

OBITUARY.

THOMAS KEITH, M.D., LL.D., F.R.C.S.E.,
Honorary Fellow British Gynæcological Society.

ONE of the most distinguished of British gynæcologists died on October 9, at his residence in London. It is difficult to do justice to the noble life work of so great a man and so skilful a surgeon. Few men of this generation have accomplished so much with every possible advantage of happy environment and robust health; yet in face of great professional antagonism against his early surgical work, and despite almost constant personal ill-health, Keith's life has been of such distinguished service to gynæcology that his name will for ever remain as one of the pioneers of abdominal surgery.

He was born in the village of St. Cyrus, Kincardineshire, N.B., on May 20, 1827. His education was obtained at the parish school, afterwards at the Grammar School, Aberdeen, and the High School, Edinburgh; he then attended the Universities of Aberdeen and Edinburgh, and in 1848, when 21 years of age, graduated at the latter University. In 1845 he was apprenticed to the late Sir J. Y. Simpson, and served under him as house physician in the Edinburgh Maternity Hospital. After obtaining his degree, he became house surgeon to the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary under the late Mr. Syme, in which capacity he served for fifteen months, and there acquired the love of the surgical branch of his art which he afterwards turned to such good account. He then

spent two years in Italy, where he held the appointment of physician to the British Embassy at Turin.

He returned to Edinburgh and joined his brother, Dr. George S. Keith, in his large general practice. His surgical predilections first found vent in aural surgery, and, indeed, up to the time he left Edinburgh, he was consulted by the public as a specialist in this department.

In 1862 Keith performed the second successful ovariectomy which had been attempted in Scotland. The first was done in Aberdeen a few days before, by Mr. Baker Brown, of London. Professional feeling ran high against abdominal surgery. One of the leading surgeons was long after this date accustomed to state—"abdominal surgery is abominable surgery." And it is still credibly believed that if Keith's second case had died he would have been accused of manslaughter by some of his woefully prejudiced critics. His third case died, probably in consequence of the inattention of a drunken nurse; but his fourth case, an enormous tumour over 120lbs. in weight, made a good recovery. Such and succeeding recoveries made many converts, and with the simultaneous successes of Sir Spencer Wells (whose first case had been operated on in 1858), the operation of ovariectomy became firmly established in Britain and in many other parts of the civilised world.

In 1866 a visit made to Strasburg enabled Keith to form some fresh ideas from seeing Koeberlé's clinic. The catch forceps, the glass drainage tube, the *serre-nœud* or wire loop for securing the pedicle, were all adopted and perfected by Keith's practical mind.

But it was especially as a hysterectomist that Keith rivalled, and at one time undoubtedly excelled, all his compeers. The present writer well remembers seeing him perform an operation some fifteen years ago, in the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary, for the removal of an enormous fibroid with multiple and exceedingly firm adhesions; the tumour extended up to the epigastrium and dipped deeply into the pelvis. From sixty to seventy ligatures were left inside the abdomen.

On the completion of the operation the writer, amazed at its magnitude, asked—"Do you think she will recover?" Keith's answer was—"Oh, I fear not; they (meaning those who had been medically responsible for her formerly) have treated her and treated her, and taken all her money from her, and, what is far worse, her strength." Happily the prognosis was wrong, for the patient recovered without an unfavourable symptom. In 1879 Keith was appointed extra surgeon for ovarian disease at the Royal Infirmary, Edinburgh, where he continued and even improved on the good work he had carried on in his private hospital from 1866.

All those who were privileged to see him operate, were impressed by the earnestness and thoroughness of his methods. Never in a hurry, methodical and systematic, he seemed to know always what he was about. As an operator he was cool and collected, but after it was all over, or if the patient at any time had an unfavourable train of symptoms, his mental anxiety was excessive. He was on one occasion visiting a patient in consultation. After returning to the writer's house, and in his own way meditating over matters for a time, he suddenly asked: "Do you worry much over your bad cases? It is a bad thing to do, but I can never help doing it myself." In addition to this constantly recurring mental strain, his physical health from boyhood was imperfect. In 1864 Mr. Syme explored his bladder for calculus, but failed to find one, although a small stone was removed from the urethra. He had recurrent attacks of hæmaturia and kidney pain, and not many years ago another operation had to be performed on him by his son in consequence of the formation of a nephritic abscess.

