

Texts and Documents

A MEDICAL STUDENT'S CAREER IN THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY

IN THE autumn of 1808 a young medical student named William Dent, from the village of Mickleton in Upper Teesdale, began his studies in London at St. Thomas's Hospital. Fortunately his sense of filial duty led him to correspond regularly with his mother during his undergraduate days or perhaps it was the perennial problem of students, the need for money, as most of his letters either justify expenditure or ask for cash. Even more fortunately virtually his entire correspondence has survived to the present and is in the possession of his descendants. It has not been published either in whole or in part before, and the writer would like to take this opportunity to thank them for permission to copy and use it. This essay deals with his student days which because of the accident of History turned out to be a little unconventional.

His first letter home shows that although times may change many student problems remain the same; the cost of tuition, books and instruments as well as accommodation loomed as large in the day to day life of the young Mr. Dent as they do his twentieth-century successors. Indeed it was even worse for him relying so completely on his family as he did for finance and the need to keep up appearances in a London Society which was about to enter upon its most elegant extravagances of the Regency period. 'London 30 October, 1808 . . . I am now very comfortably situated and have got extremely good lodgings with two other young men. I took a room when I left Mr. Bayles's at 7*s.* 0*d.* per week but I only stopped in it for one week for two young men had taken two rooms upstairs and when they came I agreed to go with them so we have two rooms betwixt three of us and we pay 18*s.* 0*d.* a week . . . The person where we lodge would take us all three to board and lodgings for a Guinea and a half a week or five and twenty shillings per week and find our own coals and candles. For everything is extremely dear here [in London] but we thought as being three of us we could live cheaper by only lodging in the house and find ourselves of everything we wanted. I am kept very busy, for there is no time to be lost while here. The two young men who I am along with are very studious and we are writing out the lectures we hear till twelve or one o'clock every night.' Perhaps this last remark was window-dressing to impress on his family the return which they were receiving for the outlay.

A great many of us recall how, in the 1940s and 1950s, National Service seemed to exist to prevent young graduates from becoming immediately established in their careers. We recall, too, the many 'folk tales' which used to circulate on the subject of its avoidance and from 1808 there comes an echo of the same kind of problem. 'We are likely to be brought into a great deal of trouble about the Militia for they are taking in all the names and I am afraid I shall be put to some expense. It is not the local Militia but the regular Militia.¹ I think the best way for me to do it is to get into

¹ Local Militia were for use in riots and only in the greatest emergencies—e.g. invasion—could they be drafted outside their own counties, whereas the regular Militia were in fact if not in name part of the standing army.

Texts and Documents

a Club² as there is a great number of students of the Hospital who subscribe so much a piece to it. I shall be obliged to go to Mr. Whithorne in a day or two to get £15 for if I subscribe to the Club I don't know as yet what I shall have to pay . . . I think to myself sometimes that you will think I am very extravagant but I am confident that I am not for I have paid upwards of £70 for the Lectures I attended at the Hospital. I have also got a new suit of clothes at Mr. John Bayles's and a pair of boots which have cost me £10. Taylors and Shoemakers are very dear, they charge £1 4s. 0d. for making a coat. I have also been obliged to get several books and a case of Pocket Instruments which cost me £5; all the money that I brought from Mickleton is gone except three Guineas. I wish you could send me three or four pair of those white yarn stockings I bought from Durham and a coloured neck cloth and two or three pocket handkerchiefs. You can put them in the wooden box that I used to send my dirty Close [clothes] in and if you can put in a pot of honey, salted butter, or a piece of cheese to fill it up with, it will be very acceptable for everything is very dear and I did not know housekeeping was till now. You can put a letter in the inside and that will save a shilling carriage, put good directions on and nail it down and lock it, I can open it with the key that belongs the black trunk and send it then by the Waggon or the heavy Coach direct for me at Mr. Small's.'

