

## **Patrick Heron Watson's Surgical Experiences in the Crimean War: Expectations versus Reality**

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### **Abstract**

The Crimean War is often cited as a watershed moment in the history of medicine. A benighted conflict which saw an ill-prepared establishment buckling under the demands of Britain's first major military campaign since the fall of Napoleon. The letters of Patrick Heron Watson (1832-1907), twice President of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh (RCSEd) and held in the archives of the College, provide an insightful view of the sufferings endured by medical staff during the conflict.

Watson, like many of his contemporaries, rushed at the chance for a rapid development of his surgical skills through military service, but his expectations were overturned by the life-threatening reality of war. His account differs from others penned by medical men during the conflict, such as George Lawson (1831-1903), David Greig (1832-90) or Frederick Robinson (1826-1901), as it takes place exclusively on the hospital wards and in the surgeon's lodgings rather than on the battlefield. In another departure from these authors, his recollections were never incorporated later into a memoir. His account stands somewhat apart, serving not only to describe events but to record his day-to-day dissatisfaction with the system, the Army and the war. Indeed, Watson subsequently buried these experiences, rather than use them to further his career, in direct contravention of his original purpose.

The process of this reorientation of intent is told in many enlightening episodes in which he endured Army inefficiency, hospital politics and multiple brushes with death. In this paper his recollections of this process will be recounted.

### **Keywords**

Crimea, Crimean War, Medicine, Surgery, Scutari, Balaklava

## **Ambitious young men**

Patrick Heron Watson was born in Edinburgh in 1832, the second son of the Reverend Charles Watson (1794-1866) of Burntisland. While his elder brother Robert (Bob) (1823-1910) would follow their father into the church, Patrick showed an academic inclination and pursued medicine as a career from an early age. Educated first at Circus Place School and later at the Edinburgh Academy from 1840, he subsequently applied to study medicine at the University of Edinburgh where he graduated MD in 1853. He rapidly secured a position at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh as a house surgeon and obtained Licentiatehip of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh (RCSEd) that same year. As he settled into his employment, he began to conduct classes for the next wave of students and expressed a desire to pursue teaching further.<sup>1</sup>

Watson's professional development, from his perspective, coincided with a number of fortuitous events. The first of these was the rapidly deteriorating state of relations with the Russian Empire. Russia, engaged as it was in a long running series of conflicts with the Ottoman Empire for influence in Southern Europe and Asia, had fallen into disfavour in British and French political circles. The net result of the resultant dispute was an official declaration of war by Britain on 28 March 1854. Watson and his contemporaries could not fail to see the great opportunity for practical surgical experience which such a conflict would entail.

The second fortuitous event was much closer to home, with the imminent retirement of the University of Edinburgh's Professor of Military Surgery, George Ballingall (1780-1855). Ballingall was a distinguished figure, and his position was the only one of its kind in mainland Britain at the time. Such an academic plum was therefore desired by many and Watson made several veiled references throughout his letters that he hoped to also throw his hat into the ring. This opinion was shared by his contemporaries and more recently his own great-nephew Dr William N. Boog Watson (1897-1973) who also suspected that Ballingall's position could be considered his prime motivation.<sup>2 3</sup>

While Watson's early letters defer from discussing his motivations, his later letters are more explicit:

I expect to return to Edinburgh ultimately and to practice there as a surgeon and think vaguely that my army service will fit me for certain positions at home ... I am increasingly ambitious in my designs upon the Edinburgh public and should wish they there keep me 'in memoriam'.<sup>4</sup>

He elaborated further on 9 May 1855 that '... more than all [I] would like to take the field as should such a chance ever come my way, I might be qualified in all aspects to lecture on Military Surgery'.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Boog Watson WN. An Edinburgh Surgeon of the Crimean War – Patrick Heron Watson (1832-1907). *Medical History*. 1966; 10(2): 166-176.

<sup>2</sup> Anon. Patrick Heron Watson. *Edinburgh Medical Journal*. 1908; 23: 3-5.

<sup>3</sup> Boog Watson. An Edinburgh Surgeon, 1966 (Note 1).

