

WHO DISCOVERED AND INTRODUCED LOBELIA?

[Benjamin Waterhouse, M. D., Professor of the Theory and Practice of
Medicine, Cambridge University, Discourses on
Thomson and His Crusade.]

The record of plain-spoken Samuel Thomson, his aggressive exposures of the evil results of orthodox medication, his persistent attacks on individuals who practiced medicine "by authority," together with the facts concerning it all so potent at that date to the people at large, led to the tremendous rebellion against cruelty to the sick, that for half a century swept over America. Not all the legalized medical profession, however, were Thomson's antagonists, nor were they all unfriendly to his cause. The talented Dr. Manasseh Cutler, as has been shown, testified in his behalf, and the scholarly Professor Tully, M. D., of Yale, believed in kindly American remedies instead of the vicious heroics that authoritatively then prevailed.

In this direction the celebrated Professor Benjamin Waterhouse, M. D., Professor of the Theory and Practice of Medicine, Cambridge University, openly advocated the recognition of Thomson and pleaded that credit be given him both for his efforts and for his discoveries. With a view of presenting this side of the question fairly, we append to the narrative a few letters by Dr. Waterhouse that properly are by reference connected therewith. In addition, they have a historical bearing on the question of "Who discovered and introduced lobelia." These letters also enter into the subject of *Quackery*, which Dr. Waterhouse defines, to Thomson's credit.

To the Editor of the Boston Courier:

I have lately read, with considerable interest and some surprise, a little volume of nearly 200 pages, entitled, "A Narrative of the Life and Medical Discoveries of Samuel Thomson, containing an account of his System of Practice, and manner of Curing Diseases with Vegetable Medicines upon a Plan entirely New;" to which is added his New Guide to Health, containing the principles upon which the system is founded.

While reading the book, I said to those who recommended it to my perusal, this man is no "Quack." He narrates his medical discoveries, gives an account of his system of practice, together with his manner of curing diseases, upon a plan confessedly new; to which he adds the principles on which his new system is founded. He who does this is no Charlatan, but by uniting theory to practice, merits atten-

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tion. With these ideas of cultivation and promulgation of human knowledge, I read the narrative of Samuel Thomson, and soon perceived that he was a man of good capacity, persevering temper, and benevolent disposition; and then he acquired his knowledge of the hitherto unknown virtues of certain plants by experiments, first on himself, and then on those about him. In the course of twenty or thirty years, he arranged his experimental knowledge into a system, as did the father of physic before him, however imperfect; and, having done this to the best of his power, (for he had no literary education,) he published the result of his experience, labor and thoughts to the world, for it to judge of them and of him.

Auto Biography is a profitable species of writing to the world, but dangerous to the writer himself, especially if a professional man, or a political partizan; before he can gain credit for one honorable motive, every sinister object that can be imagined will be laid to his account. Who, among his competitors, will exercise that impartiality on hearing his story, which they require of him in relating it? Narrow minded jealousy will pervert everything. We may allow for a little high coloring in controversy with rivals—very few physicians or divines are free from it; but if Samuel Thomson, in the narrative of his life, has not turned aside from facts, he has been unjustly treated, and, in some instances, most cruelly persecuted. He has given names, dates, places and events, and spoken of judges, sheriffs, jailors and witnesses, in a style so plain as to exclude equivocation; and the same of a noted preacher. If what he said of them be false, he ought to be exposed and publicly punished; if true, he merits protection. His discoveries, are valuable or insignificant; his practices, a nuisance or a benefit; his writings, useful, or a tissue of lies and calumnies; his Patent, honorable, or a disgrace to our government; and it is not beneath the dignity of any physician, divine, or philosopher, to inquire into the truth of a series of experiments published with so much confidence, and purporting to be for the benefit of mankind.

I have no doubt that Samuel Thomson has added a very valuable article to the *Materia Medica*, and that he has again and again relieved the sick where others have failed. From all that I can recollect, I am induced to believe that he is not an avaricious man, but one who is more flattered by success in relieving the sick than in receiving their money. This at least, entitles him to a fair and patient hearing. It is possible he may have deceived himself, but it does not appear that he has laid himself out like a conjurer, to deceive others. If this man has devoted the greater part of his life to the relief of his fellow-men, his labors claim respect, and his errors our indulgence; for who of us are free from them? Let the unprejudiced man, who reads his *Narrative and Guide to Health*, judge for himself; but should he boggle at his theory of heat and cold, let him remember that Thomson, without knowing it, has adopted a theory of Galen; and his idea of the preserving power of nature, the curer of disease and preserver of life, appears to be the same as that acknowledged by Hippocrates; but the writer could not express it in Greek.

