Sir Morell Mackenzie, a Lifetime in Laryngology
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An exhibition at the Library of the Royal Society of Medicine

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Monday – Thursday: 9.00 – 21.00
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The Library, Royal Society of Medicine,
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An introduction

From my earliest childhood years I have been fascinated by tales of the renowned London physician Sir Morell Mackenzie, tales passed down the family from my grandmother Lilian May Curtis, née Caton. My relationship with the Mackenzie family is through marriage, my great-grandfather, Herbert William Caton (father of Lilian May) being the brother of Lily Ann Caton who married Dr Kenneth Morell Mackenzie, Sir Morell’s second son.

Lilian May was born in east London where she lived until evacuation to Norfolk during the Second World War. She died in 1989.

She remembered visiting Dr Kenneth Mackenzie and his family at their large town house in Brighton on England’s south coast, where afternoon tea was served by an army of maids smartly dressed in Victorian black.

Such tales were, of course, the stuff of dreams to me, an impressionable young boy with a vivid imagination and love of history. Sadly, no documents or artefacts have been passed down through the family, but I never tired of asking my grandmother to tell the tale of visits to Kenneth’s house, nor of her description of how Morell Mackenzie was knighted by Queen Victoria for “treating the king”. Precisely what – and who – the “king” was, I did not discover until later years.

With the passage of time, my interest in this family history has led me to find out more about who these figures were, precisely how I am related to them, and what they have meant for European history in general.

In this, I have been greatly helped by the internet and by the Library of the Royal Society of Medicine which has given me access to source materials and publications which would otherwise have been very difficult to come by.

David Springall, Curator
Morell Mackenzie

Source: Wikimedia Commons
Biographical data

The plain facts of a man’s life do not always make for interesting reading. Yet in the case of Sir Morell Mackenzie, even the plain facts give cause for fascination.

Morell Mackenzie was born on 7th July 1837 in Leytonstone, Essex, the son of Dr Stephen and Margaret Mackenzie, the Mackenzies a family of Scottish extraction. Stephen Mackenzie was a general practitioner and a man with lively connections to leading literary figures of the day. He was warmly acknowledged by Robert Brudenell Carter in the preface to his 1853 book on hysteria which anticipated many of the theories put forward by Sigmund Freud.

At school, Morell showed a particular aptitude for French, Latin and drawing, disciplines which would serve him in good stead in later life. At the age of 14, he was called home from school: his father had been thrown from his gig whilst on his daily rounds, striking his head against the kerbstone; he never regained consciousness.

On leaving school at the age of 16, straitened family circumstances obliged Mackenzie to take a job as clerk at Union Assurance Company, in London. But his heart was not in the work. He attended natural history and chemistry classes several evenings a week at King’s College, and was an avid reader of medical books. Thanks to a financial loan from his aunt, Miss Harvey, who ran a “school for young ladies” in Notting Hill, Mackenzie was able to pay his fees as a medical student at the London Hospital, where he was awarded senior gold medals for surgery and for clinical medicine.

In 1858 he qualified from the London Hospital with the diploma of Membership of the Royal College of Surgeons of England. In this year he also qualified as Licentiate of the Society of Apothecaries. But to progress his career further, Mackenzie knew it was advisable to gain an all-round knowledge of medicine through exposure to the crowded clinics of Paris and Vienna, Europe’s leading medical centres at the time. Again, Miss Harvey stepped in with financial support, enabling Mackenzie to spend one year in Paris and one year in Vienna and Budapest. In Paris, he attended Charcot’s clinic at la Salpêtrière, studied under Nélaton at the Hôpital St Louis and learned from the inspirational Trousseau (the first to perform a tracheotomy in Paris) at the Hôtel-Dieu.
During his second year abroad in 1859, Mackenzie studied in Vienna, where he was taught by Rokitanski (with his insistence that pathological anatomy was the basis for all clinical knowledge) and by Škoda. He also studied the treatment of syphilis under Sigmund, a factor which was to prove of great professional relevance in his subsequent career.