<sup>4</sup> Watson PH. Letter to Robert Watson. 1855 May 30. Patrick Heron Watson Letters from the Crimea, 1854-1856. Archive of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh. GD 87.

<sup>5</sup> Watson PH. Letter to Isabella Watson. 1855 May 9.

Watson's military ambition was encouraged by the medical and surgical community in Edinburgh, which was itself notably fuelled by two former Presidents of the Royal Colleges, James Syme (1799-1870) and James Young Simpson (1811-70). In a letter to his brother Robert their influence was evident when he stated: 'you have heard by this time of my intention to temporarily enter the service, to which I made up my mind in three days, being strongly urged to do so by Syme and Simpson'.

Watson's colleague at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh, and Fellow RCSEd Licentiate, David Greig (1832-90) helps add further depth to this when he related in his own letters a missive he received from James Young Simpson in October 1854. Simpson declared to Greig: 'I do not see why one of you or all of you, conjointly or separately, should not write an excellent essay (a Medico-chirurgical) on the campaign'.<sup>6</sup> Not only did such a statement betray a distinctly academic and cavalier attitude to the dangers the young surgeons would soon be facing; it also reinforced the notion that a move into the Army was but the next logical step in a surgical education. With such illustrious mentors espousing the benefits of military service, and the medical community abuzz with the potential for success and notoriety, Watson and his colleagues signed up *en masse*.



Figure 1. Patrick Heron Watson and his colleagues from the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary, as pictured in 1854. Front row: John Beddoe, Joseph Lister, David Christison and Alexander Struthers. Back row: John Kirk, George Hogarth Pringle and Patrick Heron Watson. Wellcome Collection. Reference 14449i. Public Domain Mark.

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<sup>6</sup> Hill D (ed). *Letters from the Crimea: Writing Home, A Dundee Doctor*. Dundee: Dundee University Press; 2010. p.10.

A perfect encapsulation of the tragic consequence can be seen in a single image (Figure 1) in which Watson and some of his closest friends from the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh are shown. Of all the men in the image, only Joseph Lister (1827-1912) would not enlist on account of his Quaker beliefs. Of the remaining six, Alexander Struthers (1830-55) would die during the campaign; and both Watson and David Christison (1830-1912) would be invalided home as a result of illness, a fifty per cent rate of attrition. The rush to emulate the battlefield surgeons of the previous generation and follow their proven path to fame in the field was simultaneously the primary motivator and the greatest reason for Watson's later disappointments. A grinding, industrialised conflict entailed little of the dash and *élan* of the Napoleonic Wars but still provided a suitably Napoleonic disease rate. This combination would confound his expectations of what awaited him and circumvent his desire for surgical practice.

### **Application, departure and arrival**

To enter the Army Medical Department at this time the entrant was required to possess a diploma from one of the Royal Colleges, have at least eighteen-months' service in a recognised hospital, show a baptismal certificate, present affidavits of conduct and character, be unmarried; and be between the ages of 21 and 25. There would then follow a formal interview in London at the office of the Director General and an examination.<sup>7</sup>

Watson more than met all the requirements, having deferred his enlistment until the end of 1854 in order to serve his required eighteen months at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh. Despite this, the process was anything but smooth and the first of his letters describes it in detail, brimming with the scorn which would become something of a hallmark of his writings. He described his interviewer as '... a new man bearing the mark of the army on his upper lip and in his manners', and the whole Army Medical Department as 'the altar of government regime and absurdity' when he was informed that his baptismal certificate was invalid, as it had been sent by his parents rather than by the Registrar of Burntisland. In a letter to his parents, he raged: '... and then of all absurdities how was this to be remedied? Why by my taking an affidavit before a magistrate that to the best of my belief your certificate was true!!!'.<sup>8</sup>

A brief trip to the courts ensued before an irritated Watson was invited to sit his exam on 23 December 1854. While the Latin element of it confounded the other two examinees, Watson was untroubled, and he was accepted for service at the military hospital at Fort Pitt, Chatham. His aforementioned aim was to gain surgical experience. So, when he was assigned to Ward 14 of Fort Pitt's medical rather than surgical department, it was the beginning of a long pattern of disappointments. As Watson put it: 'such is the evil of being M.D.'.<sup>9</sup> These experiences help to show the great value of Watson's accounts. Through them we can glimpse the idiosyncrasies of the examination and selection process, as well as the byzantine bureaucracy for which the system would be subsequently criticised.