Thomson is not a Quack, if by quack, we mean a vain, artful, tricking practitioner in physic. He is an Experimenter, who accumulates knowledge by his own experience. There was a sect among the ancients who assumed the appellation to distinguish themselves from dogmatists, who, without experience taught dogmas. If Samuel Thomson be a quack, he is a quack *sui generis*, for being an enemy to concealment, he tells all he knows in as plain a manner as he possibly can, and leaves you to form your own judgment, provided you divest yourself of the fashion of this world in physic, which, with priestcraft, is fast passing away.

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Read the book, men of New England, and after making due allowance for the author's condition, situation and provocations, judge whether such a man merits the persecution he has endured, and the treatment he has met with.

BENJAMIN WATERHOUSE.

Cambridge, Dec. 8, 1835.

To Samuel Thomson, Botanic Practitioner of Medicine.

Dear Sir:—To the questions put to me yesterday, I answer, that I remain firm in the opinion that you were the discoverer of the remarkable virtues of the *Lobelia inflata*, as a safe emetic, and other rare qualities in effectually deterring the stomach and intestines of foul and morbid matter—a prime object in the removal of all disorders consequent on imperfect digestion. The efficacy and safety of the vegetable I have had ample and repeated proofs of in a number of cases, and in my own person, and have reason to value it equal to any article in our *Materia Medica*.

That you yourself were the originator of this compound process, very extensively known under the title of the Thomsonian Practice or System, I have no doubt whatever. I mean the uniting the warm bath, with the thorough cleansing of the whole alimentary canal. I value and recommend it on this account. It effects in three or four days, what we regular physicians use to occupy as many weeks to accomplish. As a public teacher of the practice of physic, I have told my pupils for nearly half a century, past, that when they have learned how to restore the long impaired organs of digestion to their pristine or natural state, they have acquired two-thirds of their profession; and on that simple principle is based the whole doctrine of my printed lecture on the pernicious effect of smoking cigars, and the inordinate use of ardent spirits.

Furthermore: the regular physician finds it necessary sometimes to make a great change in the human frame, or to make a very strong counter irritation, so as to obliterate the morbid or destructive one. This used to be done by quicksilver, that is, mercury, in the various preparations; when pushed to a salivation it dilapidates, if we may so speak, or dissolves the human fluids, all of which are made up of globules, or round particles, on the crisis of which depends the vital integrity of our bodies, and of course, our health and vigor. After the hazardous process of salivation, the physician may, perhaps, be able to say, Now I have so far changed the morbid state of the patient, that his disease is conquered, and entirely overcome by the powerful operation of the mercury. But then in what condition does he find the sufferer? His teeth are loosened, his joints are weakened, his healthy condition is impaired, his voice is more feeble, and he is more susceptible of cold, and a damp state of the weather. His original disorder is, to be sure, overcome; but it is paying a great price for it. Secret history conceals from public notice innumerable victims of this sort.

Now, my sagacious, industrious, and much-respected Empiric, or Eclectic, if you like the latter term better, let us come to the point you seem to aim at, namely, my opinion on the whole.

I consider a man laboring under a chronic disease of some time standing, who has passed through one, two, three, (as the case may be) of your processes of the *lobelia emetic*, to be as much altered as the man who has gone through the very disagreeable and dangerous operation of mercurial salivation; and, if so, your discovery is highly valuable, and on this account it was that I spoke freely and strongly in commendation of the new practice, and was not afraid nor ashamed

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to hail you as a Reformer, and to give you full credit, and, in this view, I have always considered you as standing on higher ground than Paracelsus, who was born in 1493.

As to the point of your originality, I will sum it up in as few words as I can—I regard you as a Tree, the root and trunk, of the Lobelia and vapor bath system conjoined; its limbs your immediate agents, and its leaves and fruit, the purchasers of the rights and privileges—all deriving their value from the Tree of knowledge; and, having said this, I have performed a grateful office, and I may add, to all around me, and remain, and hope ever to remain,

Your steady friend,

BENJAMIN WATERHOUSE.

Dr. Thomson was indicted before Chief Justice Parsons, for poisoning with lobelia, but the charge was of so frivolous a character that he was discharged without being put upon his defence. Here the affair should have rested; but Judge Parsons, to gratify a malicious disposition, made out a garbled report of the case, calculated to injure Dr. Thomson, and reflect discredit upon his system; and this report has now grown into a precedent, and is cited by the old faculty to prove that the Thomsonian remedies are pernicious. It was not known for many years that Parsons was the author of this report—no one suspecting him of such an act of baseness—but it was ultimately discovered by Col. House who addressed a letter to Mr. Tyng on the subject, and received the following answer, which is now in the possession of Dr. Waterhouse:

Cambridge, 11th Dec, 1835.

