

## MEDICAL HISTORY

# The College of Physicians in the nineteenth century

Gordon C Cook

### Gordon C Cook

FRCP FRACP FLS,  
Honorary Senior  
Research Fellow,  
The Wellcome Trust  
Centre for the  
History of Medicine  
at UCL

Based on a paper  
read to a meeting  
of the Historical  
Resources Panel  
held on 5 July  
2000

*Clin Med JRCPL*  
2001;1:234–9

**ABSTRACT** – For much of the nineteenth century (during which there were 16 Presidents) events within the College were dominated by widespread demands for medical reform, culminating in the great Medical Reform Act of 1858. This led to major changes within the College, including an overhaul of the system(s) of elections; the *old* licentiates disappeared (to be replaced by the *new* licentiates), whilst introduction of the membership (by examination) was instituted. The style of Presidential elections was also changed. Internal College activities centred on the Library and on the *London Pharmacopoeia*. Early in the century, the College once again moved geographically, this time from the City to the West End of London. Regarding contemporary issues, including medical advances (notably introduction of the ‘germ-theory’ of disease causation) and important social changes (dominated by Poor Law reform), the College’s input proved minimal.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, George III (1738–1820) had been on the British throne for 40 years, and the nation was in the midst of the Industrial Revolution – which had widespread ramifications as far as the health of the country (especially urban areas) was concerned.

In 1800 the College building (Fig 1) was situated in Warwick Lane – mid-way between St Paul’s Cathedral and St Bartholomew’s Hospital. The President was Thomas Gisborne, FRS (?–1806)<sup>1</sup>; following education at St John’s College, Cambridge he was appointed Physician to St George’s Hospital London and, having served as PRCP in 1791 and 1794, he was again elected (annually) from 1796 to 1803. Regrettably no image of Gisborne seems to have survived.

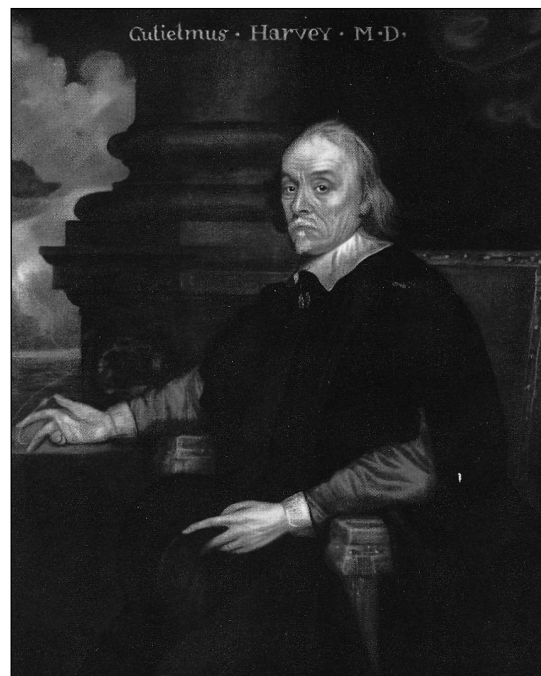
The prefix ‘Royal’ had not yet been widely introduced into the College’s title. This institution had in effect been a *Royal* College since its foundation in 1518, but the term was not in fact to be widely used until well into the nineteenth century<sup>2,3</sup>. The College was essentially an examining body, and an organisation which monitored standards of physicians practising within a radius of seven miles from the City of London. Deliberations were still carried out in the shadow of its greatest Fellow, William Harvey (1578–1657) (Fig 2).