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<sup>7</sup> Shepherd JA. The Surgeons in the Crimea 1854-1856, *Journal of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh*. 1972; 17: 3-20.

<sup>8</sup> Watson PH. Letter to Rev. Charles Watson. 1854 December 21.

<sup>9</sup> Watson PH. Letter to Isabella Boog Watson. 1854 December 29.

After a brief spell in Chatham and a lengthy voyage by sea, Watson arrived at Scutari hospital at the end of January 1855. The Anglo-French war effort at this point had ground to a halt as the winter weather set in. The rate of sickness in an army equipped for a summer campaign grew exponentially as the focus shifted to a winter siege of Sevastopol. Watson's arrival coincided with the zenith of sickness in the Army, with over 3,000 men in that month alone being placed on the sick list in an army of 30,000. He stayed in Scutari only briefly while waiting for a posting to Kulali Hospital further up the coast. His initial thoughts bluntly stated: '... the Barrack Hospital is a lazaretto, a dead house. Everything there is bad'.<sup>10</sup> He decried the cramped arrangement for the sick and '... orderlies who don't do what they are bid and Sisters of Charity who promise to do, but don't or can't perform'.<sup>11</sup> He also learned of the death of his friend Alexander Struthers, lamenting that

... the real fact is that he overworked himself trying to do justice to his patients and carry out our Edin. [sic] plans of attention to patients ... getting up at 3 in the morning and rising whenever he was called for (which is not one's duty as there is an orderly officer who ought to do it).<sup>12</sup>

He also met another Edinburgh colleague, whom he named as 'Johnston', stating with alarm that 'I hardly knew him as he was so ghostly pale and ill-looking'.<sup>13</sup> The shock of these events is evident in the candour with which he ended the letter, admitting that 'I was in desperate low spirits for I am convinced that no mistake is to be greater than coming out here'.<sup>14</sup>

### **Kulali – new hospital, same problems**

Watson's first posting was Kulali, another Ottoman barracks requisitioned by the British. He arrived there at the beginning of February 1855 and was given responsibility for two wards and around 120 patients. The problems he had witnessed at Scutari were amplified there, for as lamentable as the conditions at Scutari may have been, it was still the main hospital and therefore maintained a reliable connection to the Army's logistics chain. Watson rapidly realised that medicines were much harder to come by at the new post, and that the issues he had experienced with nurses and orderlies were the rule rather than the exception. After less than a month in post he was ranting to his family that he was '... disgusted at my orders not being attended to, so that I actually have to go round myself and push pills down the patients throats or they get no medicine at all'.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, he described his work as 'wearisome in the extreme, you find your orders disregarded, your medicines not sent either through the negligence of the dispenser or the want of medicines' and that each day he had to 'destroy a legion (sometimes) of little

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<sup>10</sup> Watson PH. Letter to Isabella Boog Watson. 1855 January 31.

<sup>11</sup> Watson PH. Letter to Rev. Charles Watson. 1855 February 2.

<sup>12</sup> Watson. 1855 January 31. (Note 10).

<sup>13</sup> Watson. 1855 January 31 (Note 12).

<sup>14</sup> Watson. 1855 January 31 (Note 12).

<sup>15</sup> Watson PH. Letter to Rev. Charles Watson. 1855 February 2.

animals, not generally found upon the garments of the respectable in England'.<sup>16</sup> These early writings provide a valuable insight into the workings of the smaller hospitals on the Bosphorus, as the Barrack Hospital at Scutari often gained the lion's share of attention, both at the time and in historiography since.

