

News, Notes and Queries

JOHN SNOW AND THE INSTITUTE OF FRANCE

PRACTICALLY all that is known of John Snow's life is derived from the Biographical Memoir which Benjamin Ward Richardson published in Snow's posthumous masterpiece *On Chloroform and Other Anaesthetics*.¹ In this memoir, Richardson states that Snow accompanied an uncle, Mr. Empson, to Paris in 1856 and that during the visit he deposited at the Institute of France a copy of his work on Cholera, submitting it as an entry for the prize of 10,000 francs offered for the discovery of a means for preventing or curing the disease.² Richardson proceeds, 'The decision of the judges has since been published, but no note seems to have been made of Dr. Snow's researches'. In 1887 Richardson repeated these statements.³

By 1898 the Dictionary of National Biography had reached Snow's name and an article written by the late Sir D'Arcy Power contains the following:

To Snow's scientific insight was due the theory that cholera is communicated by means of a contaminated water-supply and his essay on the communication of cholera, which was first published in 1849, was awarded by the Institute of France a prize of 1,200l.⁴

Garrison's *History of Medicine* contains the following note:

John SNOW (1813-1858), of York, a London medical graduate of 1844, first stated the theory that cholera is water-borne and taken into the system by the mouth (1849) in an essay which was awarded a prize of 30,000 francs by the Institute of France.⁵

There are thus two contradictory statements, apart from the discrepancies in the sums mentioned. It seemed reasonable to approach the Institute itself to clear up the confusion and this was done with the kind help of Dr. G. Vourc'h, the distinguished French anaesthetist. He received the following reply:⁶

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Institut de France.

PARIS, le 13 Avril 1950.

ACADÉMIE DES SCIENCES.

Les Secrétaires perpétuels de l'Académie des sciences à Monsieur G. VOURC'H, à Londres.
Monsieur,

Par une lettre en date du 27 mars, vous nous demandez des renseignements sur un médecin anglais nommé John SNOW, qui, vers 1854-56, aurait présenté à l'Institut un mémoire sur le choléra, en vue de concourir pour un prix de 10,000 francs offert à qui découvrirait le mode de transmission de la maladie.

John SNOW a, en effet, posé en 1855 sa candidature au prix qui venait d'être fondé par J.-R. Bréant, ancien directeur des essais des monnaies de France, qui, dans son testament, s'exprimait en ces termes:

'J'institue et donne après ma mort, pour être décerné par l'Institut de France, un prix de 100,000 francs à celui qui aura trouvé le moyen de guérir du choléra asiatique ou qui aura découvert les causes de ce terrible fléau, . . .

. . . Comme il est probable que le prix de 100,000 francs, institué comme je l'ai expliqué plus haut, ne sera pas décerné de suite, je veux, jusqu'à ce que ce prix soit gagné, que l'intérêt dudit capital soit donné par l'Institut à la personne qui aura fait avancer la science sur la question du choléra ou de toute autre maladie épidémique. . . .'

Ce prix n'a jamais été décerné, mais les intérêts, conformément au vœu du testateur, ont été fréquemment attribués. Ils le furent pour la première fois en 1858 à L. Doyère et, actuellement, l'Académie des sciences attribue tous ans un prix de 20,000 frs sur cette fondation.

Nos archives possèdent deux lettres de John SNOW relatives à sa candidature, en dates des 7 mars et 13 octobre 1855. Les *mémoires imprimés qu'il avait remis* à cette occasion ont été déposés à la Bibliothèque de l'Institut de France.

R. Couvrier. Louis de Broglie.

It is thus established that John Snow did not receive the Institute's prize. We may be tempted to think that he ought to have had it but we must not forget that it was many years before even his own countrymen gave to his researches the praise and honour which they undoubtedly deserved.

G. EDWARDS

Beaconsfield, Bucks.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. SNOW, J. (1858) *On Chloroform and Other Anaesthetics*. Edited, with a memoir of the author, by B. W. Richardson. London: J. Churchill.
2. SNOW, J. (1858) *ibid.*, p. xxii.
3. RICHARDSON, B. W. (1887) *Asclepiad*, 4, 274.
4. POWER, D'ARCY (1898) *Dict. Nat. Biog.*, 53, 207.
5. GARRISON, F. H. (1929) *Introduction to the History of Medicine*, 4th ed., p. 661. Philadelphia.
6. Translation:

'In your letter of the 27th March you ask for information concerning an English doctor named John SNOW who about 1854-56 may have sent to the Institute a memoir on cholera in order to enter for a prize of 100,000 frs offered to the man who should discover the mode of transmission of the malady.

'John SNOW did in fact submit his candidature for the prize which had just been founded by J.-R. Bréant, former director of the French Mint who in his will expressed himself as follows:

"I institute, and give after my death, to be awarded by the Institute of France, a prize of 100,000 frs to the man who shall have found the means of curing Asiatic cholera or who shall have discovered the cause of this terrible scourge, . . .

" . . . As it is probable that the prize of 100,000 frs, instituted as I have explained above, will not be awarded at once, I wish, until the prize be won, that the interest on the said capital

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shall be given by the Institute to the person who shall have advanced our knowledge of cholera or of any other epidemic disease.”

“The prize has never been awarded, but the interest, in accordance with the wishes of the donor, has been frequently disbursed. It was given in the first instance in 1858 to L. Doyère and, in fact, the Académie des sciences gives each year a prize of 20,000 frs from this fund.

‘Our records contain two letters from John SNOW referring to his candidature, under the dates of March 7th and October 13th, 1855. The printed documents which he sent at that time have been placed in the Library of the Institute of France.’