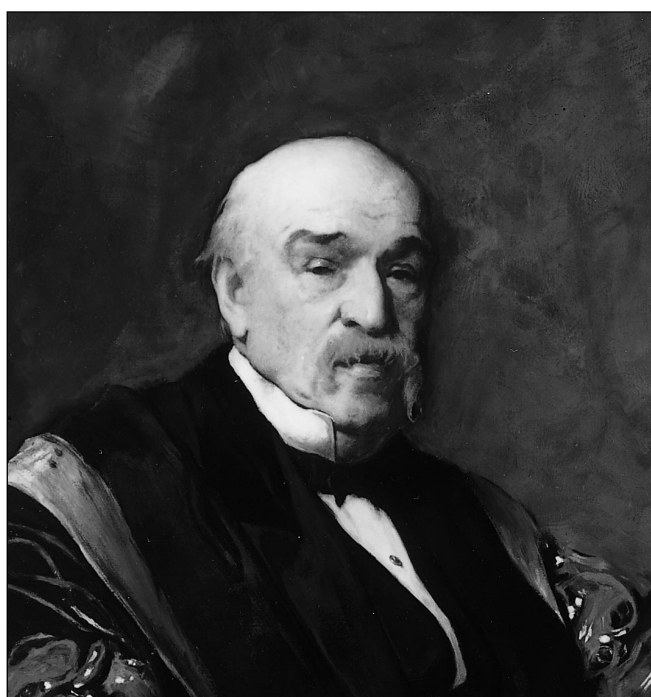
In 1820 George III was succeeded by his son, George IV (1762–1830), and in 1830 another son, William IV (1765–1837) acceded to the British

**Fig 1.** The College of Physicians building (from 1674 to 1825) situated in Warwick Lane, EC [RCP archive].



**Fig 2.** Portrait of William Harvey in old age, in the Dorchester Library at the RCP [RCP archive].





**Fig 3.** Sir William Jenner, Bt, FRS (1815–98) who served as PRCP from 1881 to 1888 [RCP archive]. He was also physician to Queen Victoria and was an authority on typhoid fever; he looked after the Prince Consort during his mortal illness – possibly typhoid.

throne. However, the century was dominated by Victoria (1819–1901), who became Queen in 1837 and remained on the throne until early in the twentieth century. Her personal physician was Sir William Jenner Bt FRS<sup>4</sup> (Fig 3), perhaps the best known of the 16 nineteenth century PRCPs. Jenner was a physician to the London Fever Hospital, where he became the first English physician (in 1850) to distinguish (on clinical grounds) between typhoid and typhus fevers.

### Major events during the nineteenth century

Table 1 summarises several important events, both internal and external, which influenced the College of Physicians during the course of the nineteenth century. The most important of these was medical reform, the urgent need for which had been rumbling on for several decades prior to the beginning of the century.

#### Medical reform

There was, in 1800, a great deal of interest in many quarters over the state of medical registration and competence to practise – not only in London, but in Britain generally. This concern had been present since the latter half of the eighteenth century. Thomas Wakley (1795–1862) was a vehement critic of the prevailing state of the College of Physicians through the medium of *The Lancet*, which he had founded in 1823. The Society of

### The College of Physicians in the nineteenth century

**Table 1.** Major events (both internal and external) which had a significant influence on the College of Physicians during the nineteenth century.

- Medical reform – the 1858 Act
- Library
- *London Pharmacopoeia*
- Disease nomenclature
- Poor Laws
- Epidemic diseases
- Removal to Pall Mall East in 1825

Apothecaries had reformed its statutes in 1815, and the Royal College of Surgeons in 1843. The College of Physicians, however, still based its proceedings on statutes formulated under Henry VIII (1491–1547); the 1518 statute was in Latin, and that of 1523 in English<sup>5</sup>. The first *public* show of dissatisfaction with the contemporary state of qualification to practise was aired in the *London Medical Gazette* of 1833; following an editorial<sup>6</sup>, J A Wilson (who wrote under the pseudonym of 'Maxilla' [his initials were JAW]) launched the 'first shot in an attack on the citadel'<sup>5,7</sup>. Amongst other matters, he demanded to know whether the College was a good working body and what were its relations with the government, and he asked: did the public know about the College? Furthermore, what was it doing about quacks? More importantly, perhaps, he was opposed to the Oxford and Cambridge privileges (commitment to the 39 articles was an essential prerequisite for admission); it was at that time impossible for anyone other than graduates of these universities to be elected to the Fellowship. This correspondence was immediately followed (in the same journal) by an anonymous 'Memorial' from the physicians practising in London<sup>8</sup>; it began:

#### ...The Memorial of the Physicians practising in London

*Sheweth, – That the Royal College of Physicians in London was instituted by charter, granted by Henry VIII, for the purpose of watching over the interests of medical science, and promoting the respectability of the medical profession ... Your memorialists are humbly of opinion, that the right of admission into this corporation ought not to depend upon religious tests, but upon proof of good moral character, and adequate general and professional knowledge ...*

