Our Sanitary Laws: How they are Administered. A contribution to the discussion of the question of public health.

By Robert Kirkwood, M.D. Glasgow: James Maclehose & Sons, St. Vincent Street.

This pamphlet is a striking and forcibly written expose of the lamentable incompetence of our Scottish Health Administrative Authorities to deal with insanitary conditions. The exciting cause of the two years' struggle with the sanitary authorities detailed in this pamphlet was a case of typhoid fever which Dr. Kirkwood was called to attend in a dairy farm. This dairy farm formed one of the principal sources of the milk supply of a fashionable watering-place on the Clyde. He found the patient lying in a small room opening off the kitchen, which again opened directly into the scullery, milkhouse, and byre. The excreta of this patient were being carried through the kitchen and scullery, and thrown into the end of the byre next the milk-house. "Tons of manure, and of thick, black, putrid liquid" were lying under the walls of the milk-house and byre. This byre contained 20 cows, and gave an average of only 300 cubic feet of air space for each cow. An outside privy was so placed that human excreta were carried into the drinking-trough for the cattle. The water used by the human inhabitants was got from a well in an adjoining field which was frequently under cultivation and liberally manured, so that the water was exposed to periodical contamination with animal excrement.

With all these insanitary conditions, we are not surprised to learn that fever had repeatedly attacked the inmates of this farm, and that some of the previous cases had been cases of typhoid. It is significant, in view of what we now know of the origination of typhoid epidemics in dairy
farms, that "on one occasion, when several members of the family were ill of fever,—one of the cases marked by alarming haemorrhage from the bowels—a great many people, respectable people they were, were also ill of fever in the town, and some died." With the knowledge of the serious consequences which have so frequently resulted from a milk supply contaminated with typhoid excreta, Dr. Kirkwood, with the most praiseworthy zeal, took every possible precaution to prevent his patient from becoming a source of danger to the community. He then set himself to move the local health authority to have the disgraceful sanitary defects of this farm-house remedied. In numerous letters, and in most forcible language, Dr. Kirkwood set forth to these authorities the details of these flagrant nuisances and the dangers which might at any time result, not only to the health of the inhabitants of the farm, but also to the public health. The correspondence, as detailed in the pamphlet, is most interesting and instructive. After 18 months, during which he gave the sanitary authorities no peace, he sums up the results of his efforts as follows:—

"In October, 1879, a complaint is made to the Local Authority at Ayr—the Commissioners of Supply for the county. It sends an inspector. The inspector reports without examining the nuisance. His report is supplemented by a report giving details of the nuisance. The Local Authority does nothing. It is reported to the Board in Edinburgh. The Board reports the Local Authority to Her Majesty's Privy Council. The Privy Council reminds the Local Authority of the circumstances and of the requirements of the Dairies Order. The ultimate Authority in the country has been reached and moved. But the end is not yet. The Local Authority is quite equal to the occasion. While its clerk is reading to it the reminder of Her Majesty's Privy Council in London the Local Authority sits at Ayr, as impassive and motionless as did the Sphinx at Cairo to the bellowings of Admiral Seymour's guns at Alexandria. It does nothing. Then the Board at Edinburgh is moved to put its medical officer in motion. The medical officer visits and makes suggestions to the proprietor and his factor. The proprietor and his factor listen, approve, and promise. Thereafter the medical officer reports to the Board. But the thing will neither end nor mend. Again the Board instructs its medical officer. He visits anew, and after a vain search for the fruit of the promises of the proprietor and his factor he again reports. But grown wiser now, he this time makes
his suggestions to the Board. These are to be carried out with the least possible delay. And now, a year and a-half after, the sanitary inspector reports to the Local Authority here that he has visited—and finds things there very much as they were, the most clamant defect, and the most objectionable arrangement, according to Dr. Littlejohn’s report, being still unremedied. Such is the result of the united efforts of all the authorities in the kingdom to remedy a proven and flagrant nuisance in a farm-house in a small country parish. Will any one maintain, that to have achieved such a noteworthy result, indicates on the part of the Board a high sense of the importance of the trust committed to it? or, that such paltering as is here shown is not destructive of all confidence in the Board as an administrator of the public health? With such an administration is it strange that the Public Health Act should have proved a failure in Scotland?"

The case of the farm, which gave rise to so much fruitless effort on the part of the author of this pamphlet and the health authorities of the country, is interesting to the community at large, not on account of its rarity, but because it is a type of the insanitary state of most of the old farm steadings in the West of Scotland. The difficulty and opposition which Dr. Kirkwood met with are met with in almost every country district in Scotland, when any effort is put forth by an individual in the interests of the public health. The health authorities in rural districts were originally constituted for poor law administration, and have long shown themselves to be hopelessly incompetent to deal effectively with sanitary matters. What Mr. Chadwick said of the Poor Law Boards of England before the reform of 1834 may now be said of the parochial authorities of Scotland in their capacity as public health administrators. "The ignorance, the injustice, and the waste of this local government and its expense, exceed that of almost any existing form of Government known," only here the waste is not of the money but of the health and lives of the people, and the money value of the lives so lost is incalculable. A sweeping reform must take place in our methods of administration, and fresh powers must be placed in the hands of competent administrators to enable them to compel the summary removal of the flagrant insanitary conditions of our farms and dairies which the numerous milk epidemics of the past ten years have disclosed. We hope that Dr. Kirkwood’s pamphlet will be widely read. He deserves great credit for his persevering efforts in the cause of sanitary reform.