

