

OBITUARY

SIR ROBERT WOODS

WHEN a great man dies there is a sense of loss to humanity. When a great physician or surgeon passes away, to this sense of loss there is added a feeling of apprehension. One of humanity's defenders is dead: the walls are weakened at their gate.

This is the way I feel now that Sir Robert Woods is gone. He operated on me three times and I felt that I might disregard disease to a great extent while he was there to tackle it, such was the confidence he could inspire in his patients. When one comes to analyse it, this confidence arose from the assurance with which he went about his work. He began an operation seeing through it all step by step to the successful end. It was a task of which he was the complete master. And Master of Surgery indeed he was had that title never have been conferred on him by the University to which he brought so many honours. Confident thoroughness in a surgeon arises from character. A man must be sincere to the core and free from all doubts or questionings which upset the soul. This was Robert Woods, a calm and certain man.

His technique was his own. He was an inventor of many surgical procedures, outcomes of thinking long about the alleviation of pain in suffering humanity. And, as the second of the four wonderful epigrams with which the master of all medicine sums up experience, tells us, technique is difficult to perfect, so short is life.

“The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne.”

This manual skill may appear to the layman in some statues he carved. He was a hand-worker, an artist and artificer as every surgeon is or should be. He was the best indirect laryngoscopist I ever met. I remember a case of a singer with a bass voice, a corpulent fellow with a larynx far down in the neck, concealed by an omega-shaped epiglottis and rendered inaccessible by a lively reflex. There was a node on one of the chords. Nothing short of a general anæsthetic would have enabled me to reach the hypertrophy. I sent him to Sir Robert with apologies for asking him to do my repairs. The patient returned with enough gratitude for both of us.

He gave much thought to Medicine. He accepted none of the things that most of us take for granted. I remember an interesting discussion we had about the capacity of Chinese workmen for resisting fatigue. He described the long hours some of those

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engaged in mining tin spent, up to their waists in water. After sixteen hours' work on end they would come into some den, smoke a few pipes of opium and go off refreshed for another lengthy spell of labour. He did not accept the thoughtless opinion that opium is altogether bad, an opinion which is largely the result of the propaganda of those who were interested in taking the opium trade from the Chinese and substituting supplies from India. So far was he from accepting opinions because they were popular that he advised me to take to smoking opium when I grew old. "There is no harm in an opium pipe. It is a great solace to millions of people, and it would be most suitable for men in their declining years." I will remember that advice when I accept the decline.

He was, as I have said, an original thinker; but he was more than that, he was a philosopher in medical subjects. His loss is all the greater in a period when Medicine is threatened by a form of Communism which seeks to merge the patient, idiosyncrasies and all, into one type and to prescribe for him en masse with mass-produced medicines. Such abolition of the individual he would never have tolerated. And while I am discussing the present tendency to ignore the individual and to supply medicines through the agency of advertisements, without seeing the patient, I will repeat a remark I heard some days ago from a friend: "English surgeons are very good," he said. "They are much better than the doctors. Perhaps it is that the surgeon has to take account of the patient's personality and all his peculiarities." There may be something in what he thought.

Ireland has suffered a severe loss lately in the death of its supreme artist W. B. Yeats. His death was preceded by that of Sir Robert Woods who like Yeats in his own way was an artist, and as such was endowed with unageing intellect, and like Yeats leaves you with a feeling that, though he should have died hereafter, it was in some way a kind of triumph to have been contemporary with such a man.

OLIVER ST. J. GOGARTY.