A significant development at this time was the foundation of the University of London<sup>9</sup> – in 1827. This university was in fact to become an important examining and degree-giving body. Its foundation was followed by 'An Act [of Parliament] to extend the Rights enjoyed by the Graduates of the Universities of *Oxford* and *Cambridge* in respect to the Practice of Physic to the Graduates of the University of *London*', dated 11 August 1854<sup>10</sup>. Shortly after this, the great Medical Reform Act of 1858 followed: 'An Act to regulate the Qualifications of Practitioners in Medicine and Surgery', which was published on 2 August 1858<sup>11</sup>. This Act had wide-ranging repercussions for the College of Physicians. For example, the old class of 'licentiates' ceased



within about two years, to be replaced by the *new* licentiates; there was to be a separate category of *members* (who were admitted by examination). The method of electing the PRCP was soon altered; instead of being appointed by the 'elects' (under an ancient and autocratic system), all Fellows of the College were now eligible to vote for this important College Officer. Further, 'An Act to remove Restrictions on the granting of Qualifications for Registration under the Medical Act on the ground of Sex,' was published on 11 August 1876<sup>12</sup>.

### Some College successes

The library and *London Pharmacopoeia* (Table 1) were focal points of College activity in the first half of the nineteenth century. Numerous donations and bequests had resulted in a superb library which was the highlight of the College. Also, enormous efforts were put into the *London Pharmacopoeia*. There was, at this time, a growing interest in materia medica, which had been relatively neglected up to this date. The first edition (in 1618) had included 1028 'drugs' and 932 'compounds'. The last edition (the 10th) of this important work was published in 1851, prior to the great Medical Reform Act (see above).

Another important activity of the College during this century was the 'Nomenclature of Disease'<sup>13,14</sup>; this work aimed to standardise the nosology of disease entities on an international basis.

### Less successful College activities

Enormously important developments were taking place during the nineteenth century regarding both the Poor Laws and the development of the germ theory of disease. Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and Edwin Chadwick (1800–90) were instigators of the former, but the College by all accounts distanced itself from these developments; indeed the Official College History records that the RCP 'ignored Poor Law matters'<sup>15</sup>.

In the later nineteenth century, great improvements in health throughout the whole of Britain devolved on improvements in the 'public health'. In the arena of communicable diseases, 1842 saw the publication of Chadwick's *Sanitary Report*, which concluded that illness and premature death resulting from 'fever' (smallpox, consumption, pneumonia, and other 'epidemic' diseases) were significantly higher in urban than in rural areas. In 1848, the General Board of Health was set up, an influential member being Thomas Southwood Smith (1788–1861), and in 1866 the Sanitary Act came into force, to be followed by two Public Health Acts (of 1871 and 1872). Thus, the College had ample opportunity to become involved in this rapidly developing field. John Snow (1813–1858), a licentiate of the College, was to determine, on epidemiological grounds, the cause of cholera<sup>16</sup>. An indirect result of this was the creation of London's sewerage system by Joseph Bazalgette (1819–1891)<sup>17</sup>. The great sanitary movement had as one of its principal motivators Florence Nightingale (1820–1910), who originated an interest during her work in the Crimea<sup>18</sup>. In matters like cholera, how-