In 1888 Dr. Keith left Edinburgh for London. Prior to this he had interested himself in the electrical treatment of uterine fibroids as practised by Apostoli of Paris, and some time after he, formerly the greatest of British hysterectomists, published the famous letter in which he stated that he repudiated the knife for the electrical battery. Subsequently he modified this judgment, but never so completely as some of his many

apostles would have wished. Whether one agreed or disagreed with Keith no one questioned his entire honesty of purpose, and in this matter those of us who had so deeply revered the skilful and judicious operator could hardly credit his change of faith. It is significant of his lack of bias that the last operation but one he performed, now nearly three years ago, was a hysterectomy. He always did what he thought best for the patient, and if he saw reason to modify his views his fearless courage of opinion asserted itself. Keith's writings on hysterectomy, and his published cases of ovariectomy and fibroids, comprise the most of his literary work; but his personal example was his greatest lesson to us. Another great Scotchman, the late Dr. Mathews Duncan, was at one time bitterly prejudiced against ovariectomy, but Keith's work and unostentatious presentation of facts overcame Duncan's prejudice, and he styled him, and practically showed that he believed him to be, "a hero of surgery."

Thomas Keith's personality was distinctive. We have the pleasure of publishing what his son, Mr. Skene Keith, thinks is the best photograph procurable of him. Of his many charming characteristics, his absolute indifference to backbiting criticisms was not the least notable. On one occasion some very ill-natured and unfounded remarks were made by a man of high position with reference to a patient both had seen and whom Keith had operated on. These remarks were fully reported to him; after listening quietly and thinking for a little, he rejoined simply: "Oh, he should not have said that." Such was the philosophical nature of the man, that a slander others would have founded a libel action on never ruffled his equanimity for a moment.

Dr. Keith at one time acted as extra examiner in clinical surgery in Edinburgh University. He was Honorary Fellow of the Gynæcological Societies of America, Boston, Dresden, Leipzig, &c. Few men have better earned the words "Famam extendere factis hoc virtutis opus."

author of a work on Prophecy which is highly prized by theologians everywhere. Dr. Thomas Keith received his early education at the parish school, the grammar school and University of Aberdeen.

His medical education was wholly received in Edinburgh. In 1845 he was apprenticed to Sir J. Y. Simpson, and served under him in the Edinburgh Maternity Hospital as house physician.

At the age of twenty-one he graduated at the Edinburgh University in the year 1848. Shortly afterwards he became Mr. Syme's resident in the old Royal Infirmary. The great surgeon recognized the natural ability of young Keith, and foretold that he would soon make a distinguished place for himself in surgery. He served under Syme for fifteen months, and then and there acquired that love for surgery which remained with him to the end.

From Syme and Edinburgh he went to Italy for two years, during which time he held the position of physician to the British embassy at the court of the King of Sardinia, at Turin. There he had the good fortune to meet the ablest surgeons in Italy. One of these (name forgotten) was a most skillful operator, and gave young Keith every opportunity to see his practice and profit by it.

Returning to Edinburgh, he began practice with his brother, George Skene Keith, then a noted physician, and there gained valuable experience in the practice of medicine and surgery, but from the first he inclined more to surgery. Gradually he drifted towards gynecological surgery, a branch of the art which occupied the best of his life, and in which he made his great reputation. He did his first ovariectomy in 1862, a time when this operation was in bad repute in Scotland and elsewhere. This was the second successful operation done in Scotland. A few days before Mr. Baker Brown, of London, had done one in Aberdeen.

His second case recovered, the third was lost; the fourth, a tumor weighing 120 pounds, made a good recovery, and from this onward his success, and simultaneously that of Sir Spencer Wells, quieted all faultfinders and made the operation acceptable in all parts of the civilized world. His first work was done before aseptic and antiseptic surgery was known, and he was well prepared to comprehend and adopt the discoveries of Lister, and was the first to turn them to account in abdominal surgery. Aided in this way, he made a record as an ovariectomist far in advance of anything in that day, and that remains unsurpassed at the present time.

When he had mastered ovariectomy, he took up hysterectomy, and very soon excelled all others in this difficult and hitherto dangerous operation.

When Keith had become known as the most successful operator of his time for ovarian and uterine diseases, the question was, "What is the secret of success of this master of his art and hero among men?" That question has never been fully answered. Parts of the secret have been revealed from time to time by those who have seen him at work and been impressed with his secret in operating, but that was only a part of a great whole.

His superior mentality, quick, clear perception and wonderful co-ordinating power which enabled his hands to obey his will; his extraordinary power of concentration of thought, his intense love of his art, and his thorough training, theoretical and practical, in all branches of medicine and surgery, all contributed to make him the man he was. He was recognized as a superior diagnostician, and possessing sound judgment in estimating the general condition of patients and the value of treatment—medical and surgical—for their relief, made him a master in selecting his treatment, preparing his cases for operating, and in their after treatment. To all these were added sterling honesty and heroic moral and intellectual courage that enabled him to withhold his hand or go boldly, fearlessly forward, as occasion required, utterly unmindful of consequences to himself. He possessed all requisite knowledge and skill required in his art, but none of that worldly wisdom of the trimmer which enables one to take precautions for self-advancement.