However, while he was undoubtedly affronted by the unpleasant reality of a wartime hospital, his letters give a wealth of extra detail regarding his patients and their treatment. On 11 February 1855 he wrote:

The Fever cases are increasing in number, they are characterised by a great tendency to head symptoms of very severe nature from the very first, and towards the close by ... jaundice. With all the cases we must have to combat scurvy into the bargain and some of the cases that you the best hopes of are carried off by repeated small haemorrhages.<sup>17</sup>

This is a great reminder that, in contravention of the statistics published by the Army Medical Department in 1858, while more graphic diseases such as typhus or dysentery may have landed the soldier in Watson's ward, it was simple scurvy brought on by want of a vitamin-rich diet that was as much to blame for their eventual deaths. Watson's own emotional hardening in response to this morbid environment becomes obvious from the earliest of these Kulali letters, in which he declares that 'one can feel no interest in patients when one has so many'.<sup>18</sup> This hardening is also seen in his frustration at the lack of surgical experience available to him in the hospital, when he complained that

... my wards are termed the dysentery wards. Now dysentery such as we have it here is the most tiresome, odious, unsatisfactory affliction to heal one could wish to have and here I am, loving surgery, condemned to take an interest in what I don't give one sham for.<sup>19</sup>

It should be noted though, that part of the reason for the lack of surgical opportunities lay with Watson himself. He had revised his earlier desire to be attached to a regiment when he learned that Assistant Surgeons in the field were paid less than he had believed. The other key element in this, the scarcity of surgical patients, was most certainly out of Watson's control however, with the decision made by the Department in April 1855 not to send wounded to the Scutari or Kulali hospitals but to treat them primarily at Balaklava itself.<sup>20</sup> In part this was to spare them a potentially hazardous journey by sea, but also because of improvement in the facilities available closer to the field of battle.

However, if one judges the severity of Watson's irritations at Kulali by the proportion of letters he devotes to them, then neither want of medicines, lack of surgical work, wages, or the general state of the hospital are at the top of the list – that tier is

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<sup>16</sup> Watson PH. Letter to Rev. Charles Watson. 1855 February 11.

<sup>17</sup> Watson. 1855 February 11 (Note 16).

<sup>18</sup> Watson. 1855 February 2 (Note 15).

<sup>19</sup> Watson PH. Letter to Isabella Boog Watson. 1855 March 12.

<sup>20</sup> Cantlie N. *A History of the Army Medical Department*, Vol. II. Edinburgh: Churchill Livingstone; 1974. p.155.

undoubtedly reserved for nurses, orderlies, and their allies. From the very beginning of his account, he fumes with great candour about the state of the nurses who travelled east to volunteer, and their benefactors in the political establishment in the region. Lady Eliza Charlotte Alexander Stratford Canning (1805-82), wife of the British Ambassador, took a particular interest in Kulali and the women who worked there. Although possessed of no political authority of her own, her proximity to those with the power to force change had the potential to be a real boon to the stretched medical staff. Watson eventually came to see things differently, describing her as a '... meddling, frolicsome runaway from home old woman, with very little sense' and later as 'a well-intentioned woman who dabbles in things she should have nothing to do with'.<sup>21 22</sup>

One result of such 'dabbling' was to force the assistant surgeons of the hospital out of their accommodations and into the main hospital building, so their lodgings could be occupied by a draft of 47 nurses under Mary Stanley (1813-79). Knowing full well the unsanitary state of the hospital, Watson and his colleagues were appalled, and he laid the blame squarely on Lady Stratford:

Who gives her the authority to do this I don't know and who puts it into her head to put the assistant surgeons into a place where they must run a great risk of their lives I don't know ... of course the question should never be the comfort of the nurses compared with the medical men, as the former are worse than useless without the latter.<sup>23</sup>

While one might hope that at least their shared criticisms of the Army and establishment would have formed the bedrock for a solid relationship with the nurses themselves, Watson's letters contain little positivity regarding their work and wellbeing, describing nurses generally as 'those secondary things' who 'seem to get ill constantly and are constantly malingering'.<sup>24 25</sup> In February 1855 he notes: '... some of the new nurses have had fever but upon my word they are no loss. A bevy of good cooks would be more useful and not half as troublesome'.<sup>26</sup>

He also makes no exception for Florence Nightingale (1820-1910), whom he dislikes for the 'absurd puff' written about her in the same newspapers which slandered the Army Medical Staff. Watson did not hold back in his attacks, stating 'from what I have seen of her, which certainly has been in the distance, she is as I say a scraggy bare boned, very dowdy old maid, about whom the less romance the better'.<sup>27</sup> All this during just the first two months of his tenure in the Army left Watson despairing for his prospects:

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<sup>21</sup> Watson PH. Letter to Annie Watson. 1855 February 24.

