

## ***THE CASEBOOK OF RALPH FLETCHER. MD. (1780-1851)*** ***SURGEON TO THE GLOUCESTER INFIRMARY, DISPENSARY AND LUNATIC ASYLUM*** ***by Dr David Stevens***

A successful surgeon with a practice extending to Bristol and South Wales, skilled in the surgical techniques of the time, and author of a monograph on surgery, Ralph Fletcher's reputation might have been laid to rest as a local worthy of his day but nevertheless a forgotten name in the dusty archives of the



Gloucester Infirmary - Centre Block and South Wing  
c. 1898 (Courtesy of the County Library, Gloucester)

Gloucester Infirmary. What set him apart and gave his place in the history of medicine was not his skill as a surgeon but his understanding of the way in which emotional factors influence symptoms and the recovery from illness. He had a remarkable ability to understand the feelings of his patients, to recognise the way in which their emotional lives contributed to their symptoms, and to help them recover from psychosomatic illness. In 1833 he published the first casebook of psychosomatic medicine based on personal experience.

Ralph Fletcher never thought of his patients as merely the repositories of disease but tried to understand them all as individuals. He did not recognise a division between physical illness and feelings and emotional lives of his patients. He drew attention to the way in which the patient's morale and mental state affected the outcome of surgery and advised the surgeon to visit every patient before he operated 'to know the exact condition of the nervous system, so much influenced by the mind' and to 'calm the deep felt anxiety, raise the spirits, and excite the confidence'. 'Not to see every patient on the eve of a great operation' he held to be 'a culpable neglect on the part of the surgeon'.

### ***The Patient's Morale***

More remarkable than his recognition of the importance of the patient's morale in recovery from organic disease was his outstanding skill in recognising the way in which the patient's emotional life could lead to psychosomatic symptoms and his ability to help the patient recover using what we would now call psychotherapy. 'The mind, in a disordered state, has little power over its own actions... (it

*often requires the aid of another, whose precision, coolness, and knowledge, may be equal to the...difficult and delicate undertaking. The exercise of reason, unseasonably recommended to the patient, is often but the exercise of folly on the part of the adviser... You forget that he possesses as much reason as yourself, and has tried on its aids without success. Nor is it indeed reasonable to suppose, that you can drive away with argument, the most heartfelt disappointments, and long built up miseries of the sensitive man. As soon, therefore, as you begin to utter the string of common-place truisms, usual upon these occasions...it may be expected that the patients confidence, in your understanding, is rapidly passing away. Quickly discovering your ignorance of human nature, the eye, which beamed with pleasure on your arrival, lowers and retires within its socket, as your proceed in your learned discourse.'*

### ***Psychosomatic Disorders***

Ralph Fletcher recognised that patients with psychosomatic disorders and with mental illness often suffering as much as those with organic disease. 'The cases of mental indigestion are also more severe, and of longer duration, and more fluctuating than the common or physical ones, as the cases operate in various shades of distressed feeling and with different degrees of force at different times.' The advice he gave to doctors who try to help these patients has lost none of its relevance: 'Medical men would often be more usefully employed in tracing out the wanderings of a distracted mind to their source, and in furnishing the appropriate relief, which an intellectual physician should be able to do, than in prescribing physic and enemas only. No essential or permanent relief is ever obtained from medicine.' His unusual insight in unravelling the patient's emotional life was central to both the diagnosis and the healing process but he also recognised the importance that religious faith, lifestyle, diet, work and leisure could play in the physical and mental well being of his patients. He describes patients whose symptoms were psychosomatic and were cured without recourse to drugs or surgery. Emotional attachments, financial problems, marital conflict, depression, anxiety and morbid fears are described with understanding and with the delicacy demanded of that time. Fletcher's descriptions are tempered with humour. A vain unfeeling husband is described as 'This 60 year old Adonis'. He understood about the importance of grief and knew that this could apply to the break down of a relationship as well as the loss of a loved one. 'Grief, in a truly sensitive mind, for the loss suddenly sustained, of once beloved object, who has not merely died, but is lost to you for ever... is a thousand times more dreadful... than the mere extinction of mortal life.' He recognised that physical escape from the place of unhappiness was rarely successful and

the patient more often needed to come to terms with his or her own feelings: *'Memory, however, must have her victim, and imagination will assist in the work of destruction.'*

### *Fletcher's World of Medicine*

Ralph Fletcher was born within a few months of René Laennec who invented the stethoscope and he was the younger contemporary of a fellow Gloucestershire doctor, Edward Jenner, who was 62 years old when Ralph Fletcher was appointed as surgeon to the Gloucester Infirmary. Laennec and Jenner are giants in the history of medicine and their names are known to every doctor and medical student whereas Ralph Fletcher is a largely unknown figure who has been of interest mainly to students of the history of psychiatry. The universal use of the stethoscope and the elimination of smallpox from the world by vaccination are testimonies to the innovations of Laennec and Jenner. In contrast the world of medicine and surgery seems to have retreated from the lessons of Ralph Fletcher's work. The great advances in medicine that have taken away so much suffering and saved so many lives have been bought at the price of increasing specialisation so that consultants are developing immense expertise in smaller and smaller areas of medicine and surgery. With this specialisation, there has, perhaps, arisen a tendency to



The County Lunatic Asylum, Horton Road, Gloucester  
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think that an understanding of the patient's feelings and emotional life are the province of psychiatrists rather than something of crucial interest to every doctor. The concept of a consultant who is equally skilled in organic and psychological medicine has been lost.

If Ralph Fletcher returned today, more than 200 years after his birth, he would be lost in amazement at modern techniques of diagnosis and treatment and the cures that are routinely achieved for many of the conditions that were uniformly fatal in his time. What he might be surprised to find is how little we have progressed in helping the large number of patients with psychosomatic disorders who come to general practitioners and consultants. An understanding of the patient's feelings and

emotional life owes nothing to modern technology but depends on the sympathy, insight and skill of the person to whom the patient has turned for help with his or her problem. Ralph Fletcher's personality was such that his patients were able to unburden their feelings and the details of their lives to an uncritical, sympathetic and understanding doctor. His approach to medicine with an emphasis on understanding the importance of both organic illness and the emotional side of the patient's life is just as relevant today as it was when he practised medicine more than 150 years ago.

### *Fletcher's Background*

There is no known portrait of Ralph Fletcher and only the bare outline of his life and career is known. He was the son of a baker in Gloucester. He studied medicine at St Bartholomew's Hospital and obtained his MD from the University of Edinburgh but he spent most of his working life in Gloucester. He lived in Barton Street where he had his practice and in 1811 obtained a position as surgeon to the Gloucester infirmary in Southgate Street and to the Gloucester Lunatic Asylum in Horton Road. In 1833, he was promoted to consultant surgeon at the infirmary. He was an important local figure and was mayor of Gloucester in 1818-19 and 1828-9. He had four children, one of whom married a surgeon who had trained under him at Gloucester. He died at the age of 70 and is buried in St. Mary de Crypt, Gloucester. He was a keen collector of paintings and works of art and left a will valued at 'under 50,000 pounds'. His house in Barton Street was near the animal pound and what he saw there provoked him to write a book in which he spoke out against cruelty to animals. His most lasting achievement however is his casebook of psychosomatic medicine which was the product of a doctor of unusual intelligence and insight.

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