By 5 December he had received no reply but despite the length of time which had elapsed he had not given up the box for lost proving that he was very well aware of the shortcomings of transport particularly in the winter months. ' . . . It [his box] may be miscarried or perhaps you may not have received my letter'. He also explained that he had solved the militia problem by leaving his lodgings temporarily, returning when the balloting was over. Dent continued to present to his family the image of the sober, hard-working student. He informed his mother that one of the men with whom he shared rooms ' . . . attended last season and we derive a good deal of information from him as he is very clever indeed. We are kept close at work both night and day writing out the lectures'. One cannot help wondering if he was as diligent as he would have one believe. It is also clear that much of the instruction consisted of being on hand in the hospital and not only at St. Thomas's. 'We have a great deal of practice in the Hospitals and accidents are continually brought in, we have an opportunity of seeing them all as our lodgings are only a few doors from Guy's Hospital.'

It is a great pity that in his correspondence, Dent has very little to say of his actual training or conditions in the hospitals. Perhaps he did not think it a fit subject for letters to his mother. However, there is one brief reference which reflects the emphasis placed on practical work even only two months after he had begun his studies. In a postscript he writes, 'I am attending midwifery and I have had one labour. I managed tolerably well and the woman is doing famously now. I expect to have another shortly but the worst of it is we have to give them 5 shillings and find them with medicines till they are quite well.'

As Mr. J. Steven Watson points out in *The Reign of George III* (Oxford), Sir John Moore was able to extricate about 24,000 of his 30,000 men after the Battle of

² The club referred to may have been one of the several mutual aid societies which existed to pay the fines (£10-£30) to avoid the draft after balloting for call-up.

Texts and Documents

Corunna but the fact that many of them were badly wounded after their retreat from Soult's army emerges from a letter from Dent dated London 17 February 1809. 'Mr. Ashley Cooper, the Surgeon and Lecturer, at St. Thomas's Hospital has received a letter from Mr. Knight, Inspector of Hospitals, desiring all the students that possibly can leave town, for to go to different districts to attend and dress the sick and wounded soldiers that have arrived from Spain for the wounded are so numerous and the Assistant Surgeons so scarce that the poor men are actually lost for want of surgical aid. Mr. Cooper hoped that every young man that could go, would, for he looked upon it both as humanity and as a duty to do so at such an emergency. He said that they would have practice which it was impossible they could see at present in London and as it would be only of a temporary nature not exceeding a month or six weeks, he trusted that it would not interrupt our studies. The young man that lodged with us is gone to Plymouth and the other would have gone too but he is a dresser at Guy's Hospital which has prevented him. There is near fifty gone from these two Hospitals however. I am going to Colchester, I and other seven set out tomorrow morning. I beg your pardon for not asking your leave before I went but as it is on such urgent business I hope you will be led to excuse me and that my conduct will meet with the approbation of yourself and all my friends. I assure you that if I thought I would not have benefited by it, I never would have attempted such a thing. We have our expenses found both there and back and seven pounds a month.' This last comment he obviously wanted to make the maximum impact because he then makes further comments on a student's cost of living. 'I wanted a watch very much, indeed I found it impossible without one . . . we got an extremely good stop watch, it was to be £8 8s. 0d.' Later on in the letter he also says, 'I have been costing up my accounts and find that I have had £155 since I came to London and that above £100 of it has been paid for Lectures, Close [clothes], Watch, Boots, Books and passage in the Coach.'

Dent's first letter from Colchester is dated 5 March 1809, and its brevity suggests that he really was as hard-worked as he says. But though brief his description is most interesting. 'I was very much surprised to find such a number of men sick as there is. There are only five Assistants now at this place two having been sent to Meely [?] Barracks where there is likewise a great number of sick. Each assistant [student] is placed under a separate Surgeon. I am placed under a very nice man of the name of Hill who is Surgeon to the first Battalion of the 4th Regiment⁸ which is come from Spain and in that Regiment alone there is one hundred and ninety seven men sick and wounded in the Hospital and half that number I have to take care of myself. I am very glad that I came here for besides attending the sick and wounded we have the privilege of dissecting those who die and in London we could not get a dead body under three Guineas.' It would seem from his next remarks as if some epidemic had broken out among the wounded. 'Six men belonging the fourth have died within these few days, the disease I think seems to be getting under but I cannot tell whether we will be wanted longer than a month, if not I shall go back to London.'