<sup>22</sup> Watson PH. Letter to Robert Watson. 1855 March 6.

<sup>23</sup> Watson PH. Letter to Isabella Watson. 1855 February 16.

<sup>24</sup> Watson. 1855 February 16 (Note 23).

<sup>25</sup> Watson PH. Letter to Isabella Boog Watson. 1855 May 23.

<sup>26</sup> Watson. 1855 February 16 (Note 23).

<sup>27</sup> Watson PH. Letter to Annie. 1855 February 24.

I think any man entering the Service is a fool and had I to do it again I assure you I should act very differently. However as I am here I will stay. But I by no means suppose that there is anything to be learned here except to take things quietly and not to lose one's temper.<sup>28</sup>

## **Typhus and Balaklava**

Dr Watson had suffered small periods of illness during his first couple of months in the Army, notably rheumatism and a 'bilious attack' while at Scutari, but his luck ran out in late March 1855 when he contracted typhus and was bedridden for almost three weeks. He had spent the time leading up to this caring for David Greig, as he had grappled with the same illness. His letters paint a remarkably bleak but descriptive picture of the suffering endured by so many of his patients before him, telling of the 'desperate thirst' which marked its onset and the 'depression of mind' which he suffered once it manifested fully. Although in letters to his mother he tried to put a brave face on his illness, insisting that he had been 'not badly' affected and that he had 'enjoyed being ill very much', he was far more candid with his brother Bob who was at this time serving as a regimental padre to the Highland Brigade in Crimea.<sup>29</sup> To Bob he admitted: '... at first I was much excited and read and spoke a great deal too much then I got stupid and sleepy ... and lay caring for nothing and nobody'.<sup>30</sup> While he made light of the concurrent weight loss to his parents, he was far more honest with his brother:

You can't imagine what a whipping post I am, my calves are quite gone and as to fat no such thing exists anywhere over my body, and to see me walking leaning on the arm of someone and resting my other hand on a stick I must cut a very absurd figure, my loose clothes, my shuffling gait and white face.<sup>31</sup>

He followed Greig to the resort town of Therapia to convalesce and spent several weeks recuperating and re-evaluating his purpose in the Army. Despite his previous reservations about pay, he determined to renew his attempt to be posted to an active regiment in Crimea 'at any sacrifice'. This was partly encouraged by the developments at Kulali in his absence, including the influx of civilian doctors seconded to the Army to help make up staff numbers, and the development of the old barrack stables as new quarters for Watson and his colleagues. Although he conceded that the quality of the nursing staff had improved in his absence, with the departure of Mary Stanley and the arrival of the 39 'Sellonite' sisters of the Anglican Sisterhood of the Holy Cross, he described the civilian doctors scathingly as a 'set of incompetents' and the accommodations as comparable to a prison.<sup>32</sup> He was also conscious of the fact that, with the weather warming, the campaigning season could begin apace and was 'beyond

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<sup>28</sup> Watson. 1855 February 16 (Note 23).

<sup>29</sup> Watson PH. Letter to Isabella Boog Watson. 1855 April 11.

<sup>30</sup> Watson. 1855 April 11 (Note 29).

<sup>31</sup> Watson. 1855 April 11 (Note 29).

