

American Osler Society William B. Bean Student Research Award Proposal

Project Title: “The Political Life of Dr. Morell Mackenzie”

Abstract:

In the late nineteenth century, Queen Victoria called on Morell Mackenzie, a pioneering British laryngologist, to consult at the bedside of her son-in-law, Frederick III, then the Crown Prince of Prussia and future emperor of the German empire. Whereas German physicians diagnosed laryngeal cancer and recommended radical surgery, Morell Mackenzie, in collaboration with the renowned pathologist Rudolph Virchow, disagreed, proceeding as if the disease were benign. Before and after the Emperor died, 90 days after his crowning, his medical case sparked international controversy, at which Mackenzie found himself at the center. Ultimately, the end of Mackenzie’s life was one of quiet tragedy in the historical record: he was removed from the London Royal College of Physicians, and he died of heart failure at age 54. His prolific legacy is complicated by this one event, and any recent scholarship on his life centers around retrospective analyses of the medical case, asking hypothetical questions with the lens of more modern medical advancements. This project takes a different approach, using the international notoriety of Morell Mackenzie, Rudolph Virchow, Emperor Frederick III and Queen Victoria to examine the primary sources detailing this case study. It aims to utilize these records first to clarify the events of the case otherwise shrouded by speculation about the controversy, but it also aims to ask larger questions about the dynamics of medical specialization and evolving diagnostic categories in late nineteenth century Europe.

Project goals:

- Methods Goal 1: Obtain access to correspondences between Sir Morell Mackenzie and Queen Victoria, housed in the Royal Archives (Windsor, UK).
- Methods Goal 2: Obtain access to correspondences between Sir Morell Mackenzie and the British Royal College of Physicians housed in the Royal College of Physicians of London (London, UK).
- Methods Goal 2: Identify writings of Dr. Rudolph Virchow on the case of Emperor Frederick III.
- Methods Goal 3: Perform a review of archived newspaper coverage of the case of Emperor Frederick III.
- Analysis Goal 1: Analyze these primary sources in order to clarify the motivations behind the German physicians’ public rebuke of Mackenzie, Mackenzie’s decision to publish his controversial reply (i.e. “The Fatal Illness of Frederick the Noble”), and the decision of the Royal College of Physicians to censure him.
- Analysis Goal 2: Utilize the case of Emperor Frederick III as a way to better understand public and professional perception of the evolution of cancer from a clinical to a clinical-pathological entity.

Background and relevance:

Dr. Morell Mackenzie (1837-1892) is considered the “father of laryngology” in England. Training under Johann Czermak in Budapest, he returned with knowledge of the newly invented laryngoscope to England. There, he grew his surgical practice toward international reputation. He founded both the Hospital for Diseases of the Throat and the Journal of Laryngology and Rhinology, both of which are still running today. One day in 1887, he received correspondence on behalf of Queen Victoria summoning him to consult at the bedside of Frederick III, the crown prince of Germany, who had developed hoarseness refractory to multiple attempts at ablation. Upon first meeting the prince, Dr. Morell Mackenzie obtained four biopsies, sending them to Dr. Rudolph Virchow for analysis, who diagnosed benign disease. Later, when the prince’s hoarseness returned, Dr. Morell Mackenzie was again summoned to examine, and he diagnosed laryngeal cancer. Emperor Frederick III died on June 15, 1888, 90 days into his reign. Throughout the course of his consultation, Dr. Morell Mackenzie was subject to vitriolic attacks from the press, sometimes antisemitic and other times nationalistic. After the death of the Emperor, German physicians published a scathing account of Dr. Mackenzie, accusing him of causing the death of their beloved leader. Dr. Mackenzie responded to these attacks by publishing his own account, which is sometimes attributed as the reason why Dr. Mackenzie was ultimately censured by the Royal College of Physicians.

Perhaps because of this, Dr. Mackenzie’s legacy was left in disarray. Dr. Mackenzie died soon after this controversy, succumbing to heart failure at the age of 54. While there is record of Dr. Mackenzie publishing essays and giving speeches during this time, the historical record does not address much of significance beyond an apparent fall from grace. Yet even today some otolaryngologists in England celebrate his legacy by putting a wreath on his grave and holding ceremony. The majority of Mackenzie’s historical legacy centers around one medical decision: Was his diagnosis wrong? What would have been different if the Emperor was diagnosed today? As Emperor Frederick III’s son and successor, Wilhelm II, was more antagonistic in his foreign policy toward England, some authors go so far as to wonder if Dr. Mackenzie’s treatment of an emperor’s laryngeal cancer indirectly led to the World Wars of the 20th century.

While all these questions are interesting and provocative, they rely primarily on re-imagining accounts from secondary literature using more modern medical perspectives; they add little to our knowledge of the practice of medicine in the late nineteenth century, which was a time of great international collaboration and medical specialization. That a pioneer of laryngology could consult the founder of pathology, that their diagnosis might be watched and recorded by the world’s press, and that their decisions might be implicated in the death of a world leader—these facts provide us superlative insight into the state of medical specialization in the late nineteenth century Europe and how the new resulting “expert consultant” challenged previous notions of expertise, professional identity, and nationalistic pride. These facts also provide insight into the evolving definitions of disease categories (i.e. from clinical to pathological) and with cancer as a feared, terminal illness. This project is therefore relevant not only because the

case of Sir Morell Mackenzie and Emperor Frederick III are seminal figures in the history of otolaryngology (and clarifying their legacy for the historical record would be helpful), but also because this case study would contribute to our understanding of the development of diagnostic and professional categories that continue to shape how we practice today. As new technologies continue to change our definitions of disease and question previous professional boundaries, it provides insight into how these dynamics arise in political, interpersonal and technological ways rather than purely biological ones.

Methods:

This project will examine these topics by examining archival records of Dr. Morell Mackenzie and Dr. Rudolph Virchow concerning the case of Emperor Fredrick III together with archives of newspaper coverage of the event and existing biographical and secondary sources on the topic. Sources identified so far have been listed below.

Bibliography:

Archives:

The Royal Archives (Windsor, UK)

- This Archive catalogues correspondences both between Dr. Morell Mackenzie and Henry Ponsonby (the secretary of Queen Victoria) and also correspondences about Dr. Mackenzie and the crown prince.

The Royal College of Physicians of London (London, UK)

- This collection has several entries regarding the controversy, including letters from physicians expressing distaste with Dr. Mackenzie as well as letters concerning the decision to censure Dr. Mackenzie.

The National Archives (London, UK)

- This archive houses various recorded speeches and personal correspondences of Dr. Morell Mackenzie.

Other sources:

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