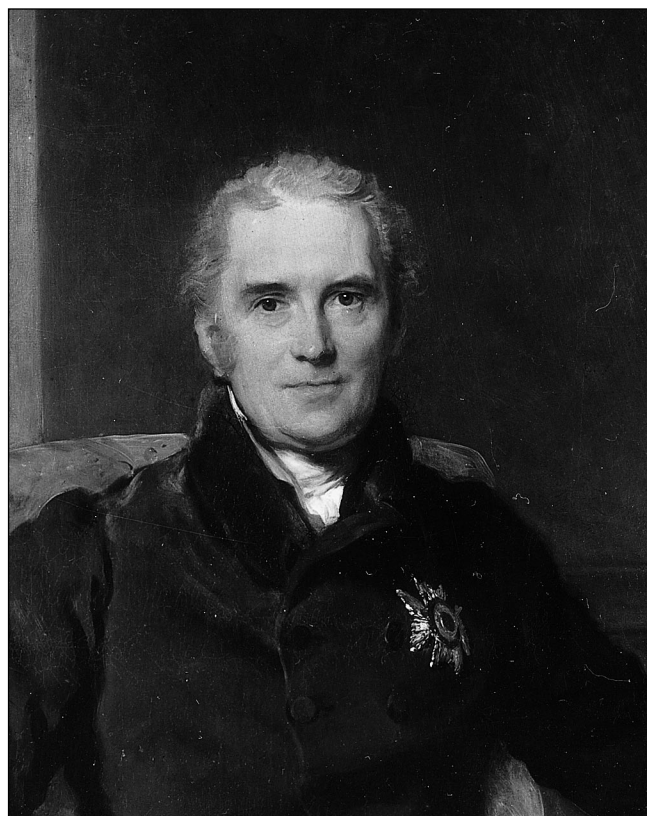


Fig 4. Sir Henry Halford (1766–1844), PRCP from 1820 to 1844, who did much to remove the College's premises from Warwick Lane to Pall Mall East [RCP archive].

ever, the public apparently listened to the General Board rather than the College<sup>15</sup>.

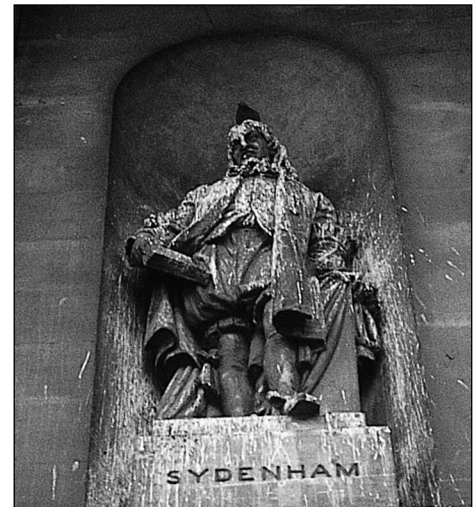
Southwood Smith's work on Epidemics, Contagion and Quarantine was summarised posthumously (in 1866)<sup>19</sup>; he wrote:

*A board, comprising all the most eminent and skilful physicians of the day, was assembled in the College of Physicians, under the presidency of Sir Henry Halford; and, after declaring, in opposition to the unanimous opinion of the physicians of Bengal, 'that no measures of external precaution for preventing the introduction of the cholera morbus by a rigorous quarantine have hitherto been found effectual,' they issued the following official notification.*

This paragraph is followed in the book by a two-page 'essay' on the College's contribution(s) to contagion and quarantine, which seems to be vaguely in favour of the latter, although the PRCP at the time (Halford) concluded that objects (fomites) were of no importance in this context. It was not until 1871 that the College first threw its weight behind smallpox vaccination<sup>15</sup> – which had been introduced by Edward Jenner (1749–1823) in 1796! Also, in the 1860s and 1870s, the official College view was that leprosy was *not* a communicable disease. The development of the 'germ theory' of disease – by Louis Pasteur (1822–1895), Robert Koch (1843–1910) and Joseph Lister (1827–1912) – also seems to have left the College behind.



Fig 5. Statues (placed in 1875) of Sydenham (above right) and Harvey (right) outside the Pall Mall East building.



### Removal to Pall Mall East

Farre has written about this move<sup>20</sup>:

*The north and south wings of [the Warwick Lane] building had long ceased to be tenanted by Fellows, and had passed into the hands of strangers ... The world had gone westward; should not the College do the same? ... The first important step was taken in 1814, when an Act of Parliament was passed, which enabled the President and Fellows to hold their corporate meetings in the City of Westminster ... No Fellow [Farre concluded] assisted so much to effect the removal and to find the means of accomplishing it as Sir Henry Hallford<sup>21</sup> [PRCP from 1820 to 1844] (Fig 4) ... the Crown allotted to the College a piece of ground in a new street about to be formed near the King's Mews (Pall Mall East) ... it was resolved that the ceremony of opening the New College should take place on 25th June 1824.*

The opening ceremony duly took place not in 1824 but in 1825, amongst a glittering array of the contemporary nobility, and was probably the highlight of Hallford's career; he was a physician to Royalty, spent no time on research and devoted most of his time to administration. The new College building

(in Pall Mall East) had been designed by Sir Robert Smirke (1781–1867)<sup>15</sup>, and the three sculptures – of Linacre, Sydenham and Harvey (Fig 5) – were added 50 years later in 1875. The first two of these are now back in the College garden, although the statue of Sydenham shows marked signs of 'wear and tear'. These statues were judged too severely damaged to be incorporated into the latest College building (opened in 1964)<sup>15</sup>.