But it was in Budapest in 1859 that the future course of Morell Mackenzie’s career was ultimately determined. Here, he was taught the use of the laryngoscope by Professor Johann Czermák. Czermák had borrowed mirrors discarded earlier by Dr Ludwig Türck, of Vienna, to devise a laryngoscope that made use of artificial light. Despite his initial enthusiasm for a laryngoscope using sunlight, as demonstrated by Manuel Garcia in 1855, Türck had grown disenchanted with the device and had given up hope for its application in practical medicine. (For the sake of fairness and accuracy, mention should be made at this point of the introduction of the glottiscope by Dr Benjamin Guy Babington, who presented his invention to the Hunterian Society in 1829, a fact which Mackenzie confirms in his “The Use of the Laryngoscope”. However, Babington’s device did not use artificial light, and the mirrors were of clumsier construction than those applied by Czermák.) Following Czermák’s inspiring tuition and having acquired the skills of diagnostic laryngology and intralaryngeal surgery, Mackenzie returned to London in 1860 an enthusiastic and convinced laryngologist.

Soon after his return from the Continent, Mackenzie was appointed Resident Medical Officer at the London Hospital, and later Resident Medical Officer at Tower Hamlets Dispensary, Commercial Road, where he visited patients in the squalid East End of 1860s’ London. He obtained his MB degree at London University in 1861, progressing to MD in 1862, when he became Medical Registrar to the London Hospital.

Thus it was that in 1862 Morell Mackenzie started his own private practice at 64, George Street, Hanover Square. At this point, it is useful to note that until 1861 Mackenzie had no university education, no major social or professional contacts on whom he could rely, and no financial security. He was equipped solely with outstanding self-confidence, intelligence, determination, and faith in his own ability and training.
A year later in 1863 Mackenzie was awarded the Jacksonian Prize of the Royal College of Surgeons for his essay: “On the Pathology and Treatment of Diseases of the Larynx: the diagnostic indications to include the appearance as seen in the living person”. This “essay” ran to three volumes. As well as its original observations, the work contains watercolour illustrations made by Mackenzie himself, showing some of the first representations of the human larynx as it appears during life.

His ambition spurred him on to seek larger premises, and in the same year he founded the Metropolitan Free Dispensary for Diseases of the Throat and Loss of Voice.

Having boldly persuaded wealthy London merchant Mr John Bouch of his future prospects, he married Miss Margaret Bouch, the merchant’s beautiful daughter. They were to have two sons and three daughters. A short time after their marriage, the Mackenzies moved from George Street to Weymouth Street.

In his paper on “The Treatment of Hoarseness and Loss of Voice by the Direct Application of Galvanism to the Vocal Cord” given to the annual meeting of the British Medical Association, Mackenzie originated the terms ‘abductors’ and ‘adductors’ for the two sets of muscles opening and closing the glottis.

In 1864 Morell Mackenzie passed the examination for Membership of the Royal College of Physicians.

Two years after the founding of the Metropolitan Free Dispensary, in 1865 the practice moved to 32, Golden Square, where it became the celebrated Hospital for Diseases of the Throat – the first of its kind in the world – until its closure in 1985. He published his first book “The Use of the Laryngoscope in Diseases of the Throat” which went to three editions and was translated into French, German and Italian.

In the face of great competition, in September 1866 Mackenzie was appointed assistant physician to the London Hospital. His continental training, his Jacksonian Prize essay, his publications, his technical skill, his determination and pleasant manner all impressed his seniors.

It was in 1870 that he took a lease on 19, Harley Street, from where he built up an outstanding private practice in laryngology.
Mackenzie was appointed full physician to the London Hospital in 1873, a position which he resigned a few months later due to the pressure of his rapidly growing private practice and his dedication to laryngology.

In 1871 Morell Mackenzie published “Growths in the Larynx”, an expansion of his Jacksonian Prize-winning work.

Between 1880 and 1884, Mackenzie produced his greatest work, “A Manual of Diseases of the Throat and Nose”, in two volumes. This publication was immediately recognised as a classical work and became the standard textbook for laryngology.

