

ROBERT GLYNN (1719–1800), PHYSICIAN AT CAMBRIDGE*

by

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ROBERT GLYNN practised as a physician at Cambridge throughout the whole of the second half of the eighteenth century. The reputation of the university was then lower than at any time in its history and there were few students. Glynn was one of a small group of men who made an attempt to maintain the continuity of medical teaching at Cambridge. In his day he enjoyed an excellent reputation as a physician but was perhaps even more widely known as poet, controversialist and wit. He numbered among his patients many of the great figures of politics and literature, and their reminiscences and letters provide us with much of our knowledge of his life and his methods of practice.

BIRTH AND EDUCATION

Glynn was born at Kelland, near Bodmin in Cornwall, on 5 August 1719. He received his early education from a local curate and was then placed on the foundation at Eton (James, 1875). In 1737 he was admitted to King's College, Cambridge as a scholar and, having taken his B.A. in 1741 and M.A. in 1745, he proceeded M.D. in 1752. In 1763 he was elected F.R.C.P. Of his medical training we have no certain knowledge. To proceed to the M.D. the M.A. was required by the Statutes to keep two acts and one opponency and to spend seven years in medicine. Russell Plumtre, Regius Professor of Physic from 1741 to 1793, was active in practice but there is no surviving evidence that he took his teaching responsibilities equally seriously. William Gibson, Professor of Anatomy from 1746 to 1753, practised at Brigham, Yorkshire, and totally neglected his duties at Cambridge (Macalister, 1891).

It has been too readily assumed by historians that since these two pillars of the official medical establishment failed to fulfil their obligations, there was no medical teaching in Cambridge in the middle decades of the eighteenth century. During the decade 1740–49, when Glynn was a student of medicine, some forty men received all or the greater part of their medical training in Cambridge. The degree of M.B. was granted to thirty-nine men and the M.D. as the first qualification in medicine to three. However some of these graduates appear to have received much of their training elsewhere and are therefore excluded, whilst some of the men who worked only in Cambridge did not take a degree, for, except in London, they could practise without formal qualifications. Many of the men trained in Cambridge during this period later achieved distinction. The teaching they received has been discussed in some detail elsewhere (Rook, 1969).

The student received most of his teaching within his own college. After taking his Arts degree the medical student continued to work in his own college if there were

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active Medical Fellows; otherwise he would follow such teaching as was offered in other colleges or by the private lecturers,* who for forty years or more had to some extent made up for the deficiencies of the university authorities. There is evidence that the reputation of a Fellow attracted intending medical students to his college, but in 1740 there were so few students that it was possible for any man to attend the teaching in any college.

King's College at that time appears to have offered no special attractions to a medical student. Robert Banks, Professor of Anatomy from 1735 to 1746, resigned his Fellowship in 1741 and was much in London. William Battie (1704–1776), a pioneer in psychiatry, had been a Fellow of the College and had lectured and practised in Cambridge from 1730 to 1737 but he appears to have had no immediate successor. Glynn and William Biddle, also a scholar from Eton in 1737, and the only other medical student in the College, must have sought their medical teaching elsewhere.

The most important influence on Cambridge medicine at that time was undoubtedly William Heberden (1710–1801). Heberden entered St. John's College in 1724 and was an excellent classical scholar. He began to study medicine after his election to a Fellowship in 1730. In 1734 he first gave a course of lectures on *materia medica*, and repeated the course each year until he left Cambridge in 1748. The course of twenty-six to thirty-two lectures varied little from year to year. It was given in the theatre of the first Anatomy House, which was on the corner of Queens' Lane and Silver Street. The fee for the first course attended was two guineas, for the second one guinea. Subsequent courses might be attended gratis (Wordsworth, 1910). For some years he also gave a course entitled 'An introduction to the Study of Physic'. A transcript made by Erasmus Darwin of the lecture notes lists the books which Heberden recommended his pupils to read. Under the heading 'practical works' are the writings of Sydenham, Boerhaave, Turner (on dermatology) and Ramazzini, amongst many others.

Lectures on Anatomy were given in Cambridge in the early 1740s by Francis Sandys, a fashionable accoucheur in London, who subsequently retired to Potton, Bedfordshire. Sandys probably lectured at the time of the assizes when bodies of criminals were available for dissection.

The professor of chemistry from 1718 to 1756 was John Mickleburgh. His courses of lectures on chemistry covered *materia medica* and his audience included local surgeons and apothecaries as well as medical students. Biddle,** Glynn's contemporary at King's, attended the 1741 course; Glynn's name does not appear in the lists, but most of these have been lost.