It is interesting to know what the people among whom he lived thought of him, so we give the following from the Scots Observer, under the heading "Modern Men."

"In more than one respect it is well that Thomas Keith was born to be a modern man. It is well for himself, because he is just the kind of person who, had he been born in the good old times, when witchcraft flourished, and convictions were practical and strong, would have had a fair chance of being burnt for a wizard, with the alternative of being worshipped as a saint. The barbarous people who at Melita showed the apostle Paul no little kindness, first thought he was a murderer whom vengeance suffered not to live, but then changed their minds and said he was a god. So it would have been with Thomas Keith. A weird-looking, gaunt, silent man, blessed with a passionate desire to

succor his kind, gifted with an absolute indifference to accepted opinion, possessed, 'as with a beneficent demon,' with an immense imaginative and intellectual courage that inspired him to attempt what seemed the impossible, and give himself up to the relieving of woes that looked beyond relief, he would have been burned on the Calton Hill or hanged in the Grassmarket had he failed : and had he succeeded, he would have been beatified, and perhaps have had a little altar of his own in the Moray Aisle of St. Giles's. And he would so far have deserved his fate, for he has none of the worldly wisdom of the trimmer ; he is the antithesis of them that hedge and take precautions. He would not have called in the King's chirurgeon to consult with him beforehand, nor would he have warned all the gossips that the case was nearly hopeless. He would not even have visited a bad result upon his assistants or the weather. He would simply have done his very best to ensure success, without asking advice from any one. He would have fed and nursed his case with his own hands, and nearly broken his heart that all was done in vain. And afterwards he might have had some wild heretical theory to account for the bad issue : that the King's own chirurgeon, who had seen the operation and disapproved, had brought in infection in the miniver of his cloak or in his pouncet-box—his anti-plague.

“ It is well for us of this generation, for Thomas Keith is the representative in Scotland of that group of brilliant scientific surgeons who have practically revolutionized their art. In this decade we have been stock-taking. In no branch of science or art has the advance been more astounding, and the result to mankind more important, than in certain branches of operative surgery and in the principles which guide the surgeon in his treatment of wounds and disease. Thirty years ago a large class of surgical tumors in women were badly understood, and were practically removed from treatment. Here, in Edinburgh, and elsewhere, bold men were trying experiments ; and the result had been so dubious, and the consensus of the older surgeons was so hostile, that to take up the work it required both courage and self-denial. But Keith felt that taken up it must be. With no hospital appointment at his back ; with the countenance of a very small minority of the profession ; at his own expense and risk, and sustained by his own personal devotion—he operated on one poor woman after another, ever increasing his technical knowledge and dexterity, always learning from his difficulties, profiting by his errors, and still diminishing his mortality, till he made Edinburgh a center

of both teaching and of healing. After his first twenty or thirty cases, he read, in admirable Saxon-English, a paper to his professional brethren on his work, and an epoch-making thing it was. None present but must still retain the profound impression as he told how he had been compelled to take up the great work, and recounted the difficulties and the dangers he and his patients had overcome. From that evening progress was assured. The confession carried conviction; old prejudices and theories were swept away as in the blast of a great wind; Keith became the master-authority on this matter, not only for Scotland, but for other lands. It is not for us to tell in detail the enormous gain to suffering women that has accrued from his practice and teaching. Many of his pupils have learned from him to be teachers, and, in their turn, inventors; and when the time came it was found that Edinburgh could spare him—even Thomas Keith!—to London.

“There were much to say of his quaint and taking individuality; of his weird, sad, long-haired face and dreamy eye; of his northern speech, with his occasional lapses from the diction of culture into the broadest Doric. But, being still with us—who owe him so much, and to whom his life and work are so excellent and shining an example of what a good, strong man may do—he is not yet public property; and the Scots Observer is not a society journal. But it is lawful and pleasant to note that in many points his surgical history has been remarkable. As a rule those who have achieved great names as surgeons and great fame as consultants follow the same path to success. They early in life thus choose their line; they attach to an hospital; they teach their special subject in a medical school; they take their opportunities of writing books or pamphlets. If they have the natural gift or have acquired the proper knowledge, being in the right way, they gradually attain to eminence; practice makes perfect: their pupils become practitioners, and they, their old masters, are called as consultants in the need of a second opinion. Other men read their books, and perhaps the public hears the names of them; and so, legitimately and honorably, are reputations made and fortunes achieved. Others (and these are chiefly physicians) leap to the consultant rank from the springboard of great general practice, are the servants and healers of many, and in this way win themselves a character for experience and practical wisdom which appeals alike to the ignorant public and the puzzled profession. Probably out of the abundance of their experience they also