<sup>32</sup> Boog Watson. *An Edinburgh Surgeon*, 1966 (Note 1). p.169.



all measure anxious to go with it. At all rates I am sick of this place and its vile snobbism'.<sup>33</sup>

Watson's entreaties to family and superiors for a transfer to Crimea were successful, and he arrived at Balaklava on 24 June 1855 for service at the Castle Hospital, described by him as 'a lot of huts pitched on the slope' and with a staff which he soon labelled 'a set of outcasts'.<sup>34</sup> In his biographical article on his ancestor, William Boog Watson describes his time there as a 'happy term of duty'. However, the letters themselves again serve to add detail to the picture. Accommodated in a tent rather than in one of the huts and, with the high ground around the harbour subjected to the full force of the elements, Dr Watson frequently found himself flooded out or woken in the night by a deluge of rainwater. He also had a poor relationship with his superiors from the start, describing his superior Dr William Holmes Jephson (1818-70), as 'a bold reckless knife using surgeon but without brains necessary to let him know where and when that excellent instrument should be used'.<sup>35</sup>

Watson again found little opportunity for surgical practice, according to the same letter, complaining that, given the patients at the hospital were mostly convalescent wounded soldiers, he was a 'glorified dresser'. He once more found that the logistics situation, despite now being based at the main harbour for the entire British Army in Crimea, remained far from perfect. In what he described as a 'splendid case of "Redtapism"', he was informed by the commissary that, as his ration certificate was for Kulali and not Balaklava, he needed to make out a supplementary return to be signed by Dr Jephson and then returned to the Commissariat before he could draw rations – a process they admitted would take days. Watson and his fellow new arrivals shrewdly asked 'if we were to starve in the interim'.<sup>36</sup> Although this particular failing was the fault of the Quartermaster General's Department rather than the Medical Department, this sort of individual experience of the now legendary inadequacies of the Crimean War's bureaucracy adds a valuable personal dimension to the large-scale view of the conflict.

## **Karane and home**

His six weeks at the Castle Hospital came to an end on 2 July 1855 when he was at last made Medical Officer to an army unit. He had hoped for assignment to the Highland Brigade, in which his brother was serving, but had to content himself with No. 5 Battery Royal Artillery, which lay in reserve at Karane, north-west of Balaklava. Watson's letters reveal his dissatisfaction with this arrangement, telling of how 'I had applied when in mental misery for Karane ... from the very day I went there my appetite went away'.<sup>37</sup> A unit of the artillery in reserve had little call for a surgeon, again disappointing his desire for practical experience, but it did have a large sick roll and Watson found himself on it after just ten days.

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<sup>33</sup> Watson PH. Letter to Robert Watson. 1855 May 16.

<sup>34</sup> Watson PH. Letter to Isabella Boog Watson. 1855 June 24.

<sup>35</sup> Watson. 1855 June 24 (Note 34).

<sup>36</sup> Watson. 1855 June 24 (Note 34).

<sup>37</sup> Watson PH. Letter to Isabella Boog Watson. 1855 August 26.

From his subsequent letters he described how the water at Karane 'not only tasted of a drain but smelt of it' and so he used it only for brushing his teeth. Although he does not diagnose the illness which followed, the vivid descriptions of 'numbness in the bowels' seems to point towards dysentery, the severity of which marked the end of Watson's tenure in the Crimea altogether. He was sent to the hospital at Scutari and slowly recovered over the following three weeks. Although his time there was improved when he was joined by brother Bob, also suffering with dysentery, Watson also had to contend with the after-effects of being treated with mercury, from which he developed osteomyelitis of the jaw. Again, his body mass deserted him: 'I am weak as water' he admitted in August in a letter to his parents, 'far thinner than I was after the fever, so much so that I can get my ring, which generally fits my left little finger tightly, to fall off by hanging my hand straight down'.<sup>38</sup>

Interestingly, Florence Nightingale, who seemed unaware of Watson's earlier rudeness towards her, insisted that the acting matron of the hospital Miss Tebbutt (1810-1896) ensure the two brothers had all they needed to make them comfortable and Watson's missives soon reported happily that they had 'books; soup; rice and milk porridge; jellies; perfumery; soap and snow-white towels in profusion'.<sup>39</sup> RCSEd's collection of Watson's letters includes the note from Miss Tebbutt with these instructions, indicating Watson came into possession of it, and was therefore likely aware of Nightingale's efforts on his behalf.

