

HECTOR GAVIN, MD, FRCSE (1815–1855) – HIS LIFE, HIS WORK FOR THE SANITARY MOVEMENT, AND HIS ACCIDENTAL DEATH IN THE CRIMEA

by

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THROUGH a family connexion,[†] a thin, leather-bound volume of thirty manuscript pages, measuring 21 × 13.5 cm., has come to my notice with other papers. It is a biography of Dr Hector Gavin, written a few years after his death by his father, and provides much of the material on which this brief account is based.

EDINBURGH

The father was also named Hector Gavin (pronounced in the family to rhyme with ravine) of Croft-an-Righ, a lovely old turreted house, now best seen from the Royal Garden at Holyrood, Edinburgh. He was an engraver.

The son was apprenticed at the age of sixteen, under the auspices of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, at a cost of £118. Three years later, in 1834, he won the Gold Medal for Botany, and in 1835, the Prize for Military Surgery. He proceeded LRCS in June 1835, and MD in June 1836. Unfortunately, the MD thesis cannot be found, though the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh have a record of the title: 'On the formation of bone'.

His probationary essay for the FRCS was *On feigned and factitious diseases*,¹ and was expanded five years later.² Both versions are written with sympathy for the malingerer, whom it was prudent to "let softly down". A couple of quotations are irresistible. "The Irish are the most numerous and expert at counterfeiting disease. The Lowland Scotsman comes next to the Irishman, and what he wants in address he makes up in obstinacy." "Discharge from the ears often proves to be a mixture of stinking eggs and rotten cheese, etc."

LONDON

According to the father's account:

In August 1836, he made a journey to London to endeavour to procure a Surgeoncy in the Army, but after some months stay, and being unsuccessful, he returned again to Edinburgh. He was now only

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[†] It is my wife who has inspired this account. Her great-grandmother was Hector Gavin's sister, and my wife's nephew, Andrew More, has presented this manuscript to the Wellcome Library (MS. 5155). Dr Ramsey G. Small has given information about Hector Gavin's visit to Dundee.

¹ Hector Gavin, 'A probationary essay on feigned and factitious diseases, chiefly of soldiers and seaman', in: *Probationary essays*, vol. 8, Edinburgh University Press, 1823–41.

² Hector Gavin, *On feigned and factitious diseases, chiefly of soldiers and seamen, on the means used to simulate or produce them, and on the best means of discovering imposters*, London, John Churchill, 1843.

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twenty-one, in high health, a fine looking, handsome, elegant and prepossessing young man, with all the world before him where to choose.

In December 1837, he married Margaret, daughter of James Greenfield, Esq.* In January 1838, he entered a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, and left there to settle in London, having bought from Dr Hawkins his medical practice, for which he paid the sum of £1,500, besides upwards of £300 for house etc. Here is a new era of his life, a young man only twenty-two years and four months old, with a wife, a carriage, an extensive establishment, and consequent heavy expenditure, in a place new and strange to him, and that place London.

He became surgeon to the London Orphan Asylum, the British Penitent Female Refuge, and the Bethnal Green Workhouse; and lecturer in forensic medicine at the Charing Cross Hospital, where he introduced public hygiene into his course.

We know little more about Gavin's clinical activities, but much about his association with the middle years of the Sanitary Movement. In 1842, Edwin Chadwick had written his devastating report to the Poor Law Commissioners.³ Pressure for legislation was maintained by the Health of Towns Association, formed in 1844, under the chairmanship of the Marquis of Normanby,⁴ and Gavin was among the sixty-nine members of the committee, though he does not appear in any of the subscription lists I have seen. Other members, subscribers, and supporters were Earl Grey, Lord Ashley (later 7th Earl of Shaftesbury), Lord Morpeth (later Earl of Carlisle, whose Bill finally reached the statute book in 1848), Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Benjamin D'Israeli, Charles Dickens, Drs Southwood Smith, William Duncan and John Sutherland, and John Simon (later Sir John Simon, Medical Officer of Health for London and subsequently for the central government). A number of documents concerning the Association are bound together at the Wellcome Library,⁵ and Gavin's name appears in them. He was one of four authors reporting critically to the Association on Lord Lincoln's Sewerage, Drainage, . . . of Towns Bill in 1845, which was rejected by Parliament. He was on a sub-committee distributing a questionnaire on the subject of sanitary improvement, and the terms of reference do not seem to have prevented Gavin himself contributing some of the answers. Satellite health of towns associations grew up for London and the provinces, and it is sometimes difficult to distinguish them from the parent body.

