This year is the bicentenary of the birth of Sir John Forbes, the distinguished nineteenth century Scottish physician who, by his translation of R. T. H. Laennec’s classic treatise, *De L’Auscultation Médiatè*, introduced to physicians in the English-speaking world Laennec’s views on diseases of the chest and his innovative diagnostic technique of auscultation, using his invention, the stethoscope.

John Forbes was born on 17th December 1787 at Cuttlebrae, in the parish of Ruthven, in Banffshire, Scotland, the fourth son of Alexander Forbes, a farmer. Forbes attended the parish school, Fordyce Academy, for three years, then spent one year at the grammar school in Aberdeen, followed by two years at Marischal College. Having decided on a medical career, he was apprenticed in 1805 to two Banff physicians, Dr James Williamson and Dr William Smith, and then proceeded to Edinburgh University where he obtained the diploma of the College of Surgeons in 1807.

**Royal Navy (1807–1816)**

In 1807, during the Napoleonic War, Forbes entered the Royal Navy in which he served for the next nine years. Commencing as Assistant Surgeon, he was promoted after 20 months to Surgeon, allegedly for his meteorological studies in the West Indies. In addition to his medical duties, he served as flag officer and secretary to Admiral P. Durham in the West Indies and the North Sea. In 1811, he had a short spell at the Haslar. Forbes was a strong swimmer and, in 1813, while serving with the home squadron, he dived into the waters of the River Elbe in Germany to save a drowning ship-mate; the current was so rapid that he was carried, with his burden, for two miles before they were rescued. It was during quiet periods at sea that Forbes studied and mastered the French, German and Italian languages, which he was to put to good use later in his career.

Forbes was demobilised in 1816 and returned to Edinburgh University, where he completed the MD in 1817, with a thesis entitled *De mentis exercitatore et felicitate exinde derivanda*. He also attended lectures by Robert Jameson (1773–1853), Professor of Natural History and Geology, who was responsible for stimulating Forbes’ interest in geology.

**Penzance (1817–1822)**

In 1817, Forbes started medical practice in Cornwall, where he was successor to (Sir) John Ayrton Paris (1785–1856) as physician to the Penzance Dispensary and Humane Society. Paris (who later became a successful London physician and was President of the Royal College of Physicians of London for 12 years, 1844–1856) was a Cambridge graduate but had also studied in Edinburgh and it was his approach to Professor Jameson which led to the choice of Forbes for the Penzance post. Forbes may have suffered from some chronic respiratory complaint and this could have been an additional reason for his decision to move to the milder climate of Cornwall.

Forbes was soon deeply immersed in his medical activities at the Penzance dispensary in Chapel Street (the house still stands). Cornwall in the early nineteenth century was one of the most important European mining areas for tin and copper. Chest disease was rife among the miners and Forbes took a special interest in ‘miners’ consumption’, of which he held the strange view that it was caused by the miners climbing their ladders too energetically.

Forbes’ predecessor, John Ayrton Paris, was also a geological enthusiast and chiefly responsible for the foundation in 1814 of the Royal Geological Society of Cornwall, of which he was Secretary. This society had considerable prestige, being under the Royal patronage of the Prince of Wales, who was also the Duke of Cornwall (later the Prince Regent and then George IV). Forbes succeeded Paris as Secretary and played an active role in the proceedings of the Society. In addition, Forbes founded the Penzance Library of which he became Honorary Librarian. While in Penzance, he married the daughter of a Mr John Burgh and one son was born to them.

The most memorable activity in which Forbes became involved in Penzance was his historic English translation in 1821 of R. T. H. Laennec’s *De L’Auscultation Médiatè*. The story of how this came about will be described later.

**Chichester (1822–1840)**

In 1822, Forbes decided to move to Chichester in Sussex, where he followed (Sir) William Burnett (1779–1861) (who later became Physician General to the Royal Navy) as Physician to the Chichester Public Dispensary, originally founded in 1784. Largely on Forbes’ initiative, the Chichester Infirmary (the forerunner of the present St...
Richard’s Hospital) was founded in 1824 and opened for its first patient in 1826. Forbes became Senior Physician to the Infirmary and remained so for the next 14 years. His consulting practice in Chichester proved highly successful. He also became involved in the Provincial Medical and Surgical Association, which was founded by Sir Charles Hastings (1794–1866) in 1832 and in 1856 became the British Medical Association.