Despite these creature comforts, Watson believed he would need three months to recover fully from his illnesses and hoped to do so in the UK. However, the Army Medical Department was loathe to allow any surgeon to leave the theatre of war before the campaign was over and he therefore faced considerable resistance from his superiors – the Medical Superintendent, Dr Alexander Cumming (1791-1858), and the Principal Medical Officer (PMO) for Scutari, Dr Robert Lawson (1815-94). Although he described Lawson as 'pleasant and agreeable' he disliked having to explain his position to him since he knew Lawson had extensive firsthand experience of the sufferings of the sick as the former PMO at Balaklava during 1854:

He spoke of the difficulties of sending away medical officers when there is such a scarcity (maldistribution). I spoke of the weakness of keeping a man out of whom they could hope to get no work for months on such a ground. He wanted to know how long I would like to get home for. I said until recovered and fit for duty when I should return with pleasure.<sup>40</sup>

Watson's perceived intransigence on the part of Lawson and Cumming left him claiming to his family that Cumming would not even consider sending sick officers home, ranting to his father that 'he cooks them, or quashes their proceedings and even in one case concealed an order to go home ...'.<sup>41</sup> 'May he have nine feet of ground near by here', an irate Watson stated on 29 August, 'I will subscribe to the monument'.<sup>42</sup> Dr

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<sup>38</sup> Watson. 1855 August 26 (Note 37).

<sup>39</sup> Boog Watson. *An Edinburgh Surgeon*, 1966 (Note 1). p.173

<sup>40</sup> Watson PH. Letter to Isabella Watson. 1855 September 2.

<sup>41</sup> Watson. 1855 September 2 (Note 40).

<sup>42</sup> Watson PH. Letter to Rev. Charles Watson. 1855 August 29.

Cumming was unlikely to be a beloved figure amongst the medical officers since his original arrival in Crimea was as Inspector General of Hospitals in October 1854, and while it is interesting to see such specific criticisms levelled against him they are difficult to substantiate as Watson was certainly not above hyperbole. Much to his surprise however, his request was granted, and Watson left Scutari for home on 13 September aboard the transport 'Earl of Shaftesbury' and later the 'Transit', arriving in London via Malta on 19 October 1855.

### **A worthwhile endeavour?**

Despite his numerous sufferings, it would be fair to say that Patrick Heron Watson failed to achieve the goals he set for himself during his army service. He saw out the remainder of his term of service in the UK, as the conflict ended with the Treaty of Paris before he could return to the theatre of war. Watson's stated aims had been to experience as broad a range of roles as possible within the Army Medical Department, while gaining as much surgical practice as he could, to prepare him for both private practice and potential academic roles once he returned. Although he certainly experienced a broad range of locales while he was in the Army, his roles were mainly medical and his chances for surgical experience naturally suffered as a result. In all his surviving letters he mentions performing only two amputations, demonstrating just how little he was able to accomplish while the needs of the Army were primarily focused on the high rate of sickness.

Fortunately, these professional disappointments did not mar his career progression when he returned to Edinburgh. If anything, he seems to have been inspired by the failure of one supposed fast-track to success by jumping with both feet straight into another – that of integrating himself more fully into the established surgical circles of the city. He married Elizabeth Gordon Miller (1842-1900), the daughter of the celebrated Edinburgh surgeon James Miller (1812-64), in 1861 and served as her father's assistant upon his return to the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh – inheriting an extensive practice upon his mentor's death. Watson's 1907 obituary was quick to note that although this 'gave him a great step, his rapid advance was largely due to his own industry and undoubted capabilities'.<sup>43</sup>

Watson also became a member of both the Harveian and Aesculapian societies of Edinburgh, dinner clubs which gave him access to the highest social echelons of his profession. Furthermore, while George Ballingall's chair of military surgery was discontinued by the University of Edinburgh in 1856, Watson was latterly successful in his desire to teach, becoming a celebrated lecturer on clinical surgery with the Extramural School of Medicine of the Royal Colleges from 1872 before being elected President of RCSEd for the first time in 1878 (Figure 2).<sup>44</sup> By following this purely civilian career path, he had achieved all the goals he had set for himself in the Army without risking his life.

