

THE MAN WHO NAMED INFLUENZA

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THERE is at least a probability that people who have given names to things which have become "household words" were themselves somewhat interesting.

The word "influenza" is just Italian for "influence." But, as everyone knows, it is the name of an exceedingly infectious variety of epidemic catarrh. Since the name reveals nothing of the characteristics of this mysterious disease, we ought not to be surprised at the news that such extreme caution in terminology was exercised by a Scotsman. It was Sir John Pringle, M.D., who coined the name for this particular complaint—a man born in Scotland in the year 1707. His father was the second baronet of Stichel, in Roxboroughshire; his mother was one of the Elliots of Stobs.

Young Pringle was first sent to the ancient university of St. Andrews, where a relative of his was professor of Greek. After a year of medical study at Edinburgh, he went over to Holland to graduate Doctor of Medicine at the famous University of Leyden, where in 1730 he received his diploma signed by no less a personage than the great Herman Boerhaave himself. Returning to his native land, Pringle began to practice in Edinburgh, and was held in such esteem that before long he was elected to a professorship—and that not even a medical one—in the metropolitan university. Eight years later he was appointed physician to the Earl of Stair,¹ at that time commanding his Britannic Majesty's forces in Flanders.

Not long afterwards, through the influence of Lord Stair, Pringle was made physician to the military hospitals in the war zone. It was then and there that he began to study those epidemics, including what we now call "influenza", which at that time affected so seriously the efficiency of the troops. His conclusions were later published as *Observations on the Diseases of the Army*, London, 1752. It is admitted by all authorities that he was the first military hygienist.

Pringle was present at the battle of Dettingen (1743), where at one time he was in very considerable danger. It will be

1. John Dalrymple, second Earl of Stair (1673-1747)—noted, among other things, for having introduced the turnip and the cabbage into Scotland.

remembered that this was the last battle where an English king led troops in person. He tells us that in this campaign the Earl of Stair humanely suggested a rule of immunity from attack for the hospital forces on both sides. Happily the courteous and no less humane French commander, the Duke of Noailles, willingly agreed to this. It was Lord Stair, when British ambassador in Paris, too, of whom it was related that King Louis XV said he was the most polite man he knew, because "when I ask him to go into the coach before me, he does so without delay or apology."

When the Duke of Cumberland took over the command in the Low Countries, he made Pringle surgeon-general to the forces as well as physician-in-chief to all the military hospitals. Remaining by the side of his patron, he returned to this country to take part in the operations which suppressed the Jacobite rising at Culloden (1746). After the peace of Aix-la-Chapelle he settled down to practice in London, and about this time he published his conclusions to the effect that "jail fever" and "hospital fever" were the same thing, and that lack of ventilation had a great deal to do with propagating the "distemper." This fever, later called "ship" and "emigrant" fever, was what we now know as typhus,—a scourge which modern hygiene has effectively banished. Pringle's great service was his insistence that adequate ventilation, particularly of hospitals and barracks where men are crowded together, must be secured.

He wrote also on dysentery. He was the first medical man to study the properties and uses of antiseptic substances,—a field in which he was the distant forerunner of Pasteur and Lister. For these and other researches he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society, awarded the Copley medal, and finally chosen to fill the presidential chair.

There are other items of personal interest about him. His wife was Charlotte Oliver, second daughter of Dr. William Oliver, a well known physician in Bath and the inventor of the biscuit made there to this day—the "Bath Oliver." In 1766 King George III created Pringle a baronet of the United Kingdom, his "Scottish" baronetcy having been only a Nova Scotian creation. Many honours flowed upon him, one of the most signal of which was his election in place of the Swedish botanist Linnaeus to a seat in the French Academy where he was one of the eight foreign members.

About two years before he died, he made his last attempt to live in Edinburgh, but it was not successful, for he found most of his old friends gone, and the climate of the Scottish capital was distinctly trying. So he returned to London, where he died in

his seventy-fifth year, and was buried in the graveyard of St. James's Church, Piccadilly. In Westminster Abbey there is a memorial to him by the famous sculptor Nollekens.

Sir John Pringle's private life was in perfect agreement with the high character of his public career. He once told James Boswell that he had never in all his life been intoxicated by liquor. Few men of his day could have said that with truth,—least of all poor Boswell himself.