

Sir Byrom Bramwell (1847–1931)

Letters recently discovered in the RCPE archive (including one from Osler) confirm how influential the physician, neurologist and educator Sir Byrom Bramwell PRCPE (1847–1931) was during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Sir Byrom was part of one of the medical dynasties that feature frequently in the history of medicine in Edinburgh. This dynastic story is very well covered in RCPE Fellow Bryan Ashworth's elegant and informative monograph *The Bramwells of Edinburgh*.¹

Byrom Bramwell was born in 1847 in North Shields where his father worked as a general practitioner. He was educated at Cheltenham College where he showed significant sporting prowess. In 1865 he went to medical school at Edinburgh which he himself described 57 years later in a fascinating talk to the Edinburgh Royal Medical Society.² Bramwell tells of being taught by many Edinburgh luminaries including John Goodsir, John Hughes Bennett, James Syme and James Young Simpson, whom he particularly praises. Bramwell's interest in sport continued at university and he captained the University cricket team.

In 1869 Bramwell became house surgeon to James Spence, the Professor of Surgery. A career in Edinburgh beckoned but his father was ill and he returned to North Shields to work in the family medical practice. His career in the North East flourished, culminating in his appointment in 1874 as physician and pathologist at Newcastle Royal Infirmary. In 1879 Bramwell took what must have been a career risk and moved to Edinburgh. He became a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh in 1880 and after a slow start his risk paid off as both his private practice and his academic career flourished. He became a lecturer in the Edinburgh extramural School of Medicine where he taught women students and in 1897 he was made a physician at the Royal Infirmary.

In 1900 he was one of the unsuccessful contenders for the chair of medicine at Edinburgh (Osler was also a candidate but withdrew). This must have been a big disappointment for the enthusiastic and industrious teacher and author. Evidence of his industry is contained in nine volumes of clinical reports, ten books, an *Atlas of Clinical Medicine* (three volumes, 1892–6), and more than 160 papers. Both *Intracranial Tumours* (1888) which Harvey Cushing was still praising in 1931³ and *Diseases of the Spinal Cord* (1881) were international successes. In

Anaemia and some Diseases of the Blood-Forming Organs and Ductless Glands (1899) Bramwell surveyed another large area of medicine by reviewing 14,777 cases. He also published *Lectures on Aphasia* (1897).

Byrom Bramwell was President of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh from 1910 to 1912. During his presidency one of the first steps towards the formation of the UK NHS, the 1911 National Insurance

Act, was being debated by the College. He was much honoured, including a knighthood in 1924, and he was the first non-member clinician to be elected a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians of London. Byrom Bramwell died in Edinburgh, close to the College, in his house at 10 Heriot Row, on 27 April 1931. Two of his sons were doctors and one (Edwin) was also an RCPE president.

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REFERENCES

- 1 Ashworth B. *The Bramwells of Edinburgh, a medical dynasty*. Edinburgh: RCPE; 1986.
- 2 Bramwell B. The Edinburgh Medical school and its professors: my student days (1865–69). *Edinburgh Medical Journal* 1923; 30:133–56.
- 3 Cushing H. Neurohypophyseal mechanisms from a clinical standpoint. *British Medical Journal* 1939; 1:823–6.

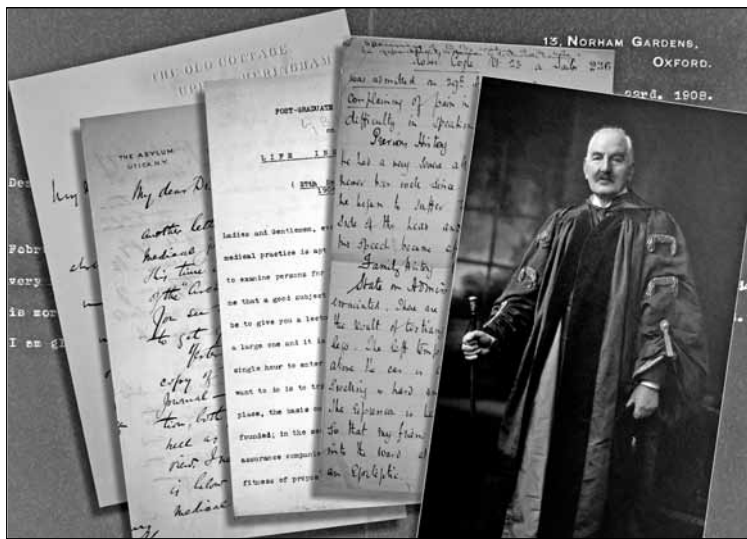


FIGURE 1 Sir Byrom Bramwell pictured with some of his correspondence and writings.