From November 1847 to October 1849, the Health of Towns Association published the *Journal of Public Health and Monthly Record of Sanitary Improvement*, adopting the first part of its name from an ephemeral publication of more than twenty years before. The monthly numbers made up two collected volumes, the first of which was edited by Dr John Sutherland, who later accompanied Gavin to the Crimea, and who became the lifelong adviser and friend of Florence Nightingale. When Sutherland went to the continent to investigate the westward-advancing cholera, Gavin edited the second volume. The two volumes provide a fascinating record of the sanitary problems of the times, and of the 1848–9 cholera epidemic. They contain a number of Gavin's writings and statistics, and many references to him. Hector Gavin and

*Their two children died at an early age.

³ Edwin Chadwick, 'Report on the sanitary condition of the labouring population of Great Britain', in: Poor Law Commissioners. *Report on an inquiry into the sanitary condition of the labouring population of Great Britain*, London, HMSO, 1842.

⁴ Robert G. Paterson, 'The Health of Towns Association in Great Britain 1844–1849', *Bull. Hist. Med.*, 1948, 22: 273–402.

⁵ *Medical Tracts 230*, at Wellcome Institute, London.

Adolphus Barnett wrote that when they visited Blyth's Buildings, in the City of London, they found 148 inhabitants "exclusive of those living in three houses having privies with no accommodation but the two privies referred to, and both at that time in the condition spoken of".

As editor of the *Journal of Public Health*, Gavin dutifully reported on "an extraordinary Court of Commissioners of Sewers for the City of London to select two gentlemen eligible for the office of Medical Officer of Health for the metropolis". There were twenty-two candidates, among them William Farr, who withdrew.

... the proceedings passed on quietly till Dr Gavin and Mr Simon respectively presented themselves. Dr Gavin was immediately submitted to an examination as to his connexion with the Health-of-Towns Association, its publications, and opposition to the city [*sic*] of London Sewers' Bill. Dr Gavin said he was not responsible for an error regarding the mortality of children in London On being questioned whether he was the author of the concluding paragraph referring to central control and inspection, in a work entitled "Sanitary Ramblings", and whether these being his sentiments the paragraph was intended to apply to the city of London; he stated that the work only applied to the parish of Bethnal-green.

It is erroneously reported in some of the daily journals that Dr Gavin stated he had done nothing in disparagement of the sanitary condition of the city of London.

Mr Simon, however, declared he never had done anything by word or writing to disparage the great City of London – that he had always held its numerous and admirable institutions in the highest estimation – that he had never even read the publications referred to, and fervently stated that he had never written one word whatever on the sanitary question. These answers appeared to give much satisfaction.

John Simon and George B. Childs were returned. Childs later withdrew, leaving the field to Simon, whose achievement as Medical Officer of Health for London has been analysed in Lambert's splendid biography.⁶

References in the journal to financial difficulties suggest that these were the reasons for its discontinuance. It was, however, again revived in 1855–6, with the title *Journal of Public Health and Sanitary Review*, which has the best obituary notice of Gavin;⁷ as the *Sanitary Review and Journal of Public Health*, it survived until 1859.