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<sup>43</sup> Anon. Patrick Heron Watson, 1908 (Note 2).

<sup>44</sup> Guthrie D. *Extramural Medical Education in Edinburgh and the School of Medicine of the Royal Colleges*. Edinburgh: E&S Livingstone; 1965. p.21.



Figure 2. Patrick Heron Watson by Sir George Reid, 1894. Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh. Creative Commons Licence (CC BY-NC-ND).

Watson had been aware of this as an option for himself, a fact proven by his correspondence. In March 1855 he had received an apologetic letter from Joseph Lister in which he had been informed by his friend that he had just succeeded in gaining a lecturing position despite not having served in the Army. While Watson readily acknowledged in a subsequent letter to his brother that his friend's accolade was well deserved, he could not help but also be discouraged by his success, stating: 'I made a sad blunder coming out here'.<sup>45</sup> In following Lister's path when he returned, Watson got what he wanted – prestige and a successful career. Regardless of his own opinions regarding his time in the Army, his contemporaries seemed to regard his wartime experiences favourably when they commemorated him following his death, remarking that 'It is given to few in our profession to live a life more eventful, more strenuous and more successful'.<sup>46</sup> The same obituary even went on to praise the fact that he was

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<sup>45</sup> Watson. 1855 March 12. (Note 19).

<sup>46</sup> Anon. Patrick Heron Watson, 1908 (Note 2).

professionally skilled in medicine as well as in surgery, something which he felt had become a distraction for him in Crimea.

Biographers since then have also directly attributed his war service to his later success, with some going as far as to state that although he could be an 'obstinate character ... his war experience established his influential career'.<sup>47</sup> Even when commenting on his frequent short-temper and irritation in his writings, subsequent analysis has been forgiving; with Shepherd remarking that in his sometimes opinionated and snobbish remarks 'he was perhaps merely letting off steam'.<sup>48</sup> In short, it seems that while it may not have given him the immediate leg-up he had hoped for, Watson's time in the Crimea did bear fruit over subsequent years; if not in the way he had expected.

This overview of Watson's account has hopefully provided an insight into the intimate lens his letters provide: a view of the intricacies of the Army Medical Department, a microcosm of the Crimean conflict and the tragic reality of war as suffered by him, his peers and his patients. Contrary to all their hopes, the reality was that for a young surgeon, refining one's skills while at war was not a simple academic matter. Although careers could be made through wartime experience, the vast majority of participants would be left disappointed, disillusioned and forced to fall back on the classic methods of surgical success, namely academia, social contacts and personal industry, if they returned home at all.<sup>49</sup> <sup>50</sup> Watson's story is worthy of attention in that he experienced the extremes of both sides of this dichotomy: the bitter disappointment and disillusionment of war with all its accompanying perils and the hard-earned heights of success which came to him afterwards.

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<sup>47</sup> Shepherd. *The Surgeons in the Crimea 1854-1856*, 1972 (Note 6). p.16.

<sup>48</sup> Shepherd JA. *The Crimean Doctors: A History of the British Medical Services in the Crimean War, Vol. II*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press; 1991. p.359.

<sup>49</sup> Kaufman MH. *Surgeons at War: Medical Arrangements for the Treatment of the Sick and Wounded in the British Army During the Late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries*. Westport, Conn. & London: Greenwood Press; 2001. p.100.

<sup>50</sup> Evatt GJH. *The Truth About the Royal Army Medical Corps*. Plymouth: Printed by Hoyten & Cole; 1901. Royal Army Medical Corps Muniments Collection. Wellcome Collection. RAMC/181/9. p.11.

### **Biographical details**

In my position as Library and Archive Assistant for The Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, I work closely alongside both the College Archivist and College Librarian to maintain, provide access to, and conserve the physical and digital collections of our institution. I provide support with clinical and historical enquiries to both our worldwide College membership and the general public.

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