

## Our Portrait Gallery.

### INDIAN MEDICAL CELEBRITIES.

By SURGEON-CAPTAIN B. D. BASU, I.M.S.,  
BOMBAY.

No. XXX.—SIR WILLIAM O'SHAUGHNESSY BROOKE,  
K.C.B., M.D. (EDIN.), F.R.S., ETC.

Of the many votaries of the healing art since the days of Hamilton and Boughton, whose unparalleled patriotism served to build up the British Empire in the East, perhaps none contributed so largely to bring India on a line with other civilized countries of the world, as the one whose short biographical account is given in this issue. Dr. O'Shaughnessy was not only a great chemist who analysed many of the indigenous drugs of India, and thus led to their being given a place in the Pharmacopœias of other countries, but he was the first to suggest and carry out the establishment of telegraphic communication in India.

Sir Wm. Brooke O'Shaughnessy was the descendant of an ancient Irish family, and was born at Limerick, Ireland, in 1809. He was sent, at an early age to the University of Edinburgh for his medical training. After graduating M. D., in the year 1830, he entered the service of the Honorable East India Company as an Assistant-Surgeon. After being transferred to civil employment by the Governor-General in 1833, he acted as physician to Lord Metcalfe, while the latter commanded Agra. On the establishment of the Medical College of Bengal he was chosen as one of the professors of the new institution.

It was in the year 1837, that a Committee was appointed by Government "to examine and report upon the state of the Honorable Company's dispensary, and the possibility of substituting indigenous remedies for some which are only procurable from other countries. The question of the publication of an Indian Pharmacopœia was also submitted to this Committee for their opinion." To Dr. O'Shaughnessy was entrusted the task of reporting on the subject of the proposed Pharmacopœia. The report which he drew up and which is published in the introduction to his "Bengal Dispensatory" is, even at this distance of time, well worth reading, as many of the suggestions which he set forth are being acted upon by the different workers in this field of research. The reasons which led him and the Committee to prepare a special Pharmacopœia of India are thus set forth in the following report:

1. "The British Pharmacopœia contains a great number of indigenous plants which do not grow in India, but for which Indian substitutes may be found.
2. "The British Pharmacopœia does not contain numerous plants, indigenous in India, of proved utility as remedial agents.
3. "The pharmaceutical processes in the British Pharmacopœia, especially with reference to distillation, evaporation, making of tinctures and alcoholic extracts, are modified so as to meet the dearness of labor, spirit, and the operation of excise laws in Great Britain, restrictions which need not affect us here.

4. "In the chemical preparations, especially those of the alkaline and metallic salts, perfectly new directions would be essentially necessary in many instances.

5. "Another and important reason for our recommendation, is the urgent necessity which exists for alteration of the nomenclature of the British Pharmacopœia to meet the circumstances and degrees of education of the Natives of this country."

The above were the reasons which warranted the compilation of a new Pharmacopœia for Bengal. Several months after the report was presented, the orders of Government were received for the suggestions being carried into effect, and a Committee of supervision was appointed. Dr. O'Shaughnessy was appointed Secretary to the Committee and Editor of the Pharmacopœia. He commenced his duties, by examining, both by chemical and clinical experiment, several articles of indigenous production of reputation for their medicinal virtues. As quickly as any fact indicated a valuable result he reported its details to the Committee. The febrifuge powers of Narcotine, the purgative Kaladana, the emetic Crinum, the extraordinary stimulant and narcotic Gunjah, and many other substances were thus successively examined; when Dr. O'Shaughnessy received new orders from the Medical Board of the day, which compelled him to relinquish much of his experimental researches and devote himself to the task of compiling, not only a Pharmacopœia, but a Dispensary of General Materia Medica.

It was under the above circumstances that the "Bengal Dispensary" was published in 1841. The second appeared in 1844, and was intended as a separate work, as the Sequel or Companion of the Dispensary.

