

THE JOURNAL OF DR. MACKRILL

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Lying in the Cory Library for Historical Research in the Rhodes University is a manuscript book, the journal kept by one of the early doctors of the Cape Colony, Joseph Mackrill (1762-1820),¹ who made his mark in his history by the introduction of buchu into medicine in Britain² and the introduction of tobacco growing into the Cape.

The book, which has survived the 140 years since the writer's death in a tolerably good condition, is rarely dated, and only on one or two occasions records the happenings of the day. He collected in it a great deal of miscellaneous information, his inclinations being very catholic. The subjects of his writing vary from medical notes to earthquakes, from Indian water mills to the flora of the Cape, and bear witness to the high degree of erudition to be found amongst the Cape's early medical practitioners.

Dr. Mackrill appears to have been a ship's surgeon or a confirmed traveller. He had a distinct leaning towards geography. His descriptions and notes touch upon South America, the USA, South Africa and India; on one occasion he recorded with some precision the exact location of a hitherto uncharted rock.

Whether Dr. Mackrill was a regularly qualified practitioner does not appear from records, but he registered with the Supreme Medical Committee of the Cape and was licensed to practice as a surgeon in 1807. It is highly probable, therefore, that he was trained as a surgeon by apprenticeship either with a surgeon or surgeon-apothecary. Perhaps he attended one of the private schools of anatomy in London, but he is not mentioned anywhere as being M.C.S., or L.S.A., the usual qualifications in those days for persons who had not graduated M.D. of a University.

The first medical note in his diary is entitled, 'For preventing sudden Death from drinking cold water'. 'Twenty drops of Laudanum', he writes, 'repeated every twenty minutes until pain and spasm are relieved (*sic*)'. The dose may be increased from 40 to 60 drops repeated as above 'if the Symptoms are very urgent and the Patient adult'.

It is natural to expect that Dr. Mackrill would feature in his armamentarium remedies unknown to the modern practitioner. 'Salep, the dried root of the Orchis', is referred to as being extremely nutritious and 'should always be carried by Ships on long voyages'. 'Sago or Palma Japonica' is mentioned as 'the best food for Children as it never ferments in the Stomach'.

Of the more familiar but now almost defunct broom he says: 'Fulk, the first Earl of Anjou, went in Pilgrimage to Jerusalem where he was soundly scourged with Broom stalks which grow there. He ever after took the surname of Plantagenet or Broomstalk and which descended from Henry 2 to Richard 3d inclusive'.

Still in frequent use is senega, of which he writes, 'Polygala, Milkwort, the Seneka or Rattlesnake Root, is a species much used in Virginia and with great success in the pleurisy'. It seems highly probable that he had come into first-hand contact with the use of senega in the American colonies, a theory supported by many references to this country. Indeed so wide were Mackrill's travels that he could only have been a ship's surgeon.

Mackrill did not accept every suggested remedy. Under 'inflammation of the Eyes' he records 'It is very confidently reported,

however extraordinary it may appear, that the Down under the Wings of the Turkey Buzzard, being applied to the Eyes, relieves almost immediately, every Species of Inflammation, whether from Injury or Disease'.

'Rheumatism', he says 'is relieved by a strong Tincture of Poke Berries in Brandy, a Wine Glassfull every night and morning, lb i Berries to a Quart of Brandy.' He seems to have been up to date in making his medicines pleasant and interesting to the taste!

Antimony was in common use in those days, as old prescription books testify, and it is not difficult to guess that many people died as a result of overdosage. Dr. Mackrill wrote: 'The too violent effect of Antimony when it acts by vomit, may be restrained and carried thru the Intestines by means of a little common salt in any small Drink or by a draught of water acidulated with the Acidum Vitroli Dilutum.'

It is revealing to study entries made concerning remedies which are now in daily use. 'Digitalis, by some powerfully recommended', he notes, 'in all inflammatory Diseases particularly—by others regarded as destructive and poisonous and every bad Quality ascribed to it. If perhaps we steer a middle Course, we shall often find it a very salutary Remedy. Dr. Thornton a man of great Eminence on the Mountains of medical Science, has frequently found it the best of all Remedies in the Scarlet Fever. I have great Reason to be of opinion that a long continued use of it in any Disease is attended with fatal consequences—but I will not discard it.'