After Lord Morpeth's Bill had established a Central Board of Health in 1848, the Health of Towns Association seems to have felt it had lost its *raison d'être*, but by 1850, a similar organization, the Metropolitan Sanitary Association,⁸ had assumed its mantle so far as London was concerned. The Bishop of London was President, with Gavin as one of the three Honorary Secretaries. In a public speech, Gavin referred to the increasing mortality in the metropolis during the previous four years, as proof of the necessity of placing it under the operation of the Health Act. He also wanted an amendment to the Nuisances Removal Act, to the effect that the Board of Health should have full power to require improvements, wherever these were absolutely necessary, in the condition of the dwellings of the poor. Next day, he was a member of a deputation that waited on the Prime Minister, Lord John Russell, who made a sympathetic but evasive reply. At least, the Chancellor of the Exchequer later proposed the abolition of the brick and timber duties, which had encouraged the use of poor building materials. Gavin pressed the Chancellor about the sanitary evils inflicted by the window duties, but no hope was held out for early change in these. The Association then adopted a plan suggested by Gavin, for submission to the legislature,

⁶ Royston Lambert, *Sir John Simon, 1816–1904, and English social administration*, London, MacGibbon & Kie, 1963.

⁷ *Journal of Public Health and Sanitary Review*, 1855, 1: 93–98.

⁸ Metropolitan Sanitary Association, *First report*, London, 1850.

that each tenement, before being let or relet should be inspected, and that letting should not be legal without a satisfactory certificate.

Gavin's concern for the health conditions in London are best seen in a series of loosely connected volumes. *The unhealthiness of London*⁹ showed the relationship of mortality or morbidity to area or volume per person in a building. Twelve per cent of those with less than 500 cubic feet of air spat blood, compared with four per cent of those with more air. In *Sanitary ramblings*,¹⁰ he went through Bethnal Green district by district and street by street, commenting on the location and structure of the houses, their space and accommodation, lodging houses, heating, ventilation, cleansing, drainage, refuse removal, privies and cesspools, paving, sewerage, interments, nuisances, water supply, sickness, disease, and mortality (with tables of these last three).¹¹ In *The habitations of the industrial classes*,¹² Gavin argued for the possession by the industrial population of "the modest comforts of an English home", quoting Henry Worsley's prize essay on *Juvenile depravity* (London, 1849): "the lodging-house is a more malignant form of the overcrowded labourer's cottage. The moral effect of both is the destruction of all modesty in either sex; and the almost universal absence of chastity and purity among the labouring class in our country villages, at the present day, is notorious to everyone at all acquainted with them".

In 1848, the Public Health Act established a General Board of Health. Gavin became its Secretary, and some of his deferential correspondence in that capacity is preserved in the Chadwick MSS,¹³ though the full range of his activities on the Board await systematic analysis. His official position, however, did not deter him from participation as a protagonist, and he was vocal in support of the evidence presented by John Snow and William Budd about the water-borne spread of cholera.¹⁴

John Snow, in 1849, maintained that cholera was communicated directly from traces of the ejections or dejections of patients being swallowed by others, sometimes by way of the hands of the nursing attendant, and sometimes by sewage reaching a water supply; but in this first edition he "does not wish to be misunderstood . . . to imply that cholera depends on veritable animals, or even animalcules . . .". In the second edition (1855), Snow left out this qualification.

There is a likeness between the Sanitary Movement of the 1840s and the campaign against smoking now at its peak.¹⁵ Thomas Beggs's account in the *Journal of Public Health* for 1849 would do, with names altered,¹⁶ for either:

⁹ Hector Gavin, *Unhealthiness of London, and the necessity of remedial measures*, London, John Churchill, 1847.

¹⁰ Hector Gavin, *Sanitary ramblings*, London, John Churchill, 1848.

¹¹ For a discussion of this book, see R. S. Roberts, 'Re-readings: an essay on a book important in East London life and affairs', *East London Papers*, 1965, 8: 110-118.

¹² Hector Gavin, *The habitations of the industrial classes*, London, Society for Improving the Condition of the Labouring Classes, 1851.

¹³ Chadwick MSS, University College London.

¹⁴ John Snow, *On the mode of communication of cholera*, London, John Churchill, 1849; William Budd, *Malignant cholera: its mode of propagation, and its prevention*, London, John Churchill, 1849.

¹⁵ Since writing this article, the author has come across a *Lancet* editorial drawing the same parallel (1982, ii: 855).

