Abel Lawrence Peirson on Animal Magnetism

To the Editor—I enjoyed reading the recent article by Leroy D. Vandam, M.D. on Abel Lawrence Peirson. The subject of the article is no stranger in the Wood Library-Museum collection. We have a copy of a rare English translation of the 1831 French Commission Report on Animal Magnetism, published in 1836, believed to be originally owned by Dr. Peirson. His bookplate (fig. 1) adheres to the back of the front cover. Dr. Ralph Waters donated this book to the Wood Library-Museum in 1967. The article makes Peirson’s personality stand out, and this book of even greater value to the Wood Library-Museum.

The new information on this obscure New England surgeon will be incorporated into our annotations of the Wood Library-Museum rare book catalogue. The article also somewhat corroborates the movement of this book in the turn of the century. The bookplate of the Essex Institute Library on our copy indicates that the transfer of its ownership occurred in 1906, which was about the same time that the Boston Medical Library received the “Peirson Letter Book” from Mrs. Lot M. Hamlin. Vandam’s observation of Dr. Peirson’s skeptical view on animal magnetism can be verified by notes in pencil that appear throughout the book. At the end of the book are Peirson’s handwritten comments on the 1831 Report: “N.B. M. Dubois of Amiens has written a critique on this report, which is a complete refutation of its doctrines and conclusions. M. Dubois witnessed the experiments and declares that no facts were brought to light but such as [sic.] were susceptible of explanation by the supposition of imposture or effects of imagination. M. Foissac has never replied to this critique.”

Vandam’s article has shed light on the life of a true Bostonian pioneer of anesthesia. The handwritten notes on animal magnetism on his personal copy of an important work of the time reveals Peirson’s interest a decade prior to the introduction of surgical anesthesia. Such interest is an indication of surgeon Peirson’s concern about pain and suffering in surgery. Because animal magnetism was not an answer to his concern, he enthusiastically welcomed the advent of ether anesthesia.

REFERENCES

2. Poyen St. Sauveur, C: Report on the Magnetic Experiments made by the Commission of the Royal Academy of Medicine, . . . by Mr. Husson. Translated from the French, and preceded with an introduction. Boston, D. K. Hitchcock, 1836

(Accepted for publication March 12, 1990.)

FIG. 1. Bookplate of Abel Lawrence Peirson.