OBITUARY.

SIR RICHARD THORNE THORNE, K.C.B., F.R.S.*

On December 18th, 1899, the Public Health Service sustained a heavy loss by the sudden death of Sir Richard Thorne, the Medical Officer of the Local Government Board. Embolism, consequent on phlebitis, was the cause of this sudden removal from our midst of one whose name had long been closely associated with sanitary administration and sanitary progress.

Sir Richard Thorne was born at Leamington on October 13th, 1841. In his earlier school-days he was for a time at Neuwied, in Prussia, and afterwards at the Lycée St. Louis, Paris, for a considerable period. The thorough knowledge of the French language that he acquired at the latter institution stood him in good stead in relation with certain of his official duties in later life. His school education was completed at Mill Hill; whence he went to St. Bartholomew's Hospital to take up the study of medicine. He graduated in medicine at London University in 1866, obtaining first-class honours in medicine and in obstetric medicine. After holding the usual minor appointments at his hospital, he was appointed physician to the Royal Hospital for Diseases of the Chest, and also assistant-physician to the London Fever Hospital.

Soon after this, he took the first step in the path which he was to follow with such distinction to himself and advantage to his country, by becoming associated with the Medical Department of the Privy Council, on whose behalf he conducted several inquiries into public health matters. This occasional employment was followed by his appointment as a medical inspector under the Privy Council in 1870; and when, in 1871, the Local Government Board was constituted, Sir Richard Thorne (then Dr. Thorne) became a Medical Inspector under that body. From that time to the day of his death he remained in the service of the Local Government Board: attaining, in 1892, the high and responsible position of Medical Officer to the Board, in succession to the late Sir George Buchanan.

* A portrait of Sir Richard Thorne will be found in the beginning of this volume.
Sir Richard Thorne was so gifted that success would have attended him in any one of the several careers open to members of the medical profession. But the most striking, perhaps, among his many gifts was his singular ability as an administrator; and by a happy choice or a fortunate accident, in joining the medical staff of the Local Government Board, he associated himself with a service in which such a gift is of pre-eminent value.

In his discharge of the varied duties of an Inspector of the Board, he disclosed power of careful research, rapid grasp of the essential points in complex questions, and remarkable judgment and tact in his dealings with local authorities and their officers. His reports to the Board were models of what such reports should be: omitting nothing essential, yet brief and lucid. Among the most noteworthy of these reports is that, issued by the Local Government Board in 1882, on the use and influence of hospitals for infectious diseases; which still ranks as a standard work on this subject.

In due course, Sir Richard Thorne was promoted from the Inspectorate to the position of an Assistant Medical Officer to the Board; and, in 1892, he became the Medical Officer. In this post, full scope was afforded to his genius for administration and organisation. During his period of office, not only had he to discharge the responsible duties ordinarily devolving upon the head of the Medical Department of the Local Government Board, but he had also to organise a scheme of defence against the threatened invasion of this country by cholera in 1892 and 1893; and again, in later years, against a like danger from plague. How promptly and how well this work was done is matter of common knowledge. And, indeed, this work, known to all, is typical of all that Sir Richard Thorne did. Shrewd, ready, and practical, he dealt with complex and far-reaching problems with astonishing rapidity, and with exact appreciation of the course of action to pursue. He knew the measure of each member of the staff that worked under him, and no complexity of detail in any question ever lessened his grasp of the real issue. These gifts he possessed in common with all good administrators; but, in the almost intuitive readiness with which he reached a sound conclusion, he had a quality higher and rarer: a quality seldom found even in the ranks of good administrators. A man so gifted may justly be considered as more than talented: he has the inspiration of genius.

Another duty, beyond the routine work of his position,
that fell to Sir Richard Thorne was that of acting as British delegate to several international conferences convened for the consideration of international measures of precaution against cholera, plague, and yellow fever. In this capacity he attended the International Conference at Rome in 1885, that at Venice in 1892, that at Dresden in 1893, that at Paris in 1894, and that at Venice in 1897. In the proceedings at these conferences the language spoken was French, and Sir Richard Thorne's familiarity with this tongue, combined with his thorough knowledge of the subjects discussed, rendered his services peculiarly valuable. It was during the period embraced by these conferences that the majority of the European Powers abandoned quarantine in favour of measures less harmful to commerce, and more in accordance with the principles of modern hygiene. No small share in this happy result was due to Sir Richard Thorne's tact, ability, and perseverance; and thus he aided in conferring a double benefit on the nation which is at once the chief commercial country in the world and the pioneer of sanitary progress.

Notwithstanding his many duties at the Local Government Board, Sir Richard Thorne found time for other work. He was lecturer on hygiene at St. Bartholomew's Hospital, and during many years the students of that institution benefited by his gifts of clear and pithy exposition. In 1891 he delivered the Milroy Lectures, selecting as his subject "Diphtheria: its Natural History and Prevention." As Harben Lecturer in 1898, he dealt with the administrative control of tuberculosis. He was a member of the Royal Commission on Tuberculosis appointed in 1896, and of the Royal Commission on Sewage Disposal, appointed in 1898. He was also Crown member of the General Medical Council. On all these three bodies he did good public service, and by all his judgment was held in high esteem. He was a member of many public health societies at home and abroad. His connection with the Epidemiological Society dates back as far as 1871, in which year he became a member. He was Treasurer of the Society from 1880 to 1886, and was its President from 1886 to 1888.

Many honours and distinctions were conferred upon Sir Richard Thorne. In 1890 he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society. In 1893 the Stewart Prize was conferred upon him. In 1898 he was made an honorary LL.D. of the University of Edinburgh, an honorary D.Sc. of the Royal University of Ireland, and an honorary Fellow of
the Royal College of Physicians in Ireland. In 1892 the distinction of Companion of the Most Honourable Order of the Bath was bestowed upon him; and in 1897 he was promoted to be a Knight Commander of the same Order.

No one merited these distinctions better than Sir Richard Thorne; and, regarded as tributes to his ability, they are grateful testimony to those who knew him that his merits did not pass unrecognised. But in their hearts he has a higher tribute: the tribute of affection and esteem, given with full knowledge of the man and of his work.

He died in the prime of his intellectual vigour; and his country is the poorer by the loss of a faithful and most able servant.

"I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course." Sir Richard Thorne might well have said the first: would that he had lived to say the second in the fuller sense.

T. T.