

JAMES HENRYSOUN 'Chirurgian to the poore'*

by

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JAMES HENRYSOUN, barber surgeon, who practised in Edinburgh during the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, has sometimes been referred to as the first Medical Officer of Health for the city. *Mutatis mutandis*—which is saying a good deal—there may be some justification for this, though in reality his position was rather that of a poor-law medical officer. Even during outbreaks of plague, when he was called upon for duties that today would be performed by the M.O.H., his functions were clinical rather than preventive. He belongs to a period when some, at least, of the larger communities were beginning to realize the advantage of having a medical man to whom they might apply for advice, even though the nature of his appointment and the extent of his duties might be somewhat loosely defined.

Of Henrysoun as an individual little can be said. He published nothing, he left no memoirs or correspondence, and his name is not associated with any special contribution to medical theory or practice. We know of him only that he made a reputation early in his career by his conduct during the great plague 1584–8, and that, thereafter, he seems to have stood high in the estimation of his professional brethren and of the magistrates of Edinburgh. On the other hand there is a fair amount of information about some of the matters with which he had to deal as an official. If he is, himself, a somewhat shadowy figure, the background against which he played his part is sufficiently clear to give a picture, not without interest, of the development of social medicine in Scotland in his time.

I have been unable to discover the date of his birth but, judging by that of his admission to the guild of Barber Surgeons, it seems probable that he may have been born some time between 1560 and 1565. He was the son of a barber-surgeon, his brother, his own son, and his two sons-in-law were also members of the craft. His father, Robert Henrysoun, had a high reputation, and was frequently employed by the town council. Some marvellous cures were credited to him. Perhaps the most noteworthy of these was his raising a dead woman from the grave in which she had lain for two days—a feat which, even now, would put any practitioner into the first rank of the profession¹. No doubt the backing of a parent of such outstanding ability must have been of great value to James Henrysoun when on 19 February 1584 he was admitted as guild-brother, and was licensed to practise in Edinburgh.

About five months later—on 22 July—he received his first commission from the town council. A rumour had become current—it proved only too well founded—that the plague had broken out at West Wemyss, and Henrysoun, accompanied by one of the town councillors, was sent to investigate and report,

* A paper read to the Scottish Society of the History of Medicine, 12 June 1957.

† We regret to record that Dr. Ritchie died on 24 December 1959 as this contribution was in the press.

'that the town may tak ordour in tyme for eschewing thairof'. They were back in two days, with the news that plague was raging at Wemyss. It was believed that the infection had been brought by a ship from Flanders, 'quhair the said seikness is vehement'.² It was, in fact, the beginning of one of the most severe outbreaks of plague in Scotland, affecting many places, and lasting for about five years.

The magistrates of Edinburgh, as feudal superiors of the town and port of Leith, at once made regulations about quarantine on shipping from infected ports. They instituted a collection for the poor in Wemyss, and took the sensible precaution of decreeing that all deaths in Edinburgh must be reported, before burial, to the baillie of the quarter where they occurred, in order that it might be determined whether they had been due to plague. Strict orders were given, also, that there should be no coming and going of travellers between Edinburgh and any infected place. A little later, in anticipation of possible trouble, they directed that the irons and chains of the gallows for the Burgh Muir should be repaired—a precaution characteristic of the times.

There was, of course, no permanent authority in Scotland at this time with special responsibility for protecting health. The duty of dealing with epidemics of plague lay on town councils, over whom the Privy Council exercised a gradually increasing control. In rural areas this duty was generally delegated to the principal landholder or landholders in the district, to whom special powers were granted. The guidance given to those bodies by statute was very limited, consisting, as it did, of 'the Rule of the Pestilence', an act passed by the thirteenth Parliament of James II in 1456—a very short statute, dealing only with some general principles. There was also a 'Letter', sent to all town councils in Scotland by special mandate of James IV in 1513, which was of greater practical value.

