

Section on Historical Pharmacy

Papers Presented at the Fifty-Ninth Convention

JOHN ATTFIELD.

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On March 18, 1911, there passed away one of the strongest men of the Victorian era, who had given up the greatest part of his life in improving the profession of pharmacy by his chemical knowledge, and his devotion to the best interests of the sciences which he loved, and of which he was generally acclaimed a master.

While the name of Michael Carteighe was known in America to the initiated, the name of Attfield is as familiar to those of the present generation as Proctor, Parrish, or Squibb. It is not the intention to draw comparisons in the careers of Attfield and Cartheighe, two stalwart defenders of the faith; for while both were intellectual giants, who consecrated their lives to the benefit of pharmacy, they were totally different in their personalities and the fields which each had selected for his activities.

John Attfield was a great educator. He wrote a book at a time when it was sorely needed, which drove away the mists which had gathered upon the chemical horizon, and pointed a course which led into a cleared atmosphere. The first edition of this book was instantly successful, and the English edition was probably no less successful than the one published in America. It has passed through nineteen editions. But even a brief review of his life is wanting if the publication of this book is given the greatest prominence.

Attfield was learned, resolute, brave and persistent. He was born in 1835, at Barnet, and the Rev. Alexander Stuart was his school teacher. Although he was destined to become a great teacher in chemistry, at the age of fourteen he was apprenticed to W. F. Smith, Ph. C., of Walworth, with whom he remained five years. He was sent to Bloomsbury Square, London, to enter the School of Pharmacy of the Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain, and in 1854 was awarded the medals in chemistry, pharmacy, and in botany and materia medica.

Dr. Stenhouse, professor of chemistry in the school of medicine at Saint Bartholomew's Hospital, appointed John Attfield junior assistant. Among the other candidates for this position were Crookes, Mathieson, and Henry Watts, editor of Watts' Dictionary. Dr. Edward Frankland succeeded Dr. Stenhouse, and Attfield remained with him as demonstrator, and assistant in many of his researches.

At the age of twenty-seven, John Attfield was appointed director of the Laboratory at the Society's School, and he afterwards became professor of practical chemistry, when Professor Theophilus Redwood gave up a part of his work.

Professor Attfield then went to Tübingen, to complete his chemical studies, and obtained there the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. His thesis on "The Spectrum of Carbon" was read at the meeting of the Royal Society in June, 1862.

In 1896, after thirty-four years of teaching, his resignation was tendered, and upon his retirement from these active duties, a remarkable demonstration of appreciation and affection on the part of his friends and old pupils occurred on July 10, 1896. An album containing the signatures of two hundred public friends and one thousand grateful students was presented to him with a massive silver tea and coffee service. In the address on that occasion, which was signed by two eminent chemists, Charles Umney and John Moss, the following words occurred:

"On the occasion of his retirement from the Chair of Practical Chemistry in the School of the Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain, a chair which he had occupied for a period of thirty-four years, from 1862 to 1896, to the great advantage of the recipients of his instruction. During the whole of this long tenure of his important office, Professor Attfield not only won and retained the respect of successive generations of students by the lucidity, accuracy, and thoroughness of his teaching, but he also endeared himself to them by his unflinching fact, kindness and urbanity. Not less successfully did he serve pharmacists and medical practitioners, and through them the public, by his versatile ability, untiring energy, and power of organization as an editor of the *Pharmacopœia*, and author of a manual of chemistry, and generally as a worker who unceasingly applied the resources of the great science of chemistry to the demands of the great art of healing. It is the earnest hope of his pupils and his many other public friends that he may long enjoy those blessings of health and leisure which he has so well earned. On behalf of a general committee of three hundred and fifty members, and of the whole twelve hundred signatories, including many prominent pharmacists and eminent men of science of all countries."

In the thirty-four years of Professor Attfield's connection with the Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain, 2367 students received instruction from him. While this work and that of revising Attfield's *Chemistry* are achievements the most notable in his career, they are far exceeded by his work upon the *British Pharmacopœia*. He was one of three editors of the *British Pharmacopœia*, 1885; editor of the *Addendum* in 1890; editor of the *British Pharmacopœia* in 1898, and of its *Indian and Colonial Addendum*, 1900. During this time Professor Attfield contributed many papers upon chemical subjects to pharmaceutical literature.

Professor Attfield was one of the Founders of the *British Pharmaceutical Conference* in 1863, and was its Senior Honorary Secretary for seventeen years. At the close of this long service the members of the Conference presented him with 500 volumes of choice books which "ministered to the pleasures of a well-earned retirement." He never lost his interest in this national body, as he served as its President in 1882, and in 1883, and his views advocating and pleading for higher education were continually quoted.