¹⁶ When I give my imagination free rein, I cast, in this reenactment, Sir Richard Doll and Sir Austin Bradford Hill in the parts of Chadwick and Farr, who collected the facts. Professor Charles Fletcher, rather like Southwood Smith, has been steadily pushing for what he believes is right and necessary. The politician

Hector Gavin, MD, FRCSE (1815–1855)

The history of the Health of Towns movement is painfully instructive. It furnishes another, among the many, of the slow progress of great and practical truths. Some coldly assented to the necessity of Sanitary Reform who never gave the value of a shilling . . . others stood by, pretending to discover in the purposes of the men who were agitating it sinister motives and selfish aims . . . then there were the natural conservatives of society . . . then there were certain local interests . . . then there were the ambitious busy-bodies, aspirants for municipal honours, who rise to distinction by the cry of "economy"; and so the old system jogs on, suffering, disease and death . . .

THE WEST INDIES

According to the MS, Lord Palmerston chose Hector Gavin to be a Medical Commissioner to the West Indies, where there were many deaths from cholera and various fevers. The other two Commissioners were Drs Laidlaw and Gavin Milroy. I have not succeeded in tracing a family connexion between Hector Gavin and Gavin Milroy (1805–86), who was also an Edinburgh graduate. Their careers were remarkably similar, being deeply involved with the sanitary movement in London. After Hector's death, Milroy¹⁷ replaced him as sanitary commissioner in the Crimea.

Hector Gavin sailed from Southampton in January 1851, with a salary of £1,500 a year plus expenses. He had a bad passage and was ill, besides having doubts about the sacrifice of his practice and the unusual nature of his mission. He arrived in Bridgetown, Barbados, the same month, and then moved a little south to Port of Spain, Trinidad, where he obtained a nice house, which he made his headquarters for the whole enterprise.¹⁸ He seems to have visited Georgetown, Demarara (now Guiana), where there was yellow fever and cholera, at least twice in 1851, and probably also nearby Tobago, Grenada a little farther north, St Vincent and Barbados again. He wrote to Southwood Smith that in the cathedral at Barbados the Arch-deacon of Guiana had preached about cholera, and "I suffered the martyrdom of laudation". He was very ill in Barbados with yellow fever, which he considered he had contracted in Guiana. The other two Commissioners returned home about that time.

In 1852, Gavin was informed that he could stay in the West Indies for another year if the Colonies would pay half his allowance of £3 3s. 0d. a day. Antigua, St Vincent, Tobago, and the Virgin Islands did not wish to avail themselves of his services, pleading that they would not be able, because of poverty, to carry out his recommendations. Gavin was led to expect the same answer from Grenada, St Lucia, Dominica, Nevis, St Kitts, and Montserrat, though he did eventually go to Grenada and Bahamas. He wryly remarked that he had not made suggestions too expensive to be adopted in Barbados, British Guiana, or Trinidad. One of his letters to Earl Desart, Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies, has a minute written on its back: "Dr Gavin seems determined to stick to the West Indies as long as he can . . . I am disposed to think that there is a great deal of genuine zeal in Dr Gavin."

The Public Record Office contains a number of papers about Gavin's time in the

Sir George Young was making a fair bid for the prestigious part of Lord Shaftesbury, until Young was abruptly moved by our present Prime Minister to a post where his philanthropic propensities had less scope. Dr Keith Ball's persistent energy entitles him at least to an audition for the part of Gavin.

¹⁷ Milroy is remembered today as founder of the Milroy lectures on State Medicine and Public Hygiene at the Royal College of Physicians of London. A Fellow who has been associated with the College for over half a century tells me that Milroy's Christian name is always pronounced with a short "i", that is to rhyme with "spavin", differently from the name of our subject.

¹⁸ Colonial Office Papers in the Public Record Office, London, 1851 and 1852, see 318, pieces 194 and 200.

West Indies. There are his handwritten reports, mostly to the Under-Secretary, about cholera, yellow fever, influenza, colony fever, smallpox, and other subjects. There are statistics, drafts of ordinances and bills for the legislatures, printed reports, and newspaper articles. He recommended changes in the personnel, increases in medical staff, alterations in drainage, improvements in housing and hospitals, a system of dispensary relief, and so on.

