

A PIONEER IN THE ORGANISATION OF THE PROFESSION OF MEDICINE.

MAISTER PETER LOWE, SCOTTISHMAN

(Doctor in the Faculty of Chirurgerie at Paris)

Surgeon in Ordinary to the King of France and Navarre Surgeon in Ordinary to James I. and Chief Surgeon to Henry Prince of Wales. Founder of the Royal Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow. Author of "A Discourse on the Whole Art of Chyrurgerie," 1597 and 1612,* "Spanish Fever," etc.

Our interest in Maister Peter Lowe does not rest entirely upon the fact that he was a pioneer in a profession kindred to our own. Far more are we, as Nurses, fascinated because behind his writings we glimpse a virile personality inflamed by just such aspirations for the reform of the Profession of Medicine as those which, in the Profession of Nursing, inspired an independent minority of nurses to agitate, for over thirty years, for the exclusion of the unqualified from its ranks. Scan the Charter of the Royal British Nurses' Association, the volumes of THE BRITISH JOURNAL OF NURSING, and lastly the Nurses' Registration Acts; then read the Discourse by Lowe and the Charter of the Royal Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow, and somehow you feel that Mrs. Bedford Fenwick and Maister Peter Lowe, Scottishman, are saluting one another, gaily, triumphantly across the centuries.

Very meagre is the information available regarding the life of the great surgeon, but it matters little after all if we can find for him no family tree, can gain no knowledge of his tastes, habits of life, etc. After all we know nothing of Homer, little of Shakespeare, and, a few centuries on, Goethe will be forgotten when "Faust" has come to be regarded as one of the epoch-making books in the domain of literature. And so it stands with Maister Peter Lowe and many more who, in one walk of life or another, have carried some message for their time. But read the Discourse and the Charter of the Faculty and you feel at once that you contact a great spirit, alive with a big sense of responsibility to the art he practised and imbued with a profound reverence for that art. Than Doctor Peter Lowe no man has felt more strongly the desire to maintain the purity of his great profession. This may have made him somewhat intolerant of lesser minds; he was not one to suffer fools gladly this Maister Peter Lowe. Rather did he do battle valiantly upon every occasion and availed himself of all opportunities to protect the sick and the honour of his profession from "deceavers," as he styled those who, with imperfect knowledge, practised the art of medicine. He criticises such as "scarcely skilled to cut a beard," advises that they "should be grievously punished and banished" and exhorts "Ye (i.e., his worshipful and well experimented friends) who have authority, learning and knowledge in the art to stop such as work unskilfully."

Lowe's insistence upon his nationality is somewhat amusing; over and over again does he wind up some passage by indicating its authorship—Maister Peter Lowe, Scottishman. This may, as Dr. Finlayson suggests, denote pride of race; but on the other hand may it not be love of country that lies at the root of this habit of his? Peter Lowe had won fame as a surgeon, he was the friend of kings, a great scholar with, to judge from the authorities he quotes in the Discourse, a wide knowledge of the classics, he has the distinction of having published the first English translation of Hippocrates (this translation is included in the 1612

edition of the Discourse). Furthermore, Lowe was a contemporary and probably a colleague of Ambroise Paré (or Parey), of Paris; he lived in the time of the English surgeons, Clowes, Gale and Hall; and it is not outside the bounds of possibility that he was acquainted with the great Lord Bacon himself. Both Clowes and Gale possessed the same respect for their profession that we find in Lowe, and they had the same intolerance of quackery. Therefore may it not be that these constant references to his nationality indicate a desire on the part of Lowe to make it plain, to his own and succeeding generations, that his country was well to the front in the advancement of medicine and "the Diuine Art of Chirurgerie," that it was out to protect the sick from those who are "voyd of all skill giuing euer to the diseased *quidproquo* promising marauls and to cure all things in short space"? Be that as it may, it would rejoice the soul of Peter Lowe to see how many of the great masters of surgery of to-day place after their names that of some Scottish University town along with the letters F.R.C.S.—an out-growth no doubt of his energy and high professional ideals in those long past years when he wrote from "my house in Glasgow." The word Maister is, says Dr. Finlayson, probably equivalent to the Magister Artium (i.e., M.A.) of the present time, for in the records of the city and of the Faculty it is only placed before the names of certain persons, among them Peter Lowe, Robert Hamilton (Professor of Medicine, to whom we shall make reference again) and W. Weems, the father-in-law of Peter Lowe and the first Presbyterian Minister of Glasgow after the Reformation, and several times Rector of the University.

To the late Dr. Finlayson the medical profession owes much gratitude for his efforts to trace something of the life of the great surgeon. Apparently Lowe was Chief Surgeon to the Spanish Regiment in Paris and was there during the great siege. In the Discourse he writes of being present at the battle of Sandlis, and says that he followed the French King in his wars for six years. The portrait of its Founder hangs in the Hall of the Faculty and shows that Maister Peter did not only possess great qualities of mind but that he was indeed a very handsome gentleman. It is a fine head that surmounts the broad shoulders covered by the doctor's robe, the nose is beautifully formed, the eyes dark and lustrous and the line of the mouth firm yet sensitive and full of character. Altogether he was a man of fine aristocratic bearing this Maister Peter Lowe, whose lineage even the persevering Dr. Finlayson has failed to trace. Practically nothing is known of his private life, but that he was a good father may be inferred from the fact that his will makes careful provision for the care and education of his children; this will was made two days before his death, so that we may take it that Peter Lowe "died with his feet first" (i.e., maintained his faculties to the end). From information available it is easy to recognise in him courage, persistence, and a fine scholarly mind. That he had an excellent opinion of himself is undoubted, and that his many-sided personality was pervaded by the saving grace of humour is shown by his writings and by an extract from the lines on his tombstone:

"Of his God he got the grace
To live in mirth and die in peace."

One episode in his life is hardly to the credit of Maister Peter. A common method of punishment in those days, in the City of Glasgow, was that of "standing at the pillar" of the Tron Church. Well, it would appear that Maister Peter was once condemned to stand, for a very considerable number of hours, at the pillar, and moreover had to endure a second term of punishment as a result of his "not behaving him on ye pillar as becumes." But let not his brother practitioners of these days too hastily condemn him of being "guilty of infamous conduct in a professional

*See List of Gifts to History of Nursing Section: Report of Council Meeting, British College of Nurses. Page 291.

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)