Professor Attfield was frequently placed in embarrassing situations on account of his connection with the *British Pharmacopœia*. Constant effort was made to increase pharmaceutical influence in the work of revision, but the medical influence steadily resisted their demands. During this time, Dr. Attfield wanted pharmacists

and physicians to work in harmony to produce an Imperial Pharmacopœia. The most strenuous years of his life were occupied in establishing workable relations between the two professions.

The Chemist and Druggist of March 25, 1911, records that Dr. Attfield "began pharmacopœia revision when chaos prevailed in arrangements and manners, and he left it fifteen years later working smoothly, with perfect harmony between all parties, and the British Pharmacopœia universally adopted throughout the Empire."

Dr. Attfield was a man of great activity and versatility. He was always busy and he did nothing superficially. If he could not do good work in any direction in which his aid was sought, he would not attempt the work. A mistake or an error, especially one which he made himself, gave him personal pain. As a chemist he enjoyed a large practice as a consultant, especially in the subject of water and sewerage. But he was frequently consulted on all kinds of subjects requiring chemical knowledge.

For four years he was a member of the Council of the London Chemical Society, and was one of the founders of the Institute of Chemistry; and he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society, an honor of great distinction in Great Britain. He was an honorary member of the American Pharmaceutical Association and over twenty foreign and colonial bodies.

One of the great sorrows of his life was the death of his son, Dr. Donald Harvey Attfield, who had received an excellent education at Cambridge, and was afterwards a demonstrator at King's College, London. He was a quarantine medical officer at Suez for a number of years, but while engaged in this work he was accidentally infected with tuberculosis, and eventually his life was sacrificed to the terrible white plague. Mrs. Attfield and two daughters remain to mourn their great loss.

The writer's recollections of Attfield upon first acquaintance are vivid. Quickness and facility of speech, a keen sense of humor, and general alertness made him appear at first like a typical American. Further acquaintance, however, proved that he was British to the core. Americanisms in speech interested him greatly. At a reception at Bloomsbury Square, he turned suddenly and asked the writer how Professor Maisch was. The answer, "He's keeping his end up very well," startled Attfield, and he moved off to say to one of his confreres, "What can he mean?" Whereupon four of his friends joined him and said, "What can you mean by such an expression?" Their smiling countenances proved that they were laughing at the Americanism, and the explanation, that the expression had originated from two men carrying a plank, and if one lagged he was dubbed "the man who could not keep up his end well." The explanation seemed to amuse the English brethren no less than the expression itself.

At the hotel table in Glasgow, in 1896, he heard an American ask, on a very hot day for some ice water. He immediately attacked the sufferer with, "Why do you Americans drink *iced* water? Don't you know that it ruins your stomachs, and will carry you off eventually, if you persist in icing your stomachs?" Subsequently he invited the American friend to his room, and showed him how he himself was suffering from inflammation of the stomach, for he had to use lavage

every day for a number of years. He recovered from this extremely annoying physical trouble, and neuritis developed in the later years of his life, from which he suffered greatly at times.

In 1871 he organized a movement to aid the Chicago pharmacists, when the Chicago College of Pharmacy was destroyed by fire, and his name is honored in this college for this great service in time of need.

John Attfield's heart was always young, and he sympathized with the problems and troubles of young people. His hand was always held out to them to give them help in every way that he could. His cheering words will never be forgotten by thousands of the youth of Great Britain.

One of his great ambitions was to visit America, and he even went so far as to fix a time when he thought he could leave; but unforeseen events occurred each time, and the promised pleasures had to be abandoned.

With Professor Attfield's pronounced views on hygiene, and his long service in protecting the public health, it should not surprise his family or friends that he should direct that his body should be cremated.

Thus has passed away into the great beyond, one of the noblest of our race; gifted beyond his fellows, he used his talents ungrudgingly, persistently, and successfully in the service of his fellow men.

“At the hands of thief or murderer few of us suffer, even indirectly. But from the careless tongue of friend, the cruel tongue of enemy, who is free? No human being can live a life so true, so fair, so pure as to be beyond the reach of malice, or immune from the poisonous emanations of envy. The insidious attacks against one's reputation, the loathsome innuendoes, slurs, half-lies by which jealous mediocrity seeks to ruin its superiors, are like those insect parasites that kill the heart and life of a mighty oak. So cowardly is the method, so stealthy the shooting of the poisoned thorns, so insignificant the separate acts in their seeming, that one is not on guard against them. It is easier to dodge an elephant than a microbe.”—*William George Jordan*.