Dear Sir:—I have found the letter of Col. House. This is the copy of it, viz:—

Newburyport, 17th October, 1825.

"Sir:—Yours of yesterday came to hand by this morning's mail. In answer to your inquiry, I have to inform you, that the late Chief Justice Parsons compiled the report of the case of the Commonwealth vs. Thomson, and handed it to me, precisely in the words published, soon after the term of the court at which the case was tried.

"Your ob't. servant,

"DUDLEY A. TYNG.

"E. G. House, Esq., Boston."

The original is at your service, whenever you shall find it needful.

Were the case mine, (as much as I lament this lawsuit,) I should insist on your adverse lawyer to define Quackery—call on him to explain etymologically the derivation and origin of the word,—insist on his drawing the line where quackery ends, the proud science begins. Let your attorney tell his opponent that if Samuel Thomson was a quack, Hippocrates and all the Greek physicians were quacks, and all the Jewish ones also; and every Roman physician, not only through the entire Roman republic, but down through all the Roman emperors, and all the first ages of Christianity, and down through all the dark ages, and still long after the revival of letters of Italy. Prior to 1400 there were no regular schools of anatomy, and the science of chemistry was unknown, until the Arabians brought the medicinal chemistry into use. The art and practice of physic was the result of experience, and

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was a collection of facts delivered verbally from father to son, and from tutor to pupil.

Anterior to 1745, the study and practice of physic was very little variant, if any, from what Samuel Thomson, the Patriarch of the lobelia and steam system, has by great pains and labor accumulated during more than forty years of an industrious life. The most solid, immovable, and valuable portion of our art, is derived from experience; and the best qualification of it is sagacity, and the next to that is industry,—all of which the Patriarch, Samuel Thomson, possesses eminently. The scientific physician follows, and copies the rules of others, and that constitutes the learned physician; but Samuel Thomson studies the Book of Nature,—that is, the nature of man, and everything about him, as did the famous physicians among the ancients, and some of the best and most successful among the moderns.

Samuel Thomson restricts his means of cure to the vegetable kingdom, and rejects entirely the mineral one, all except water. I will not dispute with him. Let him stick to his system, and let us regulars profit by it, and in return it would enlarge his own useful knowledge. I confess I have learned several valuable things from his many experiments, and his severe scrutiny into the nature, qualities, and medicinal virtues of our own native plants.

I rank Samuel Thomson among discoverers, and respect him as such. He is not an imposter. He has an uncommon stock of natural knowledge, and enjoys the benefit of his discoveries and trials by the security of a patent. The vast West has been benefited by them, and they have been, in some degree, tributaries to him. I who introduced vaccination into America, in 1799, distributed the blessings everywhere in this new world, disclosed everything, and kept nothing back; but sacrificed my practice, and even my medical professorship, to that great discovery by which one of the greatest plagues that ever afflicted human nature, has been drawn from the condition of man. I never disputed, except in one instance, with any man or body of men, but gave to the public all my pains and labor. I beat the bush, but never laid myself out to catch the bird. I have the honor, others the profit—while others are unhappy in disputes and unprofitable contentions, I do not repent of my forbearance.

In one thing every thinking man must and will agree; for it admits of no dispute. It will be admitted as an axiom, namely—The Thomsonian practice has been diffused through New England between fifteen and twenty years, and still maintains its credit; and every year its roots strike deeper, and its branches spread wider and wider. Now make any man of due reflection believe that such a practice could have spread so wide among such a discerning, inquisitive people as we of New England certainly are, without having discovered its nothingness,—its worse than nothingness,—its vain and nonsensical pretensions. The thing is impossible. If the lobelia had been proved a worthless plant, it would have been years ago, "thrown like a lonesome weed away." On the contrary, I had rather be without that very nauseous powder, ipecac, which makes me spit while I write, than to be deprived of the more agreeable and efficacious Lobelia.

We import Ipecacuanha from South America, and sometimes use it after it has been a dozen or twenty years out of the ground, whereas we can cultivate the Lobelia in our own gardens, and pick it up in our own fields. I not only prescribe it to others, but I take it myself whenever I have any occasion for an emetic. I value it equally with the Peruvian bark, or with rhubarb, jalap or senna or any other medicinal plant you can mention. Instead of Lobelia, it ought in justice, in honor, and in gratitude, to be called Thomsonian emetica.