But considerable experience of plague enabled the authorities, especially of the larger towns to improvise the necessary services fairly rapidly. Notification, hospital isolation, disinfection of persons, houses and goods, school closure, maritime quarantine and such like measures were put into operation as soon as the danger was recognized, and were enforced by hanging, drowning, mutilation, branding, banishment or fines. Even the abominable sanitary conditions that prevailed in most Scottish towns at the time generally came under review, but though numerous regulations were made in hope of amending matters there is no evidence of any real improvement until long after the plague had ceased to be a menace. On this occasion the infection spread rapidly through central Scotland, and, about the end of April 1585, plague appeared in Edinburgh, brought, in the opinion of the town council, by a woman who had come from Perth, where the epidemic was raging. She died at a house in the 'Fische Merket Close'. This house, along with several others that she had visited, was immediately enclosed, and the inmates strictly isolated. Ten days later two house-contacts of the dead woman died of plague, the three survivors of the household were at once removed to a house on the Burgh Muir 'bewest St. Roche's chapell', and the magistrates, realizing that there was now little

hope of averting an outbreak in Edinburgh, brought into operation the orders and regulations generally enforced in Scots towns in time of plague.³

An isolation hospital or camp was established at Purves Acre, which lay between the foot of Blackford Hill, the lands of St. Roche's Chapel, and the modern Canaan Lane. It was divided into a 'clean' and a 'foul' section, the first used for suspects, the second for confirmed cases. Accommodation was in wooden huts and 'tofalls', or lean-to-sheds. A staff of attendants or 'clengers' was appointed and a suitable gallows erected. This was under the charge of an individual referred to as 'Smithie', who is later found confined in his own fetters for 'offences committed', though not specified.

All kinds of sickness occurring in Edinburgh were made notifiable, a guard was set on each of the city gates to prevent the entry of unauthorized persons, arrangements were made for the support of the isolated poor and for disinfection of persons and goods, and a number of 'quartermasters' were appointed to assist the baillies in their duties. And it is worth noticing that the authorities realized the need of doing something about the children who had lost, or been deserted by their parents. They sent tradesmen to examine and report on a chapel in St. Mary Wynd 'that the sam may be provydet for placeing the puir young anes of V or VJ yeir auld quha lyes nychtlie in the buith wyndoys and durris'.

The 'Tounis College', soon to be officially closed, had already ceased to function ' . . . the haill students, throw the feir and bruit of the pestilence, hes left the scholes . . . '.

This proved to be one of the worst outbreaks of plague that Edinburgh ever experienced. King James fled, immediately followed by most of the citizens that could get away. Most of the government offices were transferred to other towns; Stirling, and later Linlithgow, became temporary capitals. James Melville notes in his diary that during November he passed through Edinburgh from the Nether Bow to the West Port—i.e. from one end of the city to the other—'in all whilk way we saw not three persons, sae that I miskenned Edinburgh, and almost forgot that I had ever seen sic a town'.⁴

A special difficulty during outbreaks of plague was that of ensuring that medical service was available to the sick poor. Regular practitioners were often reluctant to undertake work to which their ordinary patients objected, they having a not unnatural prejudice against being attended by men who were in constant contact with plague. This of course gave an excellent opportunity to quacks and charlatans, who, knowing nothing of the nature or treatment of plague, vaunted infallible remedies and often proved more destructive of life 'than the brigands and murderers of the forests and highways', as Ambroise Paré points out, with some indignation. During the sixteenth century the propriety of appointing physicians and surgeons who should confine themselves to attending the plague-stricken during the epidemic was recognized by some of the large municipalities (Paris 1533, London 1583). Sometimes, it seems, the physician confined himself to prescribing for patients about whom he had received reports but whom he had not visited. Sennertius says that as physicians

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are under no obligation to attend the plague-stricken, magistrates should arrange that surgeons, at least, are appointed to care for them, and to treat them according to the physician's instructions.⁵ Bartholin, in 1660, suggests that, as physicians cannot be compelled to visit those sick of plague they should prescribe treatment and medicines in the druggists' shops, so that, even without a doctor, the poorer classes may be enabled to provide for themselves.⁶

