXXX, xxxxxxxxxxxx@xxxxxxxxxx  
Webmaster d'*Homéopathe International*, site bilingue (français et anglais) consacré à l'homéopathie, nous informe de l'existence sur son site d'un grand nombre de textes sur l'Histoire de l'Homéopathie :

- Site en version française : <http://homeoint.org>

- site en version anglaise :  
<http://homeoint.org/english/index.htm>

Les membres intéressés par l'histoire de l'homéopathie, peuvent donc consulter ce site et/ou contacter XXXXXXXXXXXX pour tout renseignement complémentaire.