Forbes became increasingly occupied in medical editing and journalism. Together with his friend John Conolly (1794–1866), a pioneer of the humane care of the insane, and Alexander Tweedie (1794–1884), Forbes edited the highly successful *Cyclopaedia of Practical Medicine* (1822–35) containing articles by 67 contributors. It appeared in monthly parts and was later published in four volumes. Forbes himself compiled the bibliography which was published in 1835 as a separate work and is now regarded as probably the first serious attempt at a subject classification of medical literature.

In 1836, Forbes launched the *British and Foreign Medical Review*, a quarterly journal which he edited until 1847, receiving help from John Conolly during the first four years. It became the leading British medical journal and circulated widely in Europe and North America. In 1848 it amalgamated with the *Medico-Chirurgical Review* to become the *British and Foreign Medico-Chirurgical Review* which lasted until 1877. Forbes’ medical writings and journalism had by now established him as an important figure in the medical world. To facilitate his editing of the Review, he considered moving to London. He had in 1832 been appointed Physician-in-Ordinary to the Duke of Cambridge, who finally persuaded Forbes to foresake his provincial practice in Chichester and settle in the capital city.

**London (1840–1867)**

Shortly after his arrival in London, Forbes was in 1841 appointed Physician to Albert, the Prince Consort and to Queen Victoria’s Household. When the Hospital for Consumption and Diseases of the Chest, Brompton, was founded in 1842, Forbes was appointed one of its first two Consulting Physicians—the other being C. J. B. Williams (1805–1889) who at one time had been a personal pupil of Laennec.

Forbes was now at the acme of his career (Fig. 1), receiving many honours, both at home and abroad. In 1829, he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society and in 1845 he became a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians of London. In 1852, Oxford University awarded him an honorary degree of Doctor of Civil Law and in 1853, Queen Victoria knighted him for his services to the Royal Court.

Forbes’ reputation and consulting practice suffered a setback following the controversy over his alleged espousal of the cause of the homeopathic system, introduced by Samuel Hahnemann (1755–1843). Forbes was concerned about the polypharmacy practised by the profession in his day and saw in homeopathy a possible means of curbing excessive drug prescribing. In an article he wrote in his Review in 1846, entitled *Homeopathy, Allopathy and *Young Physic*, he did not unreservedly advocate homoeopathy but attempted to draw attention to some of its virtues, although realising that much of its success could be ascribed to *vis medicatrix naturae*. Forbes kept an open mind on the various medical cults then prevailing, but had no hesitation in exposing the bogus or humbug.

**Final years (1857–1861)**

Forbes’ wife died in 1851. He travelled frequently in Europe and wrote accounts of some of these journeys. He also published some minor works on general and philosophical topics related to medicine.

In 1857, Forbes began to suffer giddy attacks and two years later was forced to abandon his practice. He retired to stay with his son at Whitchurch, near Reading, Berkshire, where he died peacefully on 13th November, 1861, aged 74.

**Friendship of Forbes and Sir James Clark (1788–1870)**

Forbes and Sir James Clark were life-long friends, Forbes being one year older than Clark. Both came from Banff,
Fig. 2. A Treatise on the Diseases of the Chest (1821). Title page.

Physician, Mathew Baillie (1761–1823) and, by condensing the material, reduced the size from two volumes to one volume. He also rearranged Laennec's text, separating Pathology from Diagnosis and made various changes in the terminology of auscultatory sounds—changes which he introduced with the best of intention but which have since been criticised.

Forbes' first edition proved to be a great success. In a letter to Laennec on 13th September 1823, Forbes informed him that the 500 copies of his first edition were sold out. Forbes thereupon decided to publish a further work to include his own personal experience of the new diagnostic techniques. Forbes' Original Cases . . . (Fig. 3) appeared in 1824 and was dedicated to Laennec. It consisted of four parts:

1. The first full English translation of Invenit Novum (1761), the original work on percussion by Leopold Auenbrugger (1722–1809) together with a collection of the most important commentaries by Jean Nicolas Corvisart (1755–1821) in his French translation, La Methode Nouvelle (1806).

2. A brief outline of auscultation extracted from Laennec’s De L'Auscultation Médiante (1819).

3. Original cases (39 in number) seen at Chichester, with anatomical dissections illustrating the application of the stethoscope and percussion to diseases of the chest.