John Martyn, F.R.S. (1699–1768) was invited in 1727 to give a course of lectures on botany in the Cambridge anatomy school. In 1733 he was appointed Professor of Botany, and he continued to lecture on botany and *materia medica* until his retirement in 1762 (Gorham, 1830). Martyn was not medically qualified but he certainly practised. In his diary the Rev. Benjamin Rogers, Rector of Carlton, himself an

* Private lecturers started their activities at Oxford and Cambridge at the end of the seventeenth century, as in London. Some men indeed lectured both in Cambridge and in London (e.g. George Rolfe) or in both universities (e.g. Francis Sandys).

** William Biddle, b. 1718. M.D. 1752. Practised as a physician at Richmond and later at Windsor.



Dr. Robert Glynn. An engraving by Facius of a drawing by the Rev. Thomas Kerrich.

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enthusiastic amateur physician, noted on 15 January 1732, 'Dr. Martin . . . is well acquainted with Dr. Mead, being a Physician whom Dr. Mead everywhere recommends' (Linnell, 1950).

Such then was the teaching available to Glynn. Formal clinical teaching had not at that time been developed in England. Students accompanied physicians on their visits to their patients and Glynn may have accompanied Heberden, Martyn or Plumtre, all of whom were in active practice.

CHARACTER AND PERSONALITY

Glynn was a man of great talents and strong personality, often obstinate in support of his opinions and sometimes aggressive and quick-tempered in argument. Yet he inspired affection in his contemporaries who praise him for his kindness and sagacity, and he was generous and humane in his practice. Of mercurial temperament and lively intelligence he was described by Lord Chatham as 'one of the cheerful and witty sons of Apollo' (Leigh, 1899). He soon acquired a reputation for eccentricity in dress and in manners. He usually wore a scarlet cloak and a three-cornered hat, and pattens in rainy weather, and carried a gold-headed cane; he could be seen pacing under Gibbs Building of King's College any evening at dusk as he took his daily walk (Pryme, 1870). He had no fixed hours for his meals but ate when he felt hungry, usually cold mutton. As a wit and an eccentric he was the subject of innumerable anecdotes, not all of them flattering, but he was influential and generally respected. Matthias in his satirical poem *The Precincts of Literature*, published in 1798, wrote 'While Granta hails (what need the Sage to name?) the lov'd Iambics on the banks of Cam', but felt it necessary to name the sage in a footnote, in which he refers to 'this great disinterested, virtuous and consummate scholar and physician'.

GLYNN'S PRACTICE

Glynn left Cambridge in 1748 and practised for a short time at Richmond, Surrey. The following year he was back in Cambridge, for Anthony Allen (Allen, n.d.) recorded 'Fellow and student in physic, which science he practised at Richmond in Surrey and now resides and practises the same at College, 1749–50, with good success.' He stayed in Cambridge for the rest of his life and continued to practise from his rooms in college. Glynn's practice was essentially that of a good general practitioner. As a physician and a university graduate he enjoyed higher social standing than the surgeons and apothecaries, and he numbered among his patients many of the important families of the town and county. He visited Ely once a week until the last years of his life and he was occasionally called in consultation over a wide area of the eastern counties. Many men whom he had known as undergraduates continued to seek his advice in person or by letter after they had left the University.

Glynn was a highly successful practitioner. He no doubt owed much of his success to his personal qualities but he deserves credit for his rational therapeutic approach which he derived from Heberden. Clement Carlyon* (Carlyon, 1836) in his autobiography tells us that his brother, who was Fellow and Tutor of Pembroke, called Dr. Glynn in 1794 to see a pupil. 'He proceeded very cautiously with the examination of the case, committing the answer to writing of nearly every question, without any

* Clement Carlyon (1777–1864), M.D. Friend of Coleridge. Practised for many years in Truro.