The epidemic was either worse than he expected or than he wished to admit to his mother and indeed his month to six weeks' tour of auxiliary army duty was to stretch

⁸ Later King's Own Royal Lancaster Regiment, now King's Own Border Regiment.

Texts and Documents

through to September. His mother was naturally concerned for his health in the conditions in which he was working and it is interesting here to note that fear of the Plague was still deep-rooted in England. In his letter dated 3 April 1809, from Colchester Barracks, he wrote ‘. . . I am sorry you should put yourself into any fears concerning me, you have heard very wrong reports about the disease, it is not the Plague nor any such thing. It is merely a Typhus; it was brought on from the soldiers being exposed to the cold and being weakened from not having a sufficient quantity of nutritive food proportionable to the quantity of fatigue and exercise they had daily to undergo. [This is clearly a reference to the enforced march of over 250 miles in mountainous country in the bitter cold of December 1808/January 1809 before the army reached Corunna]. However, it certainly is contagious but as to its having extended to the inhabitants of the town is what I never heard of till I received your letter. Six weeks ago we had upwards to two hundred men belonging to the first Battalion of the Fourth ill and now we have but forty and half that number are convalescents. But there are several Regiments in this Garrison that are very sickly indeed. Both Battalions of the 43rd⁴ and the 76th⁵ have a great number ill and several have died and they continue to take a good many into Hospital every day . . .’ On 15 May 1809 he wrote once more to his mother from Colchester informing her that he had decided to stay there throughout the summer because of the opportunities of furthering his studies, ‘. . . If on the contrary I stop here I am improving’. He reports that ‘The Fever is nearly subsided now’ but goes on to make a shrewd diagnosis of the outcome of the overcrowded, unhealthy conditions in which the troops were living. ‘A number of men are affected with inflammation [*sic.*] of the lungs, indeed where there are such a number of men together [and there are several thousands in this Garrison] disease of some kind is sure to be raging.’

Once more his finances were bothering him despite his £7 a month Army pay. It cost him five shillings a week for a room furnished with a bed, chest of drawers, mirror, carpet and wash hand stand. He had a servant ‘out of the Ranks’ to wait on him for two shillings and he messed with the Officers of the Regiment ‘Breakfast is 1s. 0d., Dinner 2s. 6d., Supper 9d.’. These prices seem quite high and are no doubt indicative of the effects of inflation induced by the economic measures Napoleon had taken against Britain. In requesting more money from his mother Dent said, ‘I understand it will take more than a month’s pay to buy a suit . . . my pay is not sufficient to keep me and if I should seem short I have no friend here that I could apply to . . .’. It was partly in an attempt to break this economic pressure and to keep English manufactured goods flowing into Europe that Lord Chatham decided to attempt to take the Scheldt estuary and the port of Antwerp. A force was sent in July 1809 which captured the islands of Walcheren and South Beveland. Antwerp was rapidly reinforced and the commanders decided that it would have been suicidal to have attempted to capture it, with the result that the bulk of the abortive expedition was recalled in September. Rather surprisingly, since he was not an enlisted soldier at this date, Dent took part in this optimistic ‘second front’ venture and it may well have been this experience decidedly tinged with danger and therefore giving a certain

⁴ Later Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry. Now 1st Battalion Royal Green Jackets.

⁵ Duke of Wellington’s Regiment.

Texts and Documents

spice to a young man's life which made him elect to become a surgeon in the Army when he was qualified. Or perhaps it was the chance of monetary gain that led him to go for in a letter dated 27 November 1812 he wrote, 'I am glad to find the Walcheren Prize Money is likely to be paid, my share will be about £12 which is no trifle these hard times'. After he returned from Walcheren, he wrote from Colchester to his mother on 12 September 1809, 'I have the pleasure to inform you that I arrived at Harwich on the 10th inst. from Flushing . . . I am still attached to the 4th Regiment though we have only the sick with us here to the amount of three hundred and twenty. I have been remarkably healthy the whole time which I am sorry to say has not been the case with a number of officers, several have died and the men were buried by dozens, such a sickness I dare say was never known to prevail in the Army before. The landing at Harwich was truly an awful sight, several of the men died in the landing and on the beach and the inhabitants would not let their lodgings to the sick officers but if they had a few of the hard knocks the people of Flushing have got, they would be more humane to their countrymen'.