4. An appendix consisting of the outline of an essay, On the Physical Diagnostics of the Chest, translated and abridged from Des Diverses Méthodes d'Exploration de la Poitrine et de leur application au Diagnostic de ses Maladies. (1824) by Victor Collin, a Paris physician.

Laennec's improved second edition of De L'Auscultation Médiante appeared in 1826 and Forbes translated this and published his own second edition in 1827, dedicated where they attended the parish school together and both qualified at Edinburgh, served in the Royal Navy and obtained their MD at Edinburgh University in 1817. In the preface to his Medical Notes on Climate . . . (1820), Clark addressed himself to Forbes thus:

You must allow me the additional gratification of acknowledging how highly I prize the friendship which has so long united us, a friendship which commenced with our school-boy days, cheered us through our mature studies, and which will continue, I trust, to be in future, as heretofore, esteemed by us both, as none of the least blessings of this life.

When they married, each had a son whom he named after his friend—Forbes named his son Alexander Clark Forbes and Clark named his son John Forbes Clark.

Following a period of practice in Rome (where his patients included the doctor-poet, John Keats) Clark settled in London and became Physician to Queen Victoria, who conferred a baronetcy on him at her accession in 1837. It was no doubt Clark's influence at Court which enabled Forbes to become Physician to the Prince Consort and the Royal Household.

Forbes and R.T.H. Laennec (1781–1826)

Forbes and Laennec never met personally although they corresponded. Forbes was introduced to the stethoscope and Laennec's work by his friend Clark who, knowing Forbes' proficiency in French, earnestly requested his friend to translate Laennec's De L'Auscultation Médiate. Forbes' translation was published in 1821, just two years after the appearance of the French first edition. Forbes altered the title to A Treatise on the Diseases of the Chest . . ., (Fig. 2) dedicated the work to the Royal
to his friend, James Clark, and including a sketch of the life of Laennec.

A third edition of Forbes’ translation, appeared in 1829, with an appendix which referred to fetal heart sounds heard through the stethoscope, as described by Jacques Alexandre le Jumeeur de Kergarade (1787-1877).

Forbes’ fourth and last edition of A Treatise of the Diseases of the Chest which appeared in 1834 was a translation of the third French edition of De L’Auscultation Médiata (1831) which has been edited by Meriadeé Laennec (1797-1873), a cousin of R. T. H. Laennec. It was in this edition that Forbes decided to change the translation of the French râle from the English rattle to the Latin rhonchus.

Forbes’ views on Laennec and the stethoscope

In the preface to the first edition of his translation, Forbes wrote of Laennec:

In short...he may be said to have realised the wish of the ancient philosopher and to have placed a window in the breast through which we can see the precise state of things within.

Although Forbes was himself impressed by the stethoscope, he nevertheless had reservations about its general adoption.

I have no doubt whatever, from my own experience of its value, that it will be acknowledged to be one of the greatest discoveries in medicine by all those who are of a temper, and in circumstances that will enable them to give it a fair trial. That it will ever come into general use, notwithstanding its value, I am extremely doubtful; because its beneficial application requires much time, and gives a good deal of trouble both to the patient and the practitioner; and because its whole hue and character is foreign, and opposed to all our habits and associations. It must be confessed that there is something even ludicrous in the picture of a grave physician formally listening through a long tube applied to the patient’s thorax, as if the disease within were a living being that could communicate its condition to the sense without. Besides, there is in this method a sort of bold claim and pretension to certainty and precision of diagnosis, which cannot, at first sight, but be somewhat startling to a mind deeply versed in the knowledge and uncertainties of our art, and to the calm and cautious habits of philosophising to which the English Physician is accustomed. On all these accounts, and others that might be mentioned, I conclude, that the new method will only in a few cases be speedily adopted and never generally. In all hospitals, however, both civil and military, and in the public services of the army and navy—in all of which situations the above-mentioned obstacles to its employment scarcely exist—I should hope that its adoption will be less tardy and partial.

Finale

Sir John Forbes was not responsible for any major medical discovery but is remembered for his perspicacity in recognising and appreciating the importance of the revolution in clinical diagnosis of diseases of the chest which resulted from Laennec’s introduction to the stethoscope. His English translation of Laennec’s work was of fundamental importance in that it served to disseminate Laennec’s teachings among physicians throughout the English speaking world.

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