The above two works must be regarded as the first scientific treatment of the indigenous drugs of this country. All the other workers who preceded him, like Fleming, Roxburgh, and Ainslie, tried only the botanical identification of medicinal plants. It is therefore, that their labors were only partially successful in more extensively employing indigenous drugs. The steps which Dr. O'Shaughnessy tried to follow out in the study of indigenous drugs were: first, the botanical identification of each plant; second, its accurate chemical analysis, third, the preparation of its pharmaceutical products, *vis.*, its tincture, extract, &c.; and lastly, its experimental use or trial in hospital practice.

The two works which he prepared stand to this day as the great monuments of his ability and patient scientific research. They are epoch-marking works in the history of the subject of indigenous drugs; and they gave a general impulse to the researches of others.

The fame of Dr. O'Shaughnessy does not rest upon the two works mentioned above. Great credit is due to him to have introduced telegraphy into India. It was in 1839, while occupying the chair of chemistry in the Medical College, that Dr. O'Shaughnessy published a work wherein he urged the Government to adopt a telegraphic system which was calculated to afford immense services to the civil and military services of India. But the Earl of Auckland and his successors, Lords Ellen-

borough and Hardinge gave Dr. O'Shaughnessy very little encouragement, they being too much engrossed with carrying out their aggressive policy of annexation to give thought to any measure for the improvement of the internal resources of the country under their rule. Lord Dalhousie, however, fell in with his suggestion. He authorized Dr. O'Shaughnessy to lay down an experimental line of electric telegraph and to furnish a report of its working. That report was so satisfactory that when Dr. O'Shaughnessy laid it before the India House in the middle of 1852, the needful sanction for the construction of telegraph lines in this country was easily secured. The great difficulty that he had to contend with was the sudden and simultaneous training of 300 persons who were to be employed in the many offices connected with the working of the system. This he accomplished with his characteristic energy and business-like capacity in the course of a few months. In November, 1853, the first posts of a telegraph line from Calcutta to Agra were set up. This line consisting of a distance of 800 miles was completed in the following March, when a message was flashed from Agra to Government House at Calcutta. By the end of January, 1855, the wires had been carried from Agra to Bombay and Attak on the Indus, and from Calcutta to Madras. In February, 1856, the line was laid down throughout 4000 miles.

In the construction of these lines Dr. O'Shaughnessy surmounted great difficulties. To quote the words of Lord Dalhousie they were "such as have no existence in the civilized and cultivated countries of Europe. The establishment of the electric telegraph in India may challenge comparison with any public enterprise which has been carried into execution in recent times among the nations of Europe or in America itself." The wires had to be carried on bamboo poles, or on pillars of stone and iron, over broad swamps and rocky wastes, through dense and deadly jungles, to enter which is death during six months of the year, and across seventy broad rivers. White-ants and wild beasts, savage men and a trying climate, the scarcity of trained workmen, and the failure of old scientific appliances also largely hampered in the progress of these lines.

Dr. O'Shaughnessy was Honorary Fellow of the Royal Medico-Botanical Society of London; Corresponding member of the Provincial Medical Association of England; and also of the National Institute of Washington. In acknowledgment of his great services he was created, in 1856, on the occasion of his visit to England, a Knight Commander of the Bath. O'Shaughnessy assumed the surname of Brooke, by royal license in 1861. He retired from the service in 1862, and died on the 22nd January, 1889, at the age of 80.

It is strange that so little has been done to keep his memory green in the seat of his labors. Except the bust which is placed in an obscure corner of the Central Telegraph Office at Calcutta, the Medical College, in the establishment of which he played such a conspicuous part, and the reputation of which was not a little due to the researches which he prosecuted within its walls, knows him not except by name. No statue, no bust, not even a portrait of the first professor of chemistry whose works brought about a new era in the history of Indian materia medica, graces the enclosures or the walls of the great institution of medical learning of India.