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passing hints. At length after conning over his notes he proceeded to prescribe bark'. Glynn was well known for the simplicity of his prescriptions. He seldom if ever resorted to bleeding and held opium in horror. Carlyon considered that 'he brought a sound judgment to bear upon a good code of medical principles; and happily so: for he pertinaciously adhered to his own views and was not to be put out of his way by Cullen or any other Medical Reference'. An example of his obstinacy was his refusal ever to accept Heberden's view that gout was hereditary. To one undergraduate who claimed to have inherited the gout he is said to have observed (Nicholls, 1815) 'You may as well tell me you have a broken leg by inheritance. You must drink your double hogshead first'. In those days when dinners were heavy and interminable and port drinking so often excessive, the dietary restrictions which he advocated must have been as beneficial as his prescriptions. Many anecdotes ascribe to him a fondness for mustard plasters, especially in malaria; this appears to be one of the few therapeutic eccentricities of a critical and rational physician. Dr. Carlyon who admired him so sincerely wrote in 1837 'Glynn and Heberden were alike clinical men' and added a footnote to explain his use of this term—'whilst we cannot think too highly of the achievements of modern science there is reason to feel that the facility with which theoretical knowledge is at present acquired may lead to dangerous prescription in practice, whilst it will increase the difficulty of discriminating between the ready discourser and the safe practitioners'.

Glynn was believed to have made a considerable fortune out of his practice. He certainly left £6,000 to his College and £5,000 to his friend and executor the Rev. Thomas Kerrich* as well as other bequests. We unfortunately know very little about the fees he charged. In 1775 he received two guineas for a visit to a Mrs. Wale of Shelford and he appears normally to have charged one guinea for a consultation in Cambridge. His fees to undergraduates may well have been more modest. He always preferred to collect them through the tutors. A guinea was the standard physician's fee but Glynn had a reputation for generosity. He refused to charge the clergy, Etonians or Cornishmen, or the many fen-dwellers whose malaria he was so often called to treat.

Only a few of his many interesting patients can be mentioned. He certainly looked after William Pitt *the younger* when he was an undergraduate of Pembroke in 1775. Details of the illness appear not to have survived but Pitt's gratitude was lasting for in 1793 he offered Glynn the Regius Professorship.

In 1771 Glynn attended Thomas Gray in his last illness. On 26 July James Brown the Master of Pembroke wrote to Wharton 'I am writing to you in Mr. Gray's room and he is ill upon the couch and unable to write to you himself' (Toynbee and Whibley, 1935). Three days later he wrote 'Professor Plumtre and Dr. Glynn give us no hope of his recovery; they both attend him and come together three or four times a day. They say it is gout in the stomach and they cannot get the better of it.' Later that day Dr. Gisborne** of London was called in but Gray died the following day (Ketton Cremer, 1955).

* Rev. Thomas Kerrich, M.A., University Librarian; he was also an accomplished artist, and is responsible for the only surviving portrait of Glynn.

** Thomas Gisborne, d. 1806; P.R.C.P.

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For many years Glynn and the Regius Professor seem regularly to have called in each other in consultation in all severe illness and then to have attended the patient jointly until he recovered or died. If the patient was sufficiently eminent, a further opinion from London was often sought, usually Heberden's pupil Gisborne but sometimes William Battie (1704–1776) who was like Glynn a Kingsman, though fifteen years his senior. Battie was called in 1773 to see Lord Orford, Horace Walpole's nephew who was dangerously ill at Chesterford under the care of Glynn and Plumtre.

The Rev. William Cole of Milton, whose diaries and correspondence add so much to our knowledge of late eighteenth-century Cambridge, was often a patient of Glynn's. Cole was a short, bulky man, weighing at the age of sixty well over fifteen stone, but the illnesses he records are relatively minor and are of interest mainly for the evidence they provide that Glynn did the work of a general practitioner. 'March 12 1779—Being ill with a St. Anthony's fire eruption about my shoulder and gravity humors flying about me I sent for Dr. Glynn for his advice' (Palmer, 1935). Glynn prescribed Huxham's bark in a large glass of camomile tea and no doubt urged greater moderation on Cole. Glynn always refused to take a fee from Cole but in 1779 accepted a quarto illuminated manuscript on vellum (British Museum, Cole MSS. 5854).

Glynn's relationships with his colleagues seem to have been amicable despite his impetuosity and his habit of speaking his mind freely at all times. He often worked with the surgeons and particularly valued Thackeray's* opinion. They jointly cared for Gray during an earlier illness in 1764. Collignon, professor of anatomy 1752–85, was in practice as a physician but was not greatly esteemed and Plumtre owed his practice largely to his appointment, yet no quarrels between these three physicians are recorded and they would hardly have escaped the notice of the observant and inquisitive Cole. In 1766 when Addenbrooke's Hospital was opened, Glynn, Plumtre and Collignon were appointed physicians in that order of seniority.

