

Charles Arthur Mercier, M. D.

1852-1919

Dr. C. A. Mercier died at Bournemouth, England, Sept. 2, 1919. It was my fortune to meet him less than six months ago at the home of Sir William Osler in Oxford and a short description of that "great evening," as Osler put it, may be of interest to American neurologists and psychiatrists.

Last June, when on leave from the army, Sir William and myself were left alone one evening at his house and I looked forward to a quiet dinner with him, but a little twinkle in his eye when I mentioned our solitude gave the secret away, and I knew he had something of interest planned.

Shortly before dinner I came down to find a man of remarkable appearance, saying good-bye to his nurse, a British matron of uncertain summers, who had come with him and was to return for him later. Scarcely four feet in height, with enormously bowed legs and long arms, a kyphosis so marked that it seemed as if his great head, which was fully twice normal size, was too much for the spine to hold, a gaunt face with heavy eyebrows shading a piercing pair of eyes — such was Dr. Mercier, a marked victim of Paget's disease. He was dressed in evening clothes with an impeccable purple velvet jacket. Over one ear was a sort of telephone receiver to which was attached a long trumpet of flexible hose, his only auditory connection with the outside world. He talked with a clear, silvery voice using particularly pure English and careful articulation. His flow of language was superb, a ~~great~~ mass of witty conversation, interspersed with brilliant epigrams and anecdotes mostly relative to fifty years of British neurology ~~which~~ he had witnessed.

At dinner he was a ~~perfect~~ fountain of knowledge, appearing to know almost everything about neuropsychiatry and every one connected with it for the last two decades. When the fountain threatened to even suggest a slight drought, Sir William would lean over and whisper into his ear trumpet such pregnant themes as "Hughlings Jackson!" or "Jonathan Hutchinson!" and we would be inundated by a ~~perfect~~ deluge of rambling anecdotes, a veritable spring freshet of information. He was never at loss for a word, a brilliant incident or a humorous story. We ~~are~~ ^{was} necessarily the listeners, but who could not sit and listen by the hour to such a man!

He told us one or two interesting things about his method of work. For a number of years he had been more or less confined to his house in a chair owing to his infirmity. He arose at four in the morning and, after a bit of fruit, wrote or dictated until ten, when he had a small breakfast followed by a period of a few hours of reading or letter writing. After luncheon came a period of exercise, out of doors if possible, followed by three or four hours of writing or dictating until dinner at eight. This period, he told us, was his best time for work. After dinner came another period of work until twelve or one. Sometimes during the day he rolled his own cigarets and made them a little damp with water so that they would smoke longer. He invariably wrote with a cigaret between his lips. Surely such a routine of labor is seldom depicted in these times. Edison, of course, is noted for his long consecutive hours of work. In the past, John Hunter furnishes the classic example. In 1768, he arose at five and worked until nine in his dissecting room. After breakfast he received patients until twelve, made calls until four, dined, slept for an hour and wrote from six until midnight or later.

A complete story of Mercier's life would be a long one, but a few points may be related. Born in rather poor circumstances in Scotland, he first went to sea as a cabin boy, but soon was drawn to London for his medical education where he fell under the spell of the old London Hospital and Hughlings Jackson. Here he received his groundwork in neurology and mental disease, subjects which filled his life to the end. He was especially interested in the legal aspect of mental disease, and some of his strongest books deal with the relation of crime to insanity. Four of his better known books are: "Criminal Responsibility," a "Textbook of Insanity" (1902), one of the first comprehensive views of insanity in its practical aspect, "Psychology, Normal and Morbid," and his last and perhaps greatest work, published in 1918, "Crime and Criminals."

He was a brilliant speaker and reveled in argument. His nimbleness of brain, strong moral nature and unflinching courage, made him a very formidable opponent in any debate. As a correspondent, especially for the *London Times* and British medical journals, he was considered the most brilliant letter writer of the last decade. It is said that "he never wrote a slovenly sentence and never spared himself the most assiduous effort to make his meaning clear and precise to his readers." He had a weakness which sometimes marred his otherwise convincing logic in that he sometimes sacrificed points in debate in a desire to score, and allowed his wit to run away with his judgment.

This weakness, however, is scarcely noticeable in his medical writings, His style was clear, incisive and accurate, for he was almost a purist in the use of the English language.

He died suddenly, actively at work, ^{the} a victim of a remarkable malady. As Osler says, he "went down as he promised with all the flags flying." With his death psychiatry loses one of its most brilliant and distinguished ornaments.

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The proof was very corrected, hence the errors -

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