write books, and probably their books are mostly practical. Here in Edinburgh Syme and Spence were types of the first, while Abercrombie, Davidson and the elder Begbie were examples of the second. Now, Keith's career has been on altogether different lines. After a distinguished hospital and undergraduate experience, the aim of which was chiefly surgical, he drifted into general practice (with a special liking for aural disease), and he must have been nearer forty than thirty when the real work of his life began. Even then he was attached to no hospital; and it was not until his fame had grown world-wide that the managers of the Royal Infirmary (Edinburgh) were moved to put a certain number of beds at his disposal. Again, he did not teach himself into repute; he has never given a course of lectures; it is by the bed-sides of his cases, or within the four walls of his study, that the priceless information which men come from all parts of the world to seek is yielded up to them. And still less has he printed himself into immortality, for his writings on his own subject are few and brief, while his controversial notes on disputed points of treatment (and in the less worthy direction of personal and professional polemic), though written with fire and spirit—for he can wield both mace and rapier—are the merest ephemerides, and his reports upon his work are priceless to his successors alone. It was the high courage that avoided no difficulty however enormous it bulked, and declined no problem however hopeless of solution it appeared; it was the extraordinary measure of success that rewarded a personal devotion to the points at issue, and a temperamental outlay that were more extraordinary still; it was the high-hearted simplicity with which Keith met his difficulties, his failures, and his successes alike—it was these qualities, among others, that showed Scotland and the world that here was a master of his art, and therewith a hero among men. And in this connection there is yet another thing to tell of him. That were a poor and insufficient notice of his work which took no count of the fact that it has been done in the teeth of bad health and great bodily suffering: that often has he operated when he was himself unfit to stand, and his own case seemed as bad as his patient's.

“London has more Scotsmen than Edinburgh, and they can hold their own anywhere; but when the century's great names in surgery come to be written, among the Scotsmen in London or in Scotland there will be none greater than that of Thomas Keith.”

A few words remain to be put down here regarding Dr. Keith as he appeared to the profession and people of this country.

Here, as in his own country and elsewhere, Dr. Keith was best known and most admired by those of the highest intelligence, culture and moral worth. The greatest American gynecologist, J. Marion Sims, was a devoted friend and enthusiastic admirer of Dr. Keith, and has said and written many beautiful things of him. Sims appreciated the work of his friend and acknowledged it to be the best that he had seen, and he admired the man with an enthusiasm that was characteristic of the great, warm-hearted, broad-minded American.

Keith and Sims were unlike each other in all things excepting their intense devotion to surgery and high regard for each other.

Many other Americans visited Dr. Keith, and all returned with kind regards for the man and his work.

His name was seen constantly in the current medical literature of the country, and always on the side of the best surgery and most honest opinions.

In turn, Dr. Keith was a great admirer of America, and always kindly received those from this country who went to see him. He took pleasure in giving full credit to American surgeons for all their achievements. His attitude in this respect is well expressed in his writings. In his work on fibroids he says: "Knowing well how far behind you our hospital teaching is in some departments of woman's surgery, I sent my sons to America to study your ways and be for a time under the influence of such minds as those of J. Marion Sims, Emmet, Thomas and others." Again, in writing of hysterectomy for fibroid tumors of the uterus, he said: "And, after all, I offer you something that is not mine, but is of American origin; for though hysterectomy may have been performed by others by misadventure, if I greatly mistake not, the first case of uterine fibroid diagnosed before operation was removed by my old friend Dr. Kimball of Lowell." In his treatment of his professional brethren here and everywhere he was scrupulously honest. The obituary notice of him in the *British Gynecological Journal* has the following, which shows one side of the man's character in clear light: "On one occasion some very ill-natured and unfounded remarks were made by a man of high position with reference to a patient both had seen and whom Keith had operated upon. These remarks were fully reported to him; after listening and thinking for a little, he rejoined simply: 'Oh, he should not have said that.'

Such was the philosophical nature of the man that a slander others would have founded a libel action on never ruffled his equanimity for a moment."

His one brief visit to this country was greatly enjoyed by him, and the few who saw him while here were fascinated by him. He was here in the early summer and enjoyed the climate. "I like the heat," he said; "it agrees with me; it is fine, and the clear sky and bright light are grand to operate in. This is the country for me if I was younger."

Here, as in his own home, he was a quiet, unostentatious, extremely modest man, but courageous and fearless in the highest degree. He was never satisfied with himself or his work, so he kept on striving to improve in all things. While carefully, constantly criticising his own work, he had only a kindly word for those who followed in the path that he had made for them.

Dr. Keith was not a voluminous writer. He said of himself: "I write little for I know little. I am every day changing the ways of my work, and the dread of giving an uncertain sound is heavy upon my mind."

That which he did write was like all that he did and said, original and invaluable, and bore the stamp of an intellectual, honest man, and "a hero in surgery."