In 1852 and early 1853, he travelled a good deal north west, to Nassau, Bahamas, where there was an epidemic of cholera, then twice to Grenada again, before embarking for his homeward journey from Grenada, reaching Southampton in May 1853.

There survives in the Parliamentary Accounts and Papers¹⁹ an interesting correspondence about the arrival of the steam-packet *Esk* at Nassau, Bahamas, with eight yellow fever patients. It includes a letter from Gavin, who had been on board, to the Under-Secretary, dated 1853. The patients were landed and cared for, and no further cases occurred at Nassau. There seems to have been a controversy at the time between those who wished to quarantine ships with yellow fever, and those who preferred to “pursue the more effectual course of removing the sources of impurity which are calculated to extend the influence of malaria [the word presumably used in a generic sense], rather than attempting to prevent the introduction of disease, by prohibiting all intercourse . . .”. The latter school also preferred vaccination for smallpox to quarantine. The correspondence reveals that ships were disinfected with chlorine gas.

BRITAIN AGAIN

According to the official report of the Cholera Commissioners,²⁰ where his sworn evidence occupies twenty-three pages, Gavin was sent to Newcastle by the Board of Health to relieve or assist their representative, Mr R. D. Grainger. Gavin was in Tyneside from 17 September to 30 October 1853, when he was ordered by telegram to go to Dundee (see below). The other plentiful source of information about this visit is John Bell's²¹ vast two-volume scrapbook on the outbreak, now in the Newcastle University Library; this contains cuttings from the local and national press, posters, and miscellanea. 1,527 people died in Newcastle, the first six deaths on 1 September, the peak number 114 on 16 September, and the last single death on 4 November. The circumstances were appalling. Sandgate was particularly atrocious. Mary Timmings had one room there, measuring 14' × 13' × 8'; she lived in it with fourteen lodgers and visitors; she charged 1s. 8½d. a week. There were 350 houses in Sandgate, 4,600 inhabitants, seven private privies, and one public one.

The records of Gavin's activities in Newcastle reveal a lot about his personality, at least when he was under stress. His energy was prodigious. One day, he might be indisposed, but the next day he would be active again. He set about visiting the

¹⁹ Parliamentary Accounts and Papers, 260, 65: 123 (1852–3).

²⁰ Cholera Commissioners, *Report of the Commissioners appointed to inquire into the causes which have lead to, or have aggravated, the last outbreak of cholera in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Gateshead, and Tynemouth*, London, HMSO, 1954, pp. 143–166.

²¹ John Bell, 'Collections relative to the outbreak of the cholera at Newcastle upon Tyne, Gateshead and the surrounding districts in September, October and November 1853', 2 vols., in Newcastle University Library.

infected districts, closing unsuitable dwellings, receiving about a thousand displaced people in tents on the Town Moor, moving sick to appropriate accommodation, arranging for the safe disposal of bodies, seeing to the quantity and quality of water supplies, and cleansing lanes and alleys. “On Tuesday, on Dr Gavin visiting Scotsrow [Walker], he found in a room in the first house, on a bed, a corpse of a woman, and on another bed her husband, who had just died; a third, a lodger, was lying on another bed in a state of collapse and beyond recovery. In the room below this there was another case of collapse; and in another room another similar case. . . .”

There is very little about how he treated his patients. His recipe for cholera was: “Take of bicarbonate of ammonia, 8 grains; tincture of opium 8 grains; tincture of ginger, 20 drops; tincture of catechu, 1 drachm; aromatic confection 10 grains; chalk mixture, or camphor mixture, to 1½ or 2 ounces, to form a draught. Creosote, 3–5 drops in the chalk mixture, if accompanied by much pain.” This prescription should diminish purging.

“As an act of courtesy”, Gavin called a meeting of the medical profession through John Gibb, whose name has been immortalized in the song, *The Blaydon Races*. It took place on Monday, 26 September, although Gavin had hoped to hold it earlier. It was not a success. Dr George Robinson alleged the insufficiency of Mr Grainger, and Mr William Newton complained of personal discourtesy on the part of Dr Gavin. Newton, after the meeting, became the subject of a poster making scurrilous accusations, in which I hope Gavin had no part. Another poster asked, “Who Is Dr Gavin? I answer a Gentleman of Character and Ability. . . . Who is Dr Mason? The Greatest Swindler of the Age.” Dr John Mason, at a public meeting in Newcastle on Friday, 7 October, had tried to criticize Gavin’s character but “was received with symptoms of disapprobation”. After uproar, though, a motion was passed asking for a governmental enquiry into the management of the epidemic.