On 26 May Henrysoun was appointed Medical Officer to the City of Edinburgh, with a fairly wide range of duties. He undertook to visit all who suffered from plague or who were suspected of having it, and to 'gif his trew judgement to the magistrats in decerning the said seiknes fra all uther seiknes'. He was to be available for duty at all times, by day and night. He was to visit all the hospitals of the city, and all the poor that were referred to him by kirk or council, whatever their illness might be, and to 'imploy his cure in his airt of chirurgie, doing his diligence and labour to cure, haill, and releif thame', the town supplying such medicines as might be required. Although this appointment was made in a time of emergency the town council decided that it should be a permanent one—Henrysoun was to hold it 'induring all the dayes of his lyfetye', and to receive an annual salary of £20. The post seems to have combined the duties of a Medical Officer of Health and a Poor Law Medical Officer, and did not prevent private practice.⁷

It is not clear why so junior a surgeon should have been appointed, only fifteen months after being licensed, to what was obviously a responsible and onerous post. Possibly his father's reputation may have helped him, possibly, also, his seniors may not have been specially anxious to undertake notoriously dangerous work for which the salary—£20 a year—compared unfavourably with the £10 a month paid to 'Smithie', the hangman on the foul muir, who at ordinary times followed the useful if unostentatious calling of a scavenger. Henrysoun, on the other hand may have recognized that there might be advantages in obtaining a status with the town council at the beginning of his career.

The outbreak in Edinburgh lasted till the end of the year and, before it was over, Henrysoun had himself contracted plague, and his wife had died of it. But he had gained a reputation for civic zeal and professional ability that the magistrates fully appreciated. Their minute of 22 September 1585 is worth quoting:

For the guid and thankful service done and schawin to the guid towne be James Henrysoun, chirurgeane, at this tyme of pestilence in visitation of the seik at all tymes be day or be nycht, and geving his guid counsall, assistance and fortification thairinto, in samekill that throw his guid care and diligence he sparit nocht the hasard of his awim lyfe and contracted the said seikness in his awin body with the lose and deyth of his wife in the sam discise of pestilence, and to the effect that he may haif the better occasioun to continue in schawin of his guid will and service to the guid towne in tymes cuming, and that uthers by his guid exampill may be provoket to do the lyke heir-after, they are movet to be thankfull unto him and thairfore be thir presents thai haif exemit and exemis him for all the dayes of his lyfe fra all payment of any pairt of the extents, taxatiouns, impositiouns or contributions to be sett imposit or rayset upon this burgh and the inhabitants thair of any manner of way.⁸

Certainly an honorarium that entailed freedom from rates and taxes for life was worth having!

Long after the sixteenth century some people were always ready to declare that all epidemics were evidence of the Almighty's anger at sin, and that attempts to check them were not only useless but impious. On this occasion Hercules Rollok, headmaster of the Royal High School and a latinist of some reputation, produced a long Latin 'dirge', insisting that no human effort can check the plague. Flight and attempts to disinfect by fire or to cleanse by water are equally useless. Only after sincere penitence may we hope to breathe wholesome air again, and applaud the conquest of the pestilence. There is no evidence that Henrysoun and his colleagues paid any attention to this lucubration.*

There was, of course, no 'self-denying ordinance' at that time, and the fact that Henrysoun held a permanent appointment under the town council did not debar him from membership of that body. Indeed, he served on it several times, as Deacon, or President, of the barber-surgeons. Among his colleagues were several distinguished men—George Heriot, the elder, father of a more famous son, who represented the goldsmiths, and William Little, brother of Clement Little, an early benefactor of the University. William Little became Provost of Edinburgh in December 1585 succeeding the Earl of Arran, who had been appointed the previous year on the instruction of King James, but who fell from power in November 1585. Among others, less well known, was Baillie James Nicol who, like Henrysoun, had given good service during the late plague

... beand ane of the bailyeis of this burgh the tyme of the greitt pestilence, awaittet and attendit upoun his office att all tymes, leving nothing undone that might pertane to ane guid magestrat in sic a dangerous tyme.