Together with Norris Wolfenden, in 1887 he founded the monthly “Journal of Laryngology”.

In November 1888 he established the first British Rhino-Laryngological Association. In 1907, this association merged with the London Laryngological Society to become the Section of Laryngology of the Royal Society of Medicine.

Over the years, Mackenzie’s Harley Street practice had gone from strength to strength. He had become a laryngologist of international renown; his books had been translated into various languages; he was a keen “first-nighter” at the London theatres, and leading personalities and celebrities of the day, from the worlds of medicine, theatre and the arts, dined at his table.

Yet this picture of professional success and personal fulfilment nestling in the midst of a glorious Victorian golden age was to be dealt a severe blow in May 1887 with the arrival of a telegram from Berlin.

Morell Mackenzie – confident and in the prime of life
Source: Wikimedia Commons
On the evening of Wednesday 18th May 1887, Morell Mackenzie received a telegram from the German doctors attending German Crown Prince Friedrich, asking him to come to Berlin immediately for consultation. This telegram was to have a grave and lasting effect on Mackenzie’s own life and that of Crown Prince Friedrich, and was to influence the European political landscape for years to come.

Since the previous autumn, Friedrich had been suffering from hoarseness caused by a growth on the left vocal cord. The application of galvano-cautery by Professor Gerhardt on thirteen successive days followed by a period of rest at Bad Ems had failed to produce a cure. Suspecting the growth to be malignant, the Crown Prince’s doctors now decided on the more drastic step of thyrotomy, with Professor von Bergmann to perform the operation. However, at the instigation of Prince Otto von Bismarck, Dr Wegner, the Crown Prince’s Physician-in-Ordinary, suggested the opinion of another experienced laryngologist should first be sought. A telegram was duly sent to Morell Mackenzie.

After firstly examining the Crown Prince, Mackenzie pronounced that he was not convinced of the presence of cancer and rightly insisted on histological evidence. Three biopsies were subsequently taken and examined by Professor Rudolf Virchow, the leading pathological anatomist of the day. In each case, Virchow returned a negative finding.

Thereafter, the relationship between Mackenzie and the German physicians became increasingly fraught as a result of professional jealousy and downright envy – the clashes between Mackenzie and Professor von Bergmann became increasingly personal; Mackenzie was accused of professional incompetence, on one occasion Gerhardt alleging he had even tried to take a biopsy from the healthy vocal cord and had damaged it in the process. The more Mackenzie grew in Friedrich and Victoria’s esteem, the more the German doctors despised him. In their character assassination they were supported by Otto von Bismarck’s son Herbert, who, with the help of Felix Semon, assured a negative dialogue was maintained in England, and by Count Radolinski, Marshal of the Crown Prince’s household, who reported daily to Bismarck, opened and read telegrams and letters and bribed servants to repeat gossip and tell lies.
Emperor Friedrich III

Source: Wikimedia Commons
Uncertainty remains over Mackenzie’s reluctance to pronounce a diagnosis of cancer. Did he, out of a misplaced sense of loyalty, wish to protect the royal family from the worst possible news? Knowing full well the risks attendant on the type of operation proposed, was he determined to prolong Friedrich’s life so that he might become emperor?

The German doctors were understandably annoyed and frustrated, and physicians in Great Britain were greatly concerned at the news they were hearing from Berlin; James Reid, resident medical attendant to the British royal family, discussed the matter with Sir William Jenner, President of the Royal College of Physicians. Even when Reid, instructed by Queen Victoria and supported by Jenner, wrote suggesting Mackenzie should adopt a more drastic approach, he was still unwilling to admit that surgery was Friedrich’s only hope.

Following the death of his father Wilhelm on 9th March 1888, Friedrich became Emperor Friedrich III and wrote, for Mackenzie’s attention: “I thank you for having made me live long enough to recompense the valiant courage of my wife.” He was to reign for 99 days.

