

History of Medicine

The Doctors Who Came to the Cape with the 1820 Settlers

A. H. TONKIN

SUMMARY

Such information as can be found in the references given is set out regarding those doctors who emigrated from Britain with the British Settlers of 1820. It is regretted that so little information is obtainable as they lived in strenuous times and must have done good work without the aids which seem indispensable to modern medicine.

S. Afr. med. J., 50, 1222 (1976).

As far as is known, the only doctor in the Eastern Cape before the arrival of the settlers was Dr Johannes Theodorus van der Kemp. His name was anathema to the farmers of the region. He was a parson's son from Rotterdam and as a student and army officer he had led a wild life. He obtained his M.D. in Edinburgh in 1782, and after the accidental drowning of his wife and child in Holland he reformed and offered his services to the London Missionary Society. He founded the Mission Station at Bethelsdorp and married a Hottentot woman. This made him even less acceptable to the people of the area and there is no evidence that he practised among them. It is said that he produced the first South African medical textbook, a handbook on midwifery, but no trace can be found of it. He died in 1811.

The arrival of the 1820 Settlers brought a number of doctors to an area which had apparently been destitute of them for some time, and the names of 18 are among the lists of settlers. Of these, 3 were men of independent means, who paid their own way and were not attached to any particular party of settlers. A nineteenth doctor came a little later, after qualifying in 1821. He was in a party headed by his father, Major-General Charles Campbell, who had sent some of his group out with the main body of settlers to prepare a home for him before his arrival.

Two of the 18 were apparently not properly qualified at the time, although they were subsequently licensed to practise. Eight who were qualified were licensed by the Supreme Medical Council. Of the others, 2 died at Algoa Bay soon after landing and 6 made no mark in practice. As 4 of them were heads of parties they presumably abandoned their profession, except for one who subsequently joined the Army Medical Service.

The 2 of whom there is no trace are John Walker, who came with Baillie's party on the *Chapman*, and

W. Combley, who came with Willson's party on the *Belle Alliance*.

Those who were heads of parties and who apparently did not apply for licences to practise, were Thomas Calton who travelled on the *Aurora* and who died soon after landing at Algoa Bay; W. Clark, who was on board the *Northampton*; David Thomas Nightingale on board the *Amphitrite* and Nathaniel Morgan who took passage with his party on the *Ocean*. It is this Dr Morgan who became an Assistant Surgeon in the Army, and during the Sixth Kaffir War he was attached to the Burgher Forces and was publicly thanked for his services. He died in Salem in 1842.

It has been mentioned that Dr Calton died soon after landing, and the same fate overtook Dr Charles Caldecott at Algoa Bay. He was one of the 3 independent settlers and he had travelled on board the *Brilliant*. The poet, Thomas Pringle, had been in the same ship, and described Dr Caldecott as being 'a little dogmatic anabaptist surgeon' who used to preach on board ship. Apparently he went to visit the mission station at Bethelsdorp and after the 9-mile walk back to the bay he drank cold water while overheated and died. He left a widow and 6 small children, one of whom became a member of the Colonial Legislature and Mayor of Grahamstown.

Death was indirectly the cause of the loss of another settler doctor in the early days. He was Thomas Cock, who had been on board the *Belle Alliance*, and whose wife and 3 children had died during the voyage. Although he was licensed to practise he obtained permission to return to England by transport.

Drowning cost the life of another settler doctor. Robert Holditch travelled with the Irish party on Board the *East Indian*. This party was initially sent by Sir Rufane Donkin to Clanwilliam, although they were moved later. Dr Holditch was licensed to practise in September 1820 and was appointed provisional district surgeon of the subdistrict of Clanwilliam, but he was drowned off the Cape coast soon afterwards.

So far 9 of the original settler doctors have been mentioned. Of the other 9, all but one were licensed to practise in the Cape Colony.

John Griffith travelled aboard the *Stentor*. He was 24-years old and was said to be a surgeon. He was not licensed and it is not known what may have happened to him.

Robert Currie was in Phillips's party aboard *Kennerley Castle*. He was aged 25 and was registered as a licensed practitioner in September 1820. There is no additional information as to what became of him and apparently he did not practise in the Eastern Cape.

Edwards Roberts was in Baillie's party aboard the *Chapman*. He was licensed in August 1820 and was settled

Cape Eastern Branch, MASA

A. H. TONKIN, M.B. CH.B., *President*

Presidential Address delivered to the Cape Eastern Branch (MASA) at Somerset East, CP, on 20 March 1976.

at Cuylerville near the mouth of the Fish River with the party. In the same party were Dr Walker, whose name has been mentioned, and Dr Daniel O'Flinn. As the scope for practice there was very small both Roberts and O'Flinn left after a while. Dr Roberts went to Cape Town, where he was licensed as a surgeon in May 1826, and for a while before his death he was attached to Dr Samuel Bailey's Merchant Seaman's Hospital, which later became the Old Somerset Hospital. Burrows mentions that one of his sons became the landdrost at Fauresmith and 'the progenitor of an interesting South African family'.