Like Henrysoun he contracted the plague

... and at length be the mercie of God conualesteit, yitt noch without the lose and demembring of hys rycht eye, to his greitt hynder and skayth perpetuall . . .⁹

Not every member of the town council had been so conscientious, and Baillie Nicol's name might well be kept in memory.

It was probably in his dual capacity as town councillor and medical officer that Henrysoun was concerned in 1589 with the provision of new leper hospital for Edinburgh. Leprosy still caused some anxiety to the Scots municipal authorities in the sixteenth century, and the magistrates of Edinburgh had been concerned for some years about the condition of their leper hospital at Dyngwall, a part of the site of the present Waverley Station. They had decided, early in 1585, to replace it, but nothing was done at that time, presumably on account of the outbreak of plague. The project was revived in 1589, when John Robertson,

* The poem is to be found in the *Delitias Poetarum Scotorum*, Amsterdam 1637. Rollok was headmaster of the Royal High School during the famous 'barring out' when one of the city magistrates was shot and killed by a pupil.

He eventually got into trouble with the town council for various misdemeanours and was sacked. He has the distinction of having been, for a time, the teacher of Drummond of Hawthornden.

a merchant of Edinburgh, and some of his colleagues announced that they wished to found a leper house in fulfilment of a vow made by them while in extreme peril by sea. The town council accepted the offer, and appointed a committee, of which Henrysoun was a member, to choose a suitable site for the new institution.¹⁰

They eventually selected Greensyde on the northern slopes of the Calton Hill. The hospital erected there was opened for patients in November 1591. Five lepers were admitted, two of them being allowed to take their wives with them. The two women were made responsible for the domestic service of the place—marketing, washing clothes, making beds and keeping the hospital ‘honest and clenelie’. Each inmate was allowed four shillings a week, in addition to a share of what could be collected as charity from travellers passing the hospital gate. Money got in this way was divided equally among the lepers, and a weekly account rendered to a visitor appointed by the town council. At the formal opening of the hospital the rules regarding discipline and general conduct were read over to the inmates who promised to obey them. As an additional surety of their good behaviour the council decreed ‘that there be ane gibbet sett up at the gavel of the said hospitall’—the gibbet being a recognized adjunct to hospital administration in the sixteenth century.¹¹

During 1590 Henrysoun served on the committee appointed to make preparations for the reception of Anne of Denmark, Queen of James VI, on her arrival at Edinburgh. Royal receptions and outbreaks of plague seem to have been almost the only events that could impel Scottish local authorities of the period to tackle the matter of public cleanliness with any vigour. Generally, they were content to make sanitary regulations, to threaten severe punishment to those who disregarded them, and then to leave things as they were. The arrival of the young queen necessitated a belated effort to reduce the main streets of Edinburgh to something like decency. All ‘myddings and staynes’ were to be removed from the streets, a scavenging campaign was to be undertaken, and all beggars were commanded to ‘depesche and remove thame selffis’ within forty-eight hours. Further, the church in which the coronation was to take place had to be strewn with herbs and flowers the usual prophylactic against infection, and ‘rosset’, to the value of 2s. 8d., burned for fumigation.

Although the terms of his appointment did not specifically include medico-legal work he was occasionally called upon to act as police surgeon. There are references in the town council minutes to his reports on a wounded man, and on a post-mortem examination that he made, along with a Dr. McCartney, on the body of a woman who, it was suspected, might have been poisoned. In those cases a fee was paid to Henrysoun, so it seems that he was acting in a private, not an official capacity.