He must have passed my own house when he visited Haltwhistle, some forty miles on the railway line to Carlisle, on the same day that he met the medical profession. On other occasions he went to Morpeth and Whalton, a village with “a clean aspect which would quite deceive the passer by”, where cholera had hit hard. “The practice in Northumberland. . . is to have their midden-steads and privy accommodation together, forming huge horrible masses of exposed excrementitious refuse.”

At Gateshead, south of the river, Gavin also overplayed his hand, claiming that no man had so large an experience as himself in the treatment of cholera, and the Guardians there rejected his proposals, with the comment that no more able people could be found than their resident medical men.

Did he do good? I should like to leave the last words with the Newcastle Board of Guardians, who carried unanimously a motion approving the work of Mr Grainger and Dr Gavin “with much applause”. The Cholera Commissioners later praised Dr Gavin, and added that Mr Grainger exerted himself so severely as to affect his health.

Within two days of his arrival in Dundee, Gavin addressed the local Board of Health.

He had seen a larger amount of human ordures in the byeways of Dundee than in any other place he had ever visited. He had seen in Dundee spectacles so extremely offensive and disgusting that he could

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scarcely have conceived their existence possible in a civilised country. Even among the poor Africans just arrived in the country, or among Portuguese, who were about the dirtiest people he knew, he had seen nothing to equal the nastiness and abominations of some of the Dundee courts.²²

Recommendations were made along the usual lines, with the interesting suggestion that fumigation with sulphurous acid would be beneficial in infected houses. The Dundonians could not have been too much offended, for the address was followed by loud applause. The Dundee epidemic lasted through November and December, and by 11 January 1854, when the records in the *Courier* cease, there had been 559 cases and 324 deaths.

Gavin continued to visit Edinburgh to see his father. Although he urged improvements in public health, he was unable to obtain in Scotland the powers he wanted for the Central Government,²³ and it was not till after his death that Scotland had a satisfactory Act.

In 1854, Gavin wrote a letter to the Secretary of State²⁴ commending his system of house-to-house medical visitation in cholera, and claiming that this system reduced the mortality from 200 to three per thousand. He also felt²⁵ that this system established "a bond of union in feeling between the neglected poor and the classes above them".

THE CRIMEA

Gavin's next assignment was as Sanitary Commissioner to the Army in the Crimea. According to one of the obituaries,²⁶ Gavin was the first of the Commissioners to be selected, the day after he had been appointed permanently Government Medical Officer to the Post Office (he had occupied the post temporarily, and Rowland Hill had congratulated him on his services). Hodder gives the following description:²⁷

One day, when excitement and indignation were at their height, on account of the mismanagement of affairs in the East, Dr Hector Gavin, who had been for three years Government Commissioner for the Prevention and Cure of Cholera in the West Indies, called upon Lord Shaftesbury, to talk about his labours on the Board of Health in relation to the same disease, and, as a matter of course, the conversation turned upon the ravages made by cholera among our brave soldiers in the East. It was during this interview that the scheme for a Sanitary Commission in the East was suggested to the mind of Lord Shaftesbury.

There is other evidence that Gavin suggested it.²⁸ The Commissioners were, in fact, in the order given in the Parliamentary Report, John Sutherland, MD, Hector Gavin, MD, and Robert Rawlinson.²⁹

Two biographers of Florence Nightingale, Sir Edward Cook³⁰ and Mrs Cecil Woodham-Smith,³¹ see a feminine hand in the very urgent instructions which were

²² *Dundee Courier*, 9 November 1853.

²³ Chadwick MSS, University College London.

²⁴ Parliamentary Accounts and Papers, 23, 61: 109 (1854).

