HISTORY OF MEDICINE SECTION

TWO TRUANTS FROM MEDICINE

From the long and fascinating list of medical men who played truant from their chosen profession two names may be singled out for commemoration this year: William Curtis who turned to botany for a vocation and a means of livelihood, and William Findlay who found in literature an intellectual hobby.

WILLIAM CURTIS, 1746–1799

Son of a tanner, William Curtis was born in Alton, Hampshire, on January 11, 1746. Natural history was his first and true love. The boy would spend his pocket money on the purchase of botanical books and his holidays rambling over the country in the company of the ostler of the 'Crown Inn, one Thomas Legg, a practical botanist versed in the study of Gerard and Parkinson's herbal. Apprenticed at the age of 14 to his grandfather, a surgeon-apothecary practising in Alton, 6 years later Curtis went to London to finish his medical education, becoming associated with a Mr. Talwin of Gracechurch Street, to whose business he succeeded. In 1771 "the apothecary was swallowed up in the botanist, and the shop exchanged for a garden."

Demonstrator of practical botany at the medical schools, Curtis acquired at Bermondsey a botanical garden for teaching purposes. It was his Flora Londinensis with the gorgeous coloured plates which in 1775 established his botanical reputation, while the Botanical Magazine (continued to this day) added to his income. The magazine, in his own words, brought him pudding, while the Flora brought him praise.

One of the original Fellows of the Linnean Society of London, Curtis died of heart disease on July 7, 1799, at the early age of 53.

WILLIAM FINDLAY, 1846–1917

Prior to the year 1898, when for the first time the real name as well as the pen-name of the author appeared on the title-page of Robert Burns and the Medical Profession, few of his readers realised that "George Umber," whose contributions to the Kilmarnock Standard were as eagerly anticipated as was the appearance of a new book from his pen, was Dr. William Findlay of Dennistoun.

Born at Kilmarnock, Ayrshire, on January 31, 1846, the son of an engine keeper and of the sister of a local poet Archibald McKay, Findlay in 1866 became a medical student at Glasgow, where he sat at the feet of Andrew Buchanan of blood coagulation fame, of Sir William Tennant Gairdner, and of the great Lister. Graduating M.B., C.M. in 1870 and M.D. eight years later, for many years he practised in Dennistoun, a suburb of Glasgow, until an attack of coronary thrombosis in 1906 forced him to retire into the country, to Kilbride, where he devoted the remaining ten years of his life to the pleasant pursuit of literature. He died on May 11, 1917.

In his writings, both poetry and prose, William Findlay is revealed as a man of shrewd and kindly judgment and of keen and ready humour. His poems are distinguished by their simplicity and quiet beauty. It has been said that in his Ayrshire Idylls Findlay did for Ayrshire what Barrie (Gavin Ogilvy) and John Watson (Ian Maclaren) did for Forfarshire and Perthshire respectively.

The following few verses from his poem "Therapeutics o' Gowf," contained in his Carmina Medici (1902), may serve as an example of his lighter poetry:

"Ye say ye need a tonic rare?  
Then o' the doctor's shop beware,  
Your hauf-crown spent' in railway fare  
To some gowf shore;  
A dose o' Prestwick's champagne air  
Ye'se quick restore.  

Gowf can do ought ye like to say—  
The auld turn young, the dull mak' gay,  
An' noweel facts an' fancies slay  
As deid's a maik;  
It's worth a hale vocab'lary  
O' doctor's talk."

Five feet nine in height, of rather spare build, Findlay had a pleasant, scholarly face with a benign expression and an unusually luxuriant crop of hair and virgin beard. Of his nine children William became a well-known portrait painter, now living in Los Angeles, and Leonard one of the leading pediatricians of his generation.

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