Practitioners of today will find it strange to read of tea as a medicament. 'Bohea tea', to use the old description, was recommended 'in very strong Infusion and the Leaves also eaten'. 'When there is no visceral Disease occasioning the Dropsy it may succeed by virtue of its diuretic and astringent properties.'

Under the heading 'Nephritic Complaints', camphor dissolved in water and spirits of wine is recommended as 'certainly an excellent Remedy'.

In a later jotting he writes: 'Two remarkable symptoms attending pretty uniformly an Inflammation of the Liver are not noticed by any Writer upon the subject; these are an almost indistinguishable (*sic*) tingling at the Extremities of the Fingers of the Right hand and numbness of the arm and a coldness of the Pinis (*sic*).'

Snake bite has always been a great source of worry to physicians and before the advent of antivenin all sorts of remedies were tried empirically. 'Olive oil internally and externally applied is perhaps the safest and most effectual of all Remedies; Oil of Vitriol externally to the Bite'—certainly a most drastic remedy.

Mackrill is credited with having introduced buchu into European medicine,² but he says very little about it in his notes. 'Bucku (Diosma) used in bruises internally and externally. With the stinking powder of the leaves the Hottentots perfume or stink themselves.'

He certainly seems to have been of an enquiring turn of mind, paying great attention not only to the flora of the countries he visited, but also speculating upon the probable medical uses of the plants he came across. 'Stoebe, bastard Ethiopian Elickrysum (*sic*)—its roots smell strongly of Valerian and are perhaps as

good.' 'Roridula dentata, the fly bush, a Shrub the leaves covered with fine hairs and a tough Gluten, the boors (*sic*) hang it up in their houses and every fly that rests upon it remains to fly no more.'

Wherever Mackrill was educated, he was a botanist of no mean calibre, and never examined a plant without recording its systematic name. One section of his notebook he devoted to the 'Medicinal Plants of the Cape'. In many cases he records the details for the cultivation of particular plants, and in others items of general interest. Thus, of castor oil he says it 'will burn in a Lamp, makes the best Plaister, it may also be used in mixing paints'.

He carefully describes the preparation of aloes as carried out in the Cape and also the production of opium. Of the latter he says, 'This method differs somewhat from the general Cultivation of the Poppy in India and is in use in the Country of Origin'. Probably he refers to either Egypt or Persia, thus indicating that he had travelled in those countries also, although there is no other indication that he had done so. Later in his diary he speculates on the possibility of growing the opium poppy in the American States.

History was also another of the diarist's great interests. Under the heading 'Yellow Fever' he writes: 'The King of Spain gave to the World the Secret of his Physician Dr. La Fuente for curing the yellow fever. He reports a very great number of Cases cured by the Bark without paying attention to Symptoms of any kind. He endeavoured to get down eight or ten ounces of powdered

Bark in the Course of 48 hours. The particular effects of this Remedy we have not heard but it seems the grand object was attained by preventing every Symptom that leads to Putrescence. I never can give credit to its sulatory (*sic*) Effect in those Cases when the beginning Symptoms are violently inflammatory, until I have made the Trial.' By 'Bark' I presume he means cinchona, but the story he relates differs from the usually accepted history of the drug.³

The diary, which covers 140 pages, was very carefully indexed. Some previous reader in 1888 added notes telling how Dr. Mackrill introduced tobacco growing into the Colony. 'But on the cessation of the war, tobacco was imported at such low rates as completely to swamp the native industry.' The farm at the Boschberg passed into the hands of Dr. Mackrill's foreman Robert Hart, and the good doctor returned to Cape Town, where he died in 1820 of apoplexy.

I am grateful to Mrs. Ewan, Cory Librarian, for finding the Diary; to Dr. van der Riet, University Librarian, and to Mr. Felix Schonland, for permission to publish this note.

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