In 1864, an Act of Parliament was introduced, granting a 999-year lease of the Pall Mall building to the College of Physicians<sup>22</sup>.

### Other College matters in the nineteenth century

Of the use of Latin, Farre wrote (in 1883)<sup>20</sup>:

*The viva-voce examination of candidates for the Licence, or Membership as it is now called, continued to be conducted in Latin till about 1844, after which it was partly in Latin and partly in English ... in 1864 Dr Robert Lee [1841–1924] commenced his [Goulstonian] oration in Latin and ended it in English. This was the death blow to Latin [my emphasis], and from this time it ceased to be heard within the college walls.*

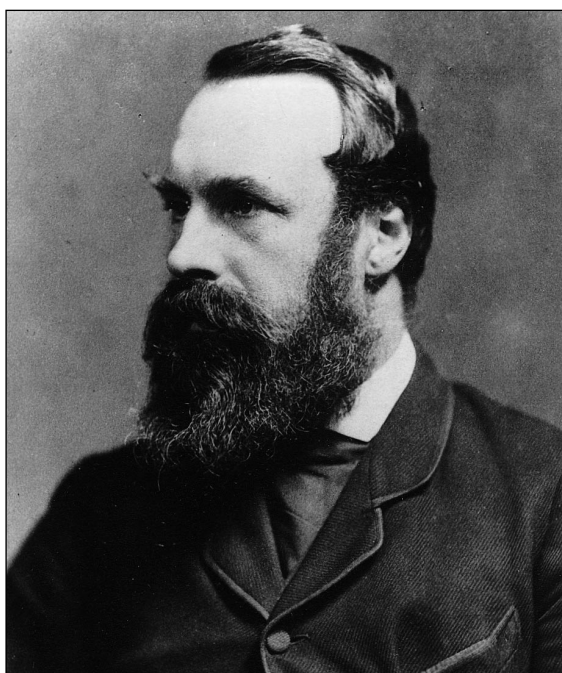




Fig 6 (above left). William Munk (1816–1898) [RCP archive]. Harveian Librarian for more than 40 years – from 1857 to 1898.

Fig 7 (below). Cartoon published in *Punch* (1897, 7 August; 50) marking the conferment of an Honorary FRCP on HRH the Prince of Wales in 1897.

Fig 8 (below left). Sir William Selby Church Bt (1837–1928), who was PRCP from 1899 to 1905, ie during the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century [RCP archive].



No history of the College in the nineteenth century could possibly be complete without mention of William Munk<sup>23</sup> (Fig 6), Harveian Librarian for more than 40 years – from 1847 until 1898. The first edition of volume I of what is now widely known as *Munk's Roll* was published in 1861.

In 1897 (the year of Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee) the College conferred an Honorary Fellowship on HRH The Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII [1841–1910]); *Punch* commemorated the event with a cartoon (Fig 7).

### The nineteenth century ends

The PRCP in the last year of the nineteenth century was Sir William Selby Church Bt<sup>24</sup> (Fig 8). Educated at Harrow (where he was captain of cricket, the coach being John Wisden – now better known in another context), Oxford University, and St Bartholomew's Hospital, he later became a physician to the latter institution. Prior to his term as PRCP (1899–1905) he had been President of the Royal Medical and Chirurgical Society

(1893–1894), and following his six-year period as PRCP he became President of the Royal Society of Medicine (1908–1910).

At the start of the century the College had a mere 47 Fellows and 106 Licentiates; it ended the nineteenth century with 304 Fellows, 452 Members and 8,500 (new) Licentiates. The ageing monarch, Queen Victoria (who had reigned for so much of the nineteenth century), had a little more than a year to live.