Glynn's association with Addenbrooke's Hospital lasted only seven years. At the First Weekly Board on 8 September 1766 he was appointed a member of the Committee to buy drugs and furnish the apothecary's shop. Two weeks later he was appointed Physician. His attendances at weekly boards after the end of 1766 were rare and irregular and he appears to have taken little interest in the administration of the hospital but there is no suggestion that he failed to attend the patients, although few were admitted under his care. In 1773 a message was delivered to the weekly board 'acquainting them of Dr. Glynn's intention to decline any further attendance at this hospital as physician, his health not permitting him to continue the same.' No further information concerning the motives for Glynn's resignation has been discovered. If his health was really failing it soon recovered for he remained in active practice until a few weeks before his death twenty-seven years later at the age of eighty-one.

MEDICAL TEACHING

Soon after his return to Cambridge in 1749 Glynn began to give annual courses of lectures very similar in content to those of Heberden. The first course of which we have any record began in March 1751 'On the Animal Oeconomy, On the Operations

* Thomas Thackeray (1736–1806), surgeon at Cambridge; great-uncle of W. M. Thackeray.

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of Medicine and on the History of Diseases'. In 1752 he lectured on 'The Structure and Use of the Principal organs of the Human Body'. The lectures were given in the Anatomy Schools. There is no record that Glynn gave any further course, nor have any attendance lists survived. There were fewer than ten medical students in residence in any year between 1750 and 1770.

When Plumtre died in 1793, Pitt offered Glynn the Regius Professorship of Physic, but he declined it on the grounds of age.

LITERARY INTERESTS

Early in his career Glynn acquired a considerable reputation for his poem *The Day of Judgment*, which won him the Seatonian prize in 1757. This prize was established in 1738 by a bequest according to the terms of which 'the subject to be given out shall for the first year be one or other of the Perfections or Attributes of the Supreme Being and so the succeeding Years till the subject is exhausted: and afterwards the subject shall be either Death, Judgment, Heaven, Hell, Purity of Heart or whatsoever else shall be judged to be most conducive to the honour of the Supreme Being and Recommendation of Virtue.' Glynn is said to have entered his poem only because Bally, whom he disliked, had won the prize for four years in succession (Gunning, 1855). *The Day of Judgment* now seems turgid and uninspired but it made a great impression on Glynn's contemporaries. The Cambridge University Press brought out a fifth edition in 1763, and as late as 1780 it was reprinted by Francis Hodson and sold for sixpence. Carlyon (1836) wrote 'There are some compositions which we never tire of reading—some subjects to which we cannot recur too often nor study too intently. To this absorbing interest Glynn's Seatonian Poem may well lay claim'.

It was Glynn's literary activities rather than his work as a physician which attracted the attention of the fashionable world and ensured the survival of so many particulars of his life and character in the papers of Nichols (1831) and in the correspondence of his contemporaries (Walpole, 1937). It was his literary reputation which led to his involvement in the Chatterton affair, in which his actions are a tribute to his good nature rather than to his literary judgment.

THOMAS CHATTERTON

Thomas Chatterton was born in 1752 and in 1765 was apprenticed to an attorney in Bristol. Whilst still at school he began to fabricate poems, pedigrees and other documents, which he claimed were copies of originals in his possession. His use of archaic style and language was sufficiently skilful for his productions to deceive many people in Bristol. His later fabrications included poems which he attributed to one Thomas Rowley, a fifteenth-century monk. He offered some of the poems to Dodsley, the publisher, and another fabrication he sent to Horace Walpole, who was at first deceived. He went to London in 1770, and a few months later he committed suicide.

The controversy as to the authorship of the Rowley poems and the identity of Rowley occupied the literary world for many years after Chatterton's death. The Rev. Michael Lort* of Cambridge paid the first of several visits to Bristol in 1771

* Michael Lort (1725–1790), F.R.S.; Antiquary, Regius Professor of Greek.

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and by 1773 had made up his mind that Chatterton was the author of Rowley (Meyerstein, 1930). In 1777 Tyrwhitt† convincingly presented the evidence that Chatterton was indeed Rowley. The mystery had therefore already been solved to the satisfaction of sound critics before the controversy reached its most vigorous stage. Glynn's active intervention in the dispute appears to have begun in 1778, when he visited Bristol and was introduced to George Catcutt, the pewterer, who was convinced of the authenticity of Rowley. Glynn too was soon convinced. 'His own simplicity Charity and humanity in heart and purpose made him incapable of weighing the evidence impartially.' (Carlyon, 1836). Glynn therefore assisted Jacob Bryant (1715–1804) to prepare that monument of perverted ingenuity the *Observations* (1781), a volume of 602 pages which purports to prove the existence of Rowley and to vindicate the honour of Chatterton. Bryant was supported by Jeremiah Milles (1714–1784), Dean of Exeter, President of the Society of Antiquaries, who is described by Coleridge (cit. Meyerstein, 1930) as 'a priest, who though only a Dean, in dulness and malignity was most episcopally eminent'.