The next letter is headed London 29 January 1810, and Dent is back once more to the mundane round of making ends meet. Either he has much superior accommodation now to that with which he started or prices had risen very considerably. He reported that he was sharing with another young man and that each was paying half a guinea a week and finding everything else themselves. He also wrote 'I have drawn £20 of Mr. Whithorne, which of course you would expect to hear of and the manner in which it is spent viz, a course of dissections £5 5s. 0d., a body £3 3s. 0d., a dissecting case of instruments £2, a hat £1 8s. 0d. I have also ordered a suit of clothes and a pair of boots and shoes which I shall not be able to pay till next time I visit Mr. Whithorne.'

By April 1810 his studies were beginning to come to an end. In a letter dated 22nd of that month he writes once more upon the subject of expense in relation to his course: 'When I wrote to you last, I was under the hope of not troubling you again but finding that the lectures in the course of six weeks will be brought to near a finish and thinking myself equal to the task of being examined before the Royal College of Surgeons . . . I wish you not to mention it to anyone except my own friends for if I should be rejected it will be a disgrace upon me and a strong symptom of my negligence and inattention; but on the other hand if I should pass my examination it will be the best mark of industry. You must be aware that this will be attended with a good deal of expense. If I pass I shall have £22 to pay for my Diploma for what you call taking out my Degrees and other expenses attending it . . .' One is tempted to think that the last phrase conceals plans for a monumental celebration with his friends. On 7 May he penned this letter to his mother not two years after he had begun his studies, 'I have the pleasure to inform you of my good fortune in passing my examination on Friday night last. It has relieved me of a good deal of anxiety I assure you and you may now congratulate yourself on having a son a Member of the Royal College of Surgeons which is more than most medical practitioners in the north can boast of'. This letter also brings out the problem which must have confronted a good many newly-qualified doctors in any age: 'I know very well you are anxious to hear of my settling somewhere and I wish I could gratify you in this respect but it does not

Texts and Documents

accord with my ideas at all at present. Supposing I should come home what is there for me to do? Even if I should beg practice on my own account it would be several years before I could expect any established business. Another thing my appearance is so much against me for I am too young.' But perhaps the real answer is that his army service and perhaps too the influence and example of Mr. Hill whom he had obviously respected and admired, held out the promise of travel and adventure which appeals to youth. Wellington was already established in the Peninsula and service there could almost be guaranteed.

On 21 May 1810 he wrote from London for the last time. 'On Friday last I passed my medical Examination at the Medical Board Office and have again entered the Army and I leave town for Portsmouth this week. This will be nothing new to you for by my last letter you would perceive I intended going into the Army again.' And from Hilsa Barracks Portsmouth on 24 June he wrote, '... there are very few sick, not more than eighty in hospital and nearly ten medical men to attend them, which makes the Duty very easy and comfortable, much more so than when at Colchester Barracks. I hope you don't fret at my entering the Army. I am perfectly happy and I see no reason why you should not be so, for I think the Army an excellent school for a young man who has a desire to excel either in his profession or to become acquainted with the manners of the world.' This letter also contains one of his rare references to his surgical work: 'P.S. We have had a very particular operation today, taking the arm off at the shoulder joint'. He does not record whether the patient survived.

So the student had become the qualified surgeon with his career ahead of him. A career which in Dent's case was to take him right through the Peninsula Campaign during which time he purchased a Commission. At Napoleon's abdication his regiment was sent to America to participate in the unsung (except for the burning of the White House) land aspect of the war of 1812 and a return to Europe just too late for Waterloo. His regiment was sent to the West Indies during which tour of duty he was promoted to full Surgeon. In 1824 on his way home on leave he was drowned, with the promise of a long and useful life of service largely unfulfilled.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am indebted to Major-General A. MacLennan of the R.A.M.C. Historical Museum for information supplied regarding the Militia in the early nineteenth century.

LEONARD WOODFORD