Daniel O'Flinn was appointed the district surgeon of Albany, but resigned this position in 1822 and went to Stellenbosch where he again became district surgeon. One of his duties there was to ride the many miles to visit the leper institution, *Hemel en Aarde*, in the Swellendam area every fortnight; this he could do only in fine weather. He made frequent complaints to the Colonial Medical Inspector, Dr James Barry, regarding the unco-operative staff there and their ill-treatment of the patients. He took an active part in local affairs and it is interesting to note that Dr F. L. C. Biccard, who was a well-known practitioner at Durbanville for many years, was at one time apprenticed to Dr O'Flinn at Stellenbosch.

James Pawle, aged 30, arrived with Willson's party on the *Belle Alliance*. He was registered on 3 November 1823 and was appointed district surgeon at Bathurst. A month later he wrote to Dr Barry, complaining that persons named Howard and Williamson were carrying on illegal practices at Kowie Mouth (now Port Alfred), while a blacksmith named Hartley was drawing teeth and reducing dislocations at Bathurst. Later he was district surgeon at George from 1828 to 1845 and was paid £150 per annum. In 1845 he was awarded an annual pension of £60. He was appointed Roads Medical Officer from 1845 to 1848, in which year he was also appointed a Justice of the Peace. He was a Churchwarden of St Mark's Church, George, where he was buried in 1873, aged 84 years.

John Younger was a member of Scott's party on the *Nautilus*, and although he was a fully-qualified doctor he omitted to apply for registration and was found to be practising illegally at Port Elizabeth. On 5 April 1824 he wrote to Dr Barry from Grahamstown and was registered as a surgeon on 16 July. He applied for the post of district surgeon of Albany, but was not appointed. He was, however appointed district surgeon of Somerset East on 31 March 1825.

Charles Augustine Wentworth was one of the 3 independent settler doctors and arrived on board the *Duke of Marlborough*. Although he was not fully qualified he was licensed as a surgeon, apothecary and accoucheur on 24 April 1821, and he practised in Cape Town. He was appointed as medical attendant to the household of His Excellency the Governor on 12 January 1826. On 18 December 1827 he was given the post of district surgeon of Uitenhage, where he served until his death by suicide in 1834.

Peter Campbell came from Ireland in the *Aurora* and had qualified M.R.C.S. in 1809. He had practised in London before emigrating. He was licensed to practise in December 1820 and his home was in Bathurst Street,

Grahamstown, where he lived until his death in 1837. He acted as district surgeon of Albany for a few years and was a member of the Eastern Committee of the Medical Council. He was a prominent Freemason, founded the Albany Lodge 389 in 1828, and was its Worshipful Master for some years. He is reported as having 'entered wholeheartedly into the vigorous communal life of early Grahamstown'.

Perhaps the best known of the 1820 settler doctors was Dr John Atherstone, who should not be confused with his famous son, Dr William Guybon Atherstone, who was only a 6-year-old boy in 1820. John Atherstone was an independent settler and was a descendant of an ancient and honourable Nottingham family. A relative, Captain John Damant, had been stationed at Fort Frederick at Algoa Bay, where he had married the daughter of Frederick Korsten of Cradock Place, and it was on his advice that John Atherstone decided to emigrate. He actually left England with his family in 1817, but Providence guided him to leave the boat at Deal, for it was wrecked on its way to the Cape. His brother-in-law, Edward Damant, became the head of a party on board the *Ocean* and John Atherstone decided to travel in the same ship with his wife and 3 children, the eldest of whom was William Guybon.

He was licensed to practise almost as soon as he arrived in April 1820, and 4 months later he was appointed district surgeon of Uitenhage, where he served for only 1 year. The times were hard and he left for Cape Town, taking 3 months to reach the city by ox-wagon. There he commenced what became a flourishing practice in Wale Street. He remained there until 1828, when he was appointed district surgeon of Albany, and he soon became the most prominent and sought after of the 3 medical practitioners in Grahamstown. He rendered distinguished service in the Seventh Kaffir War of 1847-1848 and was then elected to the first Legislative Council of the Cape.

In addition to the service already mentioned there were two other highlights in John Atherstone's public life. In 1831 he accompanied the district surgeon of Graaff Reinet, Dr Perry, on an expedition across the Orange River to vaccinate the Griquas at Phillipolis, in an attempt to prevent a smallpox epidemic from spreading south into the Colony. The other was an unsuccessful attempt to persuade Piet Retief not to join the Great Trek. Retief had lived in Grahamstown for many years, but had moved to a farm in the Winterberg. He had been a friend of Atherstone and when it was known that he was determined to trek, Atherstone and some other friends rode out to his farm to try to dissuade him.