Glynn continued to support the Rowley cause in any way possible. He encouraged Barrett, a surgeon who believed in Rowley, to publish in 1789 his history of Bristol in which Rowley was defended. Glynn gave money to Chatterton's mother and sister and left a legacy to Catcutt.

To many Glynn's obstinate refusal to accept the evidence must have seemed yet another eccentricity. Egerton Brydges (1834) says 'he would hear no contradiction and fell into a fury at an expression of doubt'. Horace Walpole in 1792 described him as 'an old doting physician and Chattertonian at Cambridge.' In speculating on the motives behind Glynn's inflexible attitude we must remember that Gray, who knew him well, said of him, that 'a liberal hand and open heart were his invariable characteristics'. (cit. Meyerstein, 1930).

CONCLUSION

Glynn* died on 8 February 1800. At his own request he was buried by torchlight in the College Chapel at a small private ceremony. The Sunday after the funeral (Carlyon, 1836) the Vice-Chancellor, Dr. Mansell,** Master of Trinity College, 'thought it right to make the respect due to the Memory of so excellent a man by proceeding in mourning from Trinity College to St. Mary's Church . . . attended by the other Heads of Houses, the Noblemen of the University and a numerous body of Masters of Arts'. The *Cambridge Chronicle* for 8 March 1801 reported the service and commented 'This was uncommon and unprecedented. So also was the character of this invaluable man himself, whose residence in the University of upwards of 60 years, was a life of unwearied and uninterrupted benevolence; and which few of those who read this account have not felt exemplified either in their friends, their relatives, or themselves.'

Glynn's other obituarists wrote of him with equal affection and respect and his skill

† Thomas Tyrwhitt (1720–1786), Clerk of the House of Commons, classical scholar and literary critic.

* Glynn assumed the additional name of Clobery and letters to him are sometimes addressed Dr. R. Glynn Clobery, but he appears never to have used the name; he invariably signed Robert Glynn.

** William Lort Mansell (1753–1820), subsequently Bishop of Bristol.

and his generosity were a legend in Cambridge for a generation after his death.

Glynn is perhaps representative of many hundreds of country physicians of whose lives little is known, because they achieved no literary fame to keep their memories alive. In many ways he personifies the good physician of the age before his own. Sydenham believed that sound practice depended solely on accurate observation of the phenomena of disease and on cautious empiricism in treatment, modified in the light of experience. Boerhaave endorsed these principles but insisted on the value of applying to the study of the body new sciences, new techniques and new instruments. Sydenham had no confidence in the microscope or in the experimental approach to medical problems.

Boerhaave's work had some influence on the teaching of theoretical medicine in Cambridge during the second half of the eighteenth century, as judged by the content of lectures, but it is doubtful whether it had any real influence on practice, perhaps because it had as yet led to no fundamental advance in therapeutics. The therapeutic repertoire of the country physician was essentially the same in 1660, in 1760 and even fifty years later. Most of the same empirical procedures were employed by John Symcotts in 1660 (Poynter and Bishop, 1951) and by Samuel Allvey (Rook, 1960) practising in almost the same area a century later, although the alleged rational basis for their prescriptions had changed radically. It is also interesting to observe that Allvey, an Edinburgh graduate and thus more directly influenced by Boerhaave, differed little from Glynn in his approach to treatment. They would probably both have approved Carlyon's warning, already quoted, that 'theoretical knowledge may lead to dangerous prescription in practice'. The practical physician's mistrust of the scientist is no modern phenomenon.

SUMMARY

Robert Glynn (1719–1800), a pupil of William Heberden, received all his medical training at Cambridge, where he practised successfully as a physician throughout the second half of the eighteenth century.

His reputation as a poet and a wit brought him as friends and often also as patients many of the literary and political personalities of the day. Their correspondence and memoirs have contributed to our knowledge of the life and methods of practice of a physician in a country town.

Glynn held no University appointment, but he was one of the small group of private teachers of medicine at Cambridge who maintained the continuity of the medical school, which continued to attract pupils some of whom later achieved distinction, at a period when the Professors of Medicine and Anatomy often neglected their duties.

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