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But the discovery of the medicinal qualities of this indigenous plant, is not the sole merit or felicity of Samuel Thomson. His vapor-bath process, to which the Lobelia is the Prodomos, (or, in plain English, file-leader, or fore-runner,) is, taken together, a very valuable improvement in our practice, if conducted by persons as experienced and as sagacious as the Patriarch Thomson.

In England, Parliament would probably have purchased the procedure by a liberal grant. In France, at least under the old regime, the King would have bought it. But we, wiser than any of them, have only tried to pick it to pieces. Still I consider it a valuable anchor, the emblem of Hope, to which is attached a firm cable, that numbers have been trying in vain to pick to oakum; but which will, I trust, be like the strongly twisted cord that binds our happy States together, acquiring strength by age.

To weigh Patriarch Thomson in the scales of the regular physician would be as unjust as for them to be weighed by his steel-yards. They practice on different principles, feelings and views—each honest in his respective path of art and nature. They both will come out in the same road at last, and travel on together to the Temple of honor and profit.

Samuel Thomson, like most reformers, has endured in our county of Essex as much severe persecution as ever was perpetrated in it; which is saying a great deal, when we call to mind the days of the delusion of Witchcraft. Though capitally indicted for murder by using Lobelia, he was discharged without a trial, after something like a reprimand of the Solicitor-General by the Court. Yet it is remarkable that Chief-Justice Parsons deemed it worth while to write the report of it in the VI. Vol. of Tyng's collections.

I feel diffident and doubtful whether I have said too much or too little on a subject that will increase in importance with time. Reformers—originators, and exterminators of loathsome and shocking diseases, are always considered as benefactors of the whole human race—not merely those who are living, but of those who shall live after us, as long as letters and other records shall endure.

BENJ. WATERHOUSE.

Letter to Samuel L. Mitchell, M. D., L.L. D., of the city of New York:

Cambridge, Dec. 19th, 1825.

My Dear Sir:—Dr. Samuel Thomson, who has the honor of introducing the valuable Lobelia into use, and fully proved its efficacy and safety, will deliver you this. He has cured and relieved many disorders which others could not, without being a regular diplomatized physician, and dared to be a republican in a hot bed of federalism; for which he has been shamefully ill-treated, even to persecution.

I have aided and assisted Thomson from a firm belief that his novel practice has been beneficial to numbers, and that it may be placed among improvements. If he be a quack, he is a quack *sui generis*, for he proclaims his mode and means.—Had John Hunter, whom I knew well, been born and bred where Samuel Thomson was, he would have been just such another man, and had S. T. been thrown into the same society and associations as J. H. he would, in my opinion, have been his equal, with probably a wider range of thought; both are men of talents and originality of thought.

I am, indeed, so disgusted with learned quackery, that I take some interest in honest, humane and strong-minded empiricism; for it has done more for our art, in all ages and in all countries, than all the universities since the times of

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Charlemagne. Where, for goodness sake, did Hippocrates study?—air, earth, and water—man, his kindred—vegetable; disease and death, and all casualties and concomitants of humanity, were the pages he studied—every thing that surrounds and nourishes us, were the objects of his attention and study. In a word, he read diligently and sagaciously, the Great Book of Nature, instead of the little books of man as Thomson has.

How came your Legislature to pass so unconstitutional an act as that called the antiquack law? such as the Parliament of England would hardly have ventured on; for who will define quackery? Were I sufficiently acquainted with your Governor Clinton, I would write to him on the subject. You New-Yorkers are half a century behind us in theological science, but your quack bill looks as if you halted also in physic.

By what I have seen and learnt of Mr. Thomson, I wish him success, and the notice of the eminent and the liberal in the profession; and with these views I give him this rapidly-written letter to you, and am with a high degree of esteem and respect, his steady friend,

BENJ. WATERHOUSE.

To Samuel Thomson, Boston.

To the Editor of the Boston Courier:

I read in one of your late papers an article entitled, The Battle of Doctors, purporting to have been contested at Baltimore on Lyceum ground. The account seemed chiefly serious, but partly ludicrous. But as it related to the very serious subject of health and disease, or, in other words, life and death, I could not drive the narrative out of my mind. The practice of physic, I am bold to say, admits of great reform; yet it is no joke, and is really a subject worthy of the utmost attention of the people, and I have often reflected with surprise that it has been left at such loose ends in this state, where we scrutinize and find fault with every thing, and every profession, excepting that on which our comfort depends; for what are riches without health to enjoy them?