## References

- 1 Munk W (Ed). Thomas Gisborne, MD. In: *The Roll of the Royal College of Physicians of London; comprising biographical sketches of all the eminent physicians, whose names are recorded in the annals from the foundation of the College in 1518 to its removal in 1825, from Warwick Lane to Pall Mall East*. Vol. 2, 1701–1800. London: RCP 1878:227–8.
- 2 Payne LM. Title of the Royal College of Physicians of London. *Br Med J* 1960;ii:123–4.
- 3 Davenport G. *College Commentary* January 1991;25:15–16.
- 4 Brown GH (Ed). Jenner, Sir William, Bart. In: *Lives of the Fellows of the Royal College of Physicians of London 1826–1925*. London: RCP 1955:67–9.
- 5 Clark G. *A history of the Royal College of Physicians of London*. Vol. 2. Oxford: Clarendon Press 1966;427–800.
- 6 Anonymous. Reform – College of Physicians. *London Medical Gazette* 1833;11:485–9.
- 7 Wilson JA. College of Physicians: Maxilla to Vestibulus. *London Medical Gazette* 1833;11:522–5; 591–5; 626–9 and 705–8.
- 8 Anonymous. Memorial of the London Physicians. *London Medical Gazette* 1833;12:330.
- 9 Harte N. *The University of London 1886–1956 : an illustrated history*. London: Athlone Press 1986;303.
- 10 Anonymous. *An Act to extend the Rights enjoyed by the Graduates of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge in respect to the Practice of Physic to the Graduates of the University of London*. 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Victoriae, c. 114 1854:596–7.
- 11 Anonymous. *An Act to regulate the Qualifications of Practitioners in Medicine and Surgery*. 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> Victoriae, c. 90. 1858:297–306.
- 12 Anonymous. *An Act to remove Restrictions on the granting of Qualifications for Registration under the Medical Act on the ground of Sex*. Chapter 41: 1876:289.
- 13 Robb-Smith AHT. A history of the College's nomenclature of diseases: its preparation. *J R Coll Physicians Lond* 1969;3:341–58.
- 14 Robb-Smith AHT. A history of the College's nomenclature of diseases: its reception. *J R Coll Physicians Lond* 1969;4:5–26.
- 15 Cooke AM. *A history of the Royal College of Physicians of London*, Vol. 3. Oxford: Clarendon Press 1972;801–1247.
- 16 Cook GC. The Asiatic cholera: an historical determinant of human genomic and social structure. In: Drasar BS, Forrest BD (Eds) *Cholera and the ecology of Vibrio cholerae*. London: Chapman & Hall 1996; 18–53.
- 17 Cook GC. Joseph William Bazalgette (1819–91): a major figure in the health improvements of Victorian London. *J Med Biog* 1999;7:17–24.
- 18 Nightingale F. *Notes on Hospitals : being two papers read before the National Association for the promotion of social science, at Liverpool, in October 1858, with evidence given to the Royal Commissioners on the state of the Army in 1857*. London : JW Parker & Son 1859;108.
- 19 Baker T (Ed). *The Common nature of epidemics and their relation to climate and civilization. Also remarks on contagion and quarantine. From writings and official reports by Southwood Smith, M. D.* London: N Trübner & Co 1866;130.
- 20 Farre FJ. *A short history of the Royal College of Physicians of London from its foundation in 1518 to 1824. Illustrated by Maps Drawings and Engravings by Frederic John Farre M.A, M.D., St John's College, Cambridge. Fellow and Treasurer. 1883, 3 volumes* [Manuscript collection, Royal College of Physicians of London].
- 21 Munk W (Ed). Sir Henry Halford, Bart. In: *The Roll of The Royal College of Physicians of London; comprising biographical sketches of all the eminent physicians, whose names are recorded in the annals from the foundation of the College in 1518 to its removal in 1825, from Warwick Lane to Pall Mall East*. Vol. 2, 1701–1800. London: RCP 1878;427–35.
- 22 Anonymous. *An Act to enable Her Majesty to grant a Lease for Nine hundred and ninety-nine Years of the Building known as the College of Physicians in Pall Mall East*. 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> Victoriae, c.60. 1864;255.
- 23 Brown GH (Ed). Munk, William. In: *Lives of the Fellows of the Royal College of Physicians of London 1826–1925*. London: RCP 1955;75–6.
- 24 Brown GH (Ed). Church, Sir William Selby, Bart. In: *Lives of Fellows of the Royal College of Physicians of London 1826–1925*. London: RCP 1955;177–8.

**Address for correspondence: Professor G C Cook,  
The Wellcome Centre for the History of Medicine at UCL,  
183 Euston Road, London NW1 2BE**