On 12th April 1888 the antagonism between Mackenzie and the German doctors took a new turn when Professor von Bergmann failed to insert a cannula correctly in the patient’s trachea, instead creating a false passage into which he repeatedly pushed the cannula, finally inserting his finger into the wound, causing the patient pain, bleeding and violent coughing. After this incident, Friedrich would not let von Bergmann near him again, claiming that he had been “ill-treated”. Some days later, an abscess formed where the false passage had been made; Friedrich became feverish, his temperature rising to 104°F on various occasions.

On 14th June terminal broncho-pneumonia developed. Emperor Friedrich III died on 15th June 1888.

In the latter months of Friedrich’s illness, the imperial couple had insisted that Morell Mackenzie remain in constant attendance, and this enormous physical and mental strain had had a great effect on Mackenzie’s own health. He was at Friedrich’s beck and call day and night; his room was adjacent to the room where the emperor slept. Friedrich could contact him at will via a simple bell-pull. In the time leading up to Friedrich’s death, Mackenzie had been on continuous duty for nearly sixty hours.
Quite apart from this unceasing burden, the aggression and antagonism to which he was subjected also undoubtedly gnawed at his constitution. The German press victimised him; it was alleged his real name was Moritz Marcowicz, a Polish Jew. He received frequent death threats. Mackenzie himself did not enjoy the best of health: he was asthmatic and relied heavily on stramonium cigarettes. Those who met him again after the emperor’s death remarked on how greatly he had changed in appearance and how his wit, sparkle and liveliness had left him.

After Friedrich’s death, the Prussian Ministry was quick to publish a volume of reports by the German doctors in which Mackenzie was sharply criticised for the course of treatment he had adopted. Stung by these attacks, Mackenzie sought to defend himself with the ill-advised publication in October 1888 of his book “The Fatal Illness of Frederick the Noble”. This brought him immense criticism from the medical profession and led ultimately to his censure by the Royal College of Surgeons and the British Medical Association and his resignation from the Royal College of Physicians.

Despite being handsomely rewarded for his services to Germany (he was paid £12,000 for his attendance from May 1887 until June 1888), Morell Mackenzie paid a very high price for his efforts. His health had suffered from the demands placed upon him; on returning to London, he found that his thriving practice had been appropriated by other specialists; he had lost the support of many medical colleagues and institutions; he was physically and mentally exhausted, and acquired the status of a peep-show exhibit, with people standing on chairs in restaurants to get a glimpse of him. Kaiser Wilhelm II blamed him for the death of his father, and Dr Felix Semon, a German émigré whom Mackenzie had assisted in becoming professionally established as a laryngologist in London, would tell anyone who would listen: “Mackenzie killed my emperor.” The knighthood awarded by Queen Victoria and the Order of Hohenzollern awarded by Friedrich were scant recompense for these humiliations.

Between 1888 and 1892 Mackenzie suffered frequently from various illnesses. His asthma troubled him more than ever before. He sought relief through the constant smoking of stramonium cigarettes, and slept in a sitting position to aid breathing. He suffered a severe attack of influenza in 1890 and again in November 1891. On 19th January 1892 he suffered yet another bout of influenza. Burdened by the added complication of pneumonia, Morell Mackenzie died at his home in 19, Harley Street, on the evening of 3rd February 1892. He was aged 54.
A summary of Morell Mackenzie’s achievements

Morell Mackenzie returned to London from Vienna and Budapest fully convinced of the efficacy of the newly developed laryngoscope, and fully convinced of his own role and calling in applying that technology – and all that it made possible – to the best of his considerable ability. As such, he was the first laryngologist in Great Britain, although he did not call himself by that title at the time, referring instead to his profession as that of “consulting physician, with a special interest in and experience of diseases of the throat”.

So convinced was he of the promise and future of laryngology, and of his own ability and calling, that he held out against all criticism from sources far better qualified than he: in 1860 the laryngoscope was derided in certain medical quarters as a “toy” and ‘The Lancet’ wrote disparagingly of its usefulness. Medical specialism was greatly frowned on at the time and considered to be a means for less-than-serious practitioners to make easy money at the expense of a duped public; when Mackenzie first projected his hospital specialising in diseases of the throat, Sir James Paget – who was nevertheless an enlightened surgeon and a founder of scientific surgical pathology – told him that he might as well found a hospital for diseases of the great toe.