It seems that the Lyceum question was whether the Thomsonian practice ought to be encouraged? Now this includes another question, viz:—whether regular physicians ought to encourage it, or the people? If I mistake not, more than a million people in the United States have already answered the question and said—Let it be encouraged.

There arose a serious question in my mind—a question of honor and conscience, namely, ought I be silent on the solemn subject, or to give my opinion. I have determined on the latter; and that because I have received a considerable number of letters from Maryland, and further south, on the same subject, and as I have received some loaded with postage, the writers may receive the trifling value of my opinion without a cent's expense to them or me.

With due submission to that privileged body of physicians denominated through courtesy, the faculty, I should place Samuel Thomson among the reformers of the healing art.

The famous Galen dictated the laws of medicine full fourteen years after his death, by his, then, matchless writings. After the revival of letters, Paracelsus, who was born, 1493, in Switzerland, appeared as a reformer of the system of Galen. He was learned in Latin, Greek, and several other languages, and of respectable connexions. He first introduced mercury, (quicksilver,) antimony and

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opium into the *Materia Medica*; but he was arrogant, vain and profligate, and after living the life of a vagabond, died a confirmed sot. He studied mystery, and wrapped up his knowledge in terms of his own invention, so as to keep his knowledge confined to himself and a few chosen followers. The very reverse of Thomson, who performs numberless cures, and makes no secret of the means. The cant phrase of "Quack" belongs to the learned Paracelsus; but not to the mystery-hating Thomson, who considers mystery and roguery offsprings of the same father—the man of sin—the old father of lies and deception. If Thomson be a quack, he is a quack *sui generis*, or a cheat of a new and singular class.

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The following letter was written just before Dr. Thomson went to Washington to obtain his last patent:

To Samuel Thomson, Botanic Practitioner of Medicine.

Cambridge, March 26th, 1836.

Dear Sir:—In answer to your last letter, I would remark, that I continue to receive, from diverse quarters of our country, anxious inquiries with regard to my opinion of you, and your practice: to which I have uniformly said, that, as far as I know, you were the first person who discovered the remarkable medicinal virtues of the *Lobelia inflata*, even before you knew its systematic name, and called it the emetic weed; and that in consequence of the evidence adduced of its value, as a medicine, you obtained a patent for it, when the Hon. John Quincy Adams was Secretary of State, in which you were aided by the late Dr. Mitchell, and Dr. Thornton. Since then you have spread its value through a great part of the United States, and in a great degree silenced your opponents.

I have as little hesitation in saying, that I consider your joining to its exhibition the vapor bath, as a matter of no small importance, when carefully conducted by persons of sound judgment, and competent experience. I have entire confidence in the safety of the lobelia, and in the whole process, when conducted by the patriarch of the science, Samuel Thomson himself; for the practice is so far from being a trifling one, that I consider it in a class of Herculean remedies.

I wish the regular physician had a better opinion of the Thomsonian discoveries in the vegetable kingdom, and that the empiric practitioners had a better opinion of the regular or scientific physician. The conduct of Hippocrates is a bright example for both. Experience must be enlightened by reason and theory built upon close and accurate observation. The happy union of the two will form the consummate physician; while the desire of gain, and the ambition of celebrity, may injure both. You, my benevolent sir, have lived long enough in the world to be convinced how slowly beneficial discoveries are received and patronized, by the people, when they think that fame and fortune are the predominant motives of the discoverer.

Should it happen, that in your business at Washington, this letter should fall under the eye of that great and good man, Hon. John Quincy Adams, he will, at once, recognize the hand-writing of his old friend and correspondent.

BENJAMIN WATERHOUSE.

The foregoing letters and the friendship of many other talented men, neither allayed the antagonism that existed between Thomson and the Regular Medical Profession, nor prevented ignorant and ill-advised

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people from abusing therapeutic privileges and opportunities. In the name of Thomson, men and women, including statesmen, clergymen and scholars throughout America, repelled by the horrors of regular medication, but yet ignorant both of diseases and of the action of remedies, proclaimed themselves qualified to practice medicine by Thomson's Patent Right. The fanaticism and audacity of inexperience possessed them, but yet, necessity demanded that legalized persecution of the sick be circumvented. Among these Thomsonian enthusiasts was one whose trial became of National consequence; second only was it to that of his leader, Samuel Thomson, and as such needs be made a part of this record. From it we produce enough of the salient features, to clearly indicate not only its legal phases but to supply additional evidence concerning the rebellion of the people who had now by reason of the cruelty and viciousness of authoritative medicine, become aggressive protesters against the methods of the medical profession of America. This trial was celebrated as "The Trial of Dr. Frost."