Although the Guild of Barber-Surgeons of Edinburgh survived till 1845 it seems that even before the end of the sixteenth century differences had arisen between the two crafts composing it. The Seal of Cause, or Charter of the Guild, which had been granted in 1505, dealt with barbers and surgeons as one body of guild brothers, but its terms implied a difference in their functions.

Applicants for membership, whether their personal inclinations were to surgery or to hairdressing had to serve an apprenticeship of six years, and thereafter to pass an examination in anatomy—the Guild were entitled to the body of one criminal yearly for dissection—and in astrology, to ensure that the young surgeon was acquainted with the planetary influences that might affect his operations, especially the phlebotomies that constituted a large part of his practice. After dealing with these subject of study the Seal of Cause provides

. . . that na barbour, maister nor seraund, within this burgh hantt, use nor exerce the craft of Surregenrie without he be expert and knaw perfytelie the thingis aboue written.¹³

This indicates that a candidate who had failed to qualify in surgery might practise as a barber, so long as he confined himself to that craft.

It appears that the surgeons found this clause an insufficient protection against competition by unqualified practitioners, and they devised the plan of admitting some of their freemen as 'simple barbers' who were forbidden to dabble in surgery. The record of the admission of a barber named Mark Liberton (5 March 1589) states that he was allowed only 'to cow, clip, schafte and wesche'. He was to use

na poynt of chirurgie under the payne of tynsell of his freedome . . . and ordanis the said Mark not to haif na signe of chirurgie in his bucht nor hous, oppynlie or privatlie, such as pigis, buistis or chirurgane caiss or box pertening to the chirurganis.¹³

Two years later (16 July 1591) the Guild resolved

. . . that all and quhatsumevir persone that sallhappin to be maid maister and freman among thame in tyme cuming that is nocht abil and expert to abyde and geif ane sufficient tryall and examination of his qualification, science and erudition of the art of chirurgie, sall haif na ferdar libertie and priviledge bot to clip, cow, schaf and wesche allanerlie, without any ferdar liberty or license to use and exerce uther poyntis of the airt of chirurgie. . . .

All 'simple barbers' when admitted had to take an oath to observe these conditions ' . . . under the panis of periurie defamatioun and tynsell of thair fredome for evir.'¹⁴ Unfortunately, some, despite their oath, did thereafter begin to practise surgery, and in 1598 the surgeons, represented by their Deacon, Henry Lumsdail, James Henrysoun and various 'collegs', appealed to the town council, asking that this practice should be stopped. The council, however, decided that the so-called 'simple barbers', having been admitted to the Guild, were entitled, as burgesses and freeman, to undertake surgical work 'swa far as thai haif knowledge and practike', and pointed out to the surgeons that the remedy lay in their own hands—they should 'tak better tryell of the admission of thair frie en'.¹⁵

During the next few years, references to Henrysoun are scanty, and deal mostly with non-medical matters. In 1600 the town council appointed him 'pricer of wine', and an entry in the Privy Council Records shows that he stood 'cautioner' for one Sam Barcar, who had risked severe punishment by drawing

a sword on the High Street of Edinburgh within a mile of the king's residence. In the following year he was appointed commissioner for the town's affairs in Leith, and is again mentioned as a cautioner, this time for Sir George Ramsay, who had come under clerical censure for 'pursuing' a gentleman of his own clan within the Kirkyard of Fouldon.

In 1606, when Perth, like many other parts of Scotland, was invaded by plague the magistrates of that city determined to call in a physician who should make a personal inspection of the town and advise them thereafter. In September of that year they paid a £12 piece to 'James Henrysoun, chirurgeon, for his pains in sighting the estate of the town, being visited by the plague of pestilence'. There can be little doubt that this was the Henrysoun who is the subject of this note.¹⁶

Henrysoun seems to have been a useful and energetic member of the town council, judged by the number of duties that had nothing to do with his work as medical officer which were laid on him. In 1615 he was on a committee charged with the establishment of the University library, and on another concerned with the reconstruction of the Netherbow. In that year there seems to have been some irregularity in the election of the Bakers' Deacon. The town council declared it null and void, and ordered a new election, appointing four of their number, of whom Henrysoun was one, to 'sie guid order keipit'. This appears to have been satisfactorily accomplished.