Despite this stinging put-down, Mackenzie went on to found the world’s first Hospital for Diseases of the Throat, which remained in existence until 1985.

Mackenzie published a number of important works on laryngology and was the author of the first standard textbook on diseases of the throat. Together with Norris Wolfenden, he founded the ‘Journal of Laryngology’.

In short, Morell Mackenzie was indeed the father of British laryngology. Mackenzie adapted existing laryngological instruments and invented new devices. He was held in high international esteem, with patients travelling from around the world to be treated by him.

He was revered by the acting profession for his tireless and generous dedication to their needs, often restoring an actor’s voice at short notice so that he or she might take to the stage again that same evening. He was generous to those patients of more modest financial means and made a point of regularly treating the poor and helpless free of charge, going far out of his way to visit their homes. Morell Mackenzie insisted on correct histological procedure, thus going against what were frequently merely inferential diagnoses in that day. And he succeeded in significantly prolonging the life of Emperor Friedrich III.
Morell Mackenzie – his character and temperament

Aside from his professional life and achievements, a consideration of Morell Mackenzie’s character and temperament reveals interesting facets.

That he was possessed of a keenly developed ego is very clear. He enjoyed the limelight and seeing his name in print – it is reported that he personally dictated daily bulletins in English and German on the state of Crown Prince Friedrich’s health to groups of reporters outside his hotel room in San Remo until late into the evening. He sought flattery and praise – his great admirer and supporter Dr Mark Hovell remarked many years after Mackenzie’s death that he was in some ways a “humbug”. When asked by a friend what he would have done had he not become a doctor, Mackenzie replied: “I don’t exactly know. I think I should have written. I would have made myself known somehow.”

Countless examples exist of his generosity and kindness to those less able to fend for themselves and less fortunate in life. During the interval of a play staged by the Bancrofts, Mackenzie informed the company: “You have a dying man upon your stage, who is only fit to be in bed.” For many weeks thereafter, Mackenzie visited the man at home in a remote part of London and provided care at his own expense until, sadly, the man passed away.

The acting profession adored him and to acknowledge their gratitude presented him with a large silver bowl inscribed with facsimiles of their signatures. Morell Mackenzie was the toast of London. In her book “A Woman of Temperament” Lady Duff Gordon declares: “…nearly every woman in London was half in love with him.”

Coupled with his gentle and compassionate nature was an iron will, a polemical edge, a sharp wit, and the ability to deliver a cutting riposte.

He did not shy away from controversy, claiming: “...(when) this idea of the intimate connection between hay fever and culture has been firmly grasped by the public mind, the complaint will, perhaps, come to be looked on, like gout, as a sign of breeding.”
Mackenzie had a strong creative and artistic side and enjoyed travel. He loved visiting Europe’s art galleries with his daughters, and even after his return from Berlin he wrote a travelogue of his visits to Madeira and Tenerife, with an analysis of the suitability of their climates for the relief of certain diseases. These works are also written with his unmistakable precision and clarity of expression – the hand of a master.

His leisure time in Wargrave was spent enjoying his garden, rowing on the Thames with his daughters, swimming, playing tennis and riding – his favourite exercise. He held the progressive belief that all women should have a profession or business: his eldest daughter Ethel wrote that he thought there was a great field for women as doctors.

Morell Mackenzie was a man of formidable intellect, lively interests and many talents. It was his destiny to set those of a more staid nature against him.

It is tragic that events in Berlin during 1887 and 1888 should have claimed a second victim. Cut off in the prime of life, at age 54, who knows what he might still have achieved?
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David Bryson Delavan (1850-1942)

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Exhibition curated by David Springall, Chief Curator and Researcher & Robert Greenwood, Heritage Officer

Booklet compiled by Ashley Phillips, Library Assistant

The essays in this booklet were written by David Springall

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