²⁵ General Board of Health, *Report on the epidemic cholera of 1848 and 1849*, London, 1850.

²⁶ *Journal of Public Health and Sanitary Review*, 1855, 1: 93–98.

²⁷ Edwin Hodder, *The life and work of the seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, K.G.*, London, Cassell, 1888.

²⁸ Geoffrey B. A. M. Finlayson, *The seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, 1801–1885*, London, Eyre Methuen, 1981.

²⁹ Rawlinson had worked under Robert Stephenson, and was chief engineering inspector to the Local Government Board; he was later knighted and, like Sutherland, became Florence Nightingale's friend.

³⁰ Sir Edward Cook, *The life of Florence Nightingale*, London, Macmillan, 1913.

³¹ Cecil Woodham-Smith, *Florence Nightingale 1820–1910*, London, Constable, 1950.

given to the Sanitary Commission. The Commissioners left London within three days of receiving them, taking with them three Inspectors and the Borough Engineer from Liverpool (the first town to have a Sanitary Act), and a Secretary. One can learn of Hector Gavin's surroundings and activities from the Report of the Commission;³² in those days government reports contained evocative English, and reproduced elegant illustrations. "The Bosphorus, from its northern entrance in the Black Sea, until it joins the Sea of Marmora at Istanbul, has very much the appearance of a river flowing between lofty and beautifully wooded banks, studded with palaces, houses, barracks, mosques and gardens. Towards the opening of the Sea of Marmora, the shore presents, on the Eastern or Scutari side, an elevated rocky margin from 100 to 150 feet in vertical height." The Commission arrived at Istanbul on 6 March, and began the same afternoon to examine the hospitals on the Scutari ridge just described, on the other side of the Bosphorus. The largest was the Barrack Hospital, formerly a Turkish barrack, "a vast quadrangle with a Tower at each corner, and a Square in the Centre". It measured 840' × 630', and was three floors high, and contained Florence Nightingale's headquarters. The Commission set about cleansing, the removal of nuisances, and the carriage of refuse. Simple structural alterations were to be made to improve ventilation. The sewers were to be protected. Each patient was to have 1,000 cubic feet of space. Water was to be filtered, and water tanks covered. Hogsheads were to be installed, connected with the head of each sewer by a valve so that the sewers could be regularly flushed.

Florence Nightingale wrote to Sidney Herbert on 18 March 1855: "The Sanitary Commission is really doing something, and has set to work burying dead dogs and whitewashing infected walls, two prolific causes of fever".³³ "That Commission", she wrote to Lord Shaftesbury, "saved the British Army",³⁴ though on another view the epidemic of cholera was already declining. The communications of the Commission to Brigadier-General Lord William Paulet and Admiral F. Grey may be inspected in the Public Record Office, with the somewhat evasive replies of these gentlemen.³⁵

On 21 March, the three Commissioners split up for a few days, and it was Gavin's assignment to travel across the Black Sea to the Crimean peninsula. He reached Balaclava on the evening of 22 March, Mr Newlands, the Liverpool Engineer, having preceded him with two Inspectors the week before. Newlands showed him round on 23 March, and they both saw Lord Raglan on 24 March, requesting "50 such men as the railway navigators". On 30 March, forty-one men were told off for use, but discharged because they had no tools. They were set to work on 2 April. On 3 April, Mr Newlands accompanied Gavin to inspect a portion of the Cavalry camp near Kadikoi. The first meeting of the entire Commission at Balaclava was on 6 April, when Gavin laid before them a statement of the sanitary defects requiring remedy. The burial grounds needed covering with lime or charcoal, then with earth. Collections of animal and vegetable organic matter needed similar treatment if they were not to be burned. Latrines were to be erected and cared for. A slaughtering place for

³² Sanitary Commission, *Report to the Lord Panmure, GCB, etc., Minister at War, of the proceedings of the sanitary commission dispatched to the seat of war in the East, 1855–56*, London, 1857.

³³ Florence Nightingale, British Library Add. MS 43,393 (1855).

³⁴ Hodder, *op. cit.*, note 27 above, p 503.

³⁵ War Office papers, in PRO, 1855, see WO2, piece 7580.

animals was to be provided, and barges for carrying refuse out to sea. A stream was to be covered in to prevent fouling of the water, if there was to be any lengthened occupation of the town. Reports went to the Commander and Lord Panmure on 11 and 16 April.

On 8 May, Gavin's father received a letter announcing the death of his son:³⁶

Balaklava, Saturday night, April 21st 1855.

Sir, – Your son, William Gavin,³⁷ of the 17th Lancers, has requested me to send you the details of an event which has plunged us all into the deepest grief. I allude to the fatal accident which has deprived you of a son, and us of a zealous and efficient member of the Sanitary Commission.

Dr Gavin died this morning of a pistol wound in the abdomen, inflicted last night about half-past ten P.M., at his hut. The following are the facts as they were brought out today, at the court of inquiry ordered by Lord Raglan, of which I was a member:–

Mr William Gavin and Dr Linton dined with Dr Gavin in his hut last night. Dr Linton left about half-past ten, and Mr William Gavin left, or rather got up to leave, very shortly after. Dr Gavin had a revolver of Deanes, which is a most dangerous weapon if not handled with great care. He asked William to exchange it for one of his, to which William assented. The servant saw the two brothers come together to the door of the hut. Dr Gavin was heard to say to his brother, 'William, you had better take my revolver with you tonight, and bring down the other in the morning'. He then went and took the revolver from the case. It was capped and loaded. He put his hand on William's shoulder and passed the pistol into William's hand, when it exploded so instantaneously that the servant stated it was impossible to tell in whose hand it had gone off. The shot passed through the left side of the abdomen and came out behind. The doctor said that he felt he was mortally wounded. Two military surgeons were on the spot in a quarter of an hour, and I saw him about the same time. There could be no doubt he had sustained a mortal injury. He lingered on till half-past seven o'clock this morning and died.

I append a copy of the decision of the court of inquiry. I only wish that the entire exculpation of William could be felt by him as we feel it. But, alas! the accident – for accident it was – will, I fear, make a permanent impression on his mind. I may also state that Dr Gavin entirely exculpated William of all blame in the matter. Every one considers it as a very great calamity, and poor William will have every sympathy that kind hearts can give him. He returned to his regiment this afternoon in the deepest grief. Such are the simple facts – they require no comment. My colleague, Mr Rawlinson, joins me in the deepest expressions of sympathy, and I am, Sir, your obedient servant,

JOHN SUTHERLAND

On 12 March 1857, in a House of Commons debate³⁸ about the other Commission to the Crimea, on the subject of the Commissariat, Lord Palmerston said:

Moreover, they [the Commissariat Commissioners] were not the only Commissioners. There was a Medical Commission, consisting of Dr Sutherland, Dr Gavin, who unfortunately lost his life, and Mr Rawlinson, an engineer, who was wounded in action in which he had unnecessarily placed himself. I am bound to say, without disparagement to Sir John M'Neill and Colonel Tulloch that the Medical Commissioners conferred greater advantages upon the public at home and upon the army in the Crimea than it was possible for them [the Commissariat Commissioners] to accomplish.

CONCLUSION

The *British Medical Journal* obituary,³⁹ laudatory like the others,⁴⁰ writes of the pioneers of sanitary reform, "of whom, after Dr Southwood Smith and Edwin Chadwick, Dr Hector Gavin was one of our very foremost men". He is commemorated over the family vault, next to the David Hume memorial in the Old Calton Burial Ground, Edinburgh.

³⁶ *Scotsman*, 9 May 1855.

³⁷ Dr Hector Gavin's brother, William, was in the Crimea as veterinarian attached to the Scots Greys. He died of cholera eighteen days after this accident.

³⁸ *Hansard*, 1857, 144: 2227–2228.

³⁹ *Br. med. J.*, 1855, i: 481.

⁴⁰ *Lancet*, 1855, i: 502; *Medical Directory*, London, John Churchill, 1856, p. 735; *Medical Directory for Scotland*, London, John Churchill, 1866, p. 149; *Gentleman's Mag.*, 1855, 653–654; *BUILDER*, 1855, 13: 226.