At this time the citizens of Edinburgh still depended on wells for their water supply; an arrangement that was always unsatisfactory and often inadequate. Periodic attempts were made to improve matters by cleaning and deepening the wells, by restricting the times at which water might be drawn, and by forbidding the professional water-carriers, 'burnmen' and 'wemen watter bereris' to take water from the public wells in order to supply brewers, dyers, bakers and others who wanted it for trade purposes. An order was actually made in 1580 requiring the woman water-bearers to give up their trade altogether—largely, it would appear because they were addicted to 'thift and harlettry', and were 'commoun banneris, sweireris and blasphemers of Goddis name'. The citizens were instructed to fetch what water they required themselves, or to have it brought by their own domestics. Nobody seems to have paid much attention to this.

Although driven to such unpleasant expedients as opening wells in the burial ground of Greyfriars the town council took no steps to introduce a better supply until 1616. In that year a committee, of which Henrysoun was a member, was appointed to confer with the proprietors of certain springs at Comiston, which, it was suggested might be a suitable source of supply for the town.¹⁷ Shortly after 'my lord provost' visited the springs presumably accompanied by some members of his council, as the bill for drinks on this occasion amounted to £17 13s. 4d. Thereafter enthusiasm seems to have cooled. There were discussions with the Society of Brewers of Ale and Beer—who of course had a special interest in the matter—and in 1621 the Scots Parliament passed an Act approving the proposals, and directing the Privy Council to deal with the compensation

to be paid to proprietors whose lands would be disturbed by the work. But the powers given by this Act were not used until 1672, and the supply was not available to the citizens until 1681, by which time Henrysoun had been in his grave for fifty-two years.

Hereafter references to Henrysoun are few and fragmentary. His name appears in a town council minute during 1619 as one of those deputed to inquire into some 'misorder' at the College, and a minute of the Privy Council records that on 15 December 1623 a medical certificate, signed by Henrysoun, was received, referring to Sir Thomas Otterburn, to whom certain duties had been deputed, but who 'hes contractit ane pluricie with ane great fever who hes lyne bedfast sene Thursday at nicht last', and who is therefore unable to obey the council's instructions.¹⁸

About his later years there is some mystery. There is no record of his having given up his appointment as Town Surgeon, but the minutes of the town council state that on 23 February 1627 John Ker, 'ordiner Chirurgian to the poore of this burgh', resigned office,¹⁹ and five days later James Henrysoun was re-appointed. Ker was Henrysoun's son-in-law, having married Grizel, Henrysoun's daughter, in 1608. It may, perhaps, be of some significance that, during the previous month, a ship called the *Good Fortune*, of Dundee, detained on suspicion that some undiagnosed disease on board might be plague, was released from quarantine on a medical certificate signed by 'Lawrence Cockeburn, Chirurgian in Edinburgh'. Cockeburn, also, was a son-in-law of Henrysoun, and the fact that Ker and he had apparently been undertaking work that would ordinarily have been done by their father-in-law may suggest that Henrysoun was beginning to feel the weight of his years—may, perhaps, have been ill—and that his sons-in-law had been acting as his deputies. Possibly too, the desirability of keeping the appointment in the family was not overlooked! In fact, Lawrence Cockeburn did eventually succeed him.

A brief note in the register of the old Kirk of the Canongate shows that 'James Henrysoun, chirurgian, burgess of Edinburgh' was buried there in May 1629.²⁰ There he lies among the forgotten dead, not, perhaps one of the 'famous men' that the writer of Ecclesiasticus bids us praise, but at least one deserving the honour due to a man who, under the menace of one of the most terrible diseases, risked his own life in the service of his fellow citizens.

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