When he was in his mid-fifties he went into semi-retirement and lived on Table Farm outside Grahamstown. This estate had belonged to Major T. C. White who had been killed in the Sixth Kaffir War, and whose widow Dr Atherstone had subsequently married. In May 1855 he was visiting Grahamstown when the *disselboom* of the cart in which he was travelling broke and he was thrown out of the back of the cart. He sustained a spinal injury and died a few days later.

His son, William Guybon, was the President of the Fourth South African Medical Congress which was held in Grahamstown in 1896. In his Presidential Address,

which was reported in the *South African Medical Journal* of the following year, he quoted his father's rules of practice as follows:

1. There is a cause for all things.
2. The blood is the source of all energy and power. Curative treatment should be directed therefore to restoring the purity of the blood by all available means, either by reducing the force of the circulation or by medicines acting through the lungs and skin, as experience or advancing knowledge may suggest.
3. Never operate or prescribe a drug without a reason to justify your doing so.
4. Kindness and patient examination of symptoms will often succeed, by restoring confidence, where other methods fail.

This then completes the list of 18 doctors who accompanied the settlers, and a nineteenth has been mentioned who, in a sense, was a settler, although he came a year later. He was Ambrose George Campbell. His father was Major-General Charles Campbell, who was responsible for a party of 50 settlers. He was a man of independent means, who could afford to send out a small party, which included his son, on board the *Dowson* in 1821. This party was to prepare a home for him and his family on the location which had been allotted to him, and which he named *Barville Park*. The General followed with the rest of his party 6 months later. Unfortunately, he died comparatively soon after they had settled, as a result of being thrown from his horse while on a visit to Grahamstown.

Dr Ambrose Campbell settled in Beaufort Street, Grahamstown, and while he soon showed that he was a good doctor he also showed another side to his character which made Burrows wonder whether he was not a 'psychotic personality'. He seems to have developed paranoid ideas and Burrows says that 'In no time Dr Campbell had established himself as anti-Atherstone, anti-Grahamstown Journal, anti-Colonial and anti-Government'. He joined Dr Philip in backing the cause of the natives against what he described as the 'bloodthirsty and unchristian feeling' of the colonists and he got into trouble with Sir Benjamin d'Urban by alleging that Hints had been murdered and his body mutilated by one of the colonists. He kept up a vendetta against Robert Godlonton

and the *Grahamstown Journal*, and even went so far as to publish, in the 1840s, a scurrilous magazine which he called the *Echo*. Some extracts of the paper are published in Dr Burrows's *History of Medicine in South Africa*. His attacks on Dr Atherstone involved him in a libel action, in which damages were awarded against him. Apparently much of his antagonism towards his colleague arose from the latter's appointment as district surgeon, a position which Campbell coveted.

This Dr Campbell is credited with having established the first hospital in Grahamstown in 1833. It was a small private hospital which was later taken over by Dr Atherstone. He served in the Kaffir War of 1834-35 and again in 1850-53. In 1860 he returned to England in poor health, but the climate did not suit him after the warmer Cape and he returned. He then seems to have moved around, for in 1864 he was in Alexandria, and he spent from 1868 to 1872 in Uitenhage. He was then appointed as district surgeon at East London, but his appointment there could not have lasted long, as Burrows states that Dr Paley was district surgeon there from 1875 to 1901.

Eventually he retired to Port Elizabeth, where it is said he 'kept up his litigation and defamation' until he died in 1884 at the age of 85 years. Burrows states that 'His old foe, the *Grahamstown Journal* wrote: "He was a man of considerable ability but his zeal was not tempered with knowledge. He had occasionally dabbled in newspaper work and, when he did so, was apt to get both himself and his friends into trouble . . . May he rest in Peace".'

These, very briefly, were the settler doctors of the 1820 immigration. At the time the army had its own doctors, so that the civilian doctors were confined to private practice and certain civil duties, except in time of war, when they might be called upon to help. They lived in hard and difficult times and it seems a pity that so little is really known of them and the kind of lives they lived.

REFERENCES

1. Burrows, E. H. (1958): *A History of Medicine in South Africa*. Cape Town: A. A. Balkema.
2. Laioler, P. W. and Gelfand, M. (1971): *South Africa, Its Medical History*. Cape Town: C. Struik.
3. Hockley, H. E. (1957): *The Story of the British Settlers of 1820 in South Africa*. Cape Town: Juta.
4. Morse Jones, E. (1969): *Roll of the British Settlers in South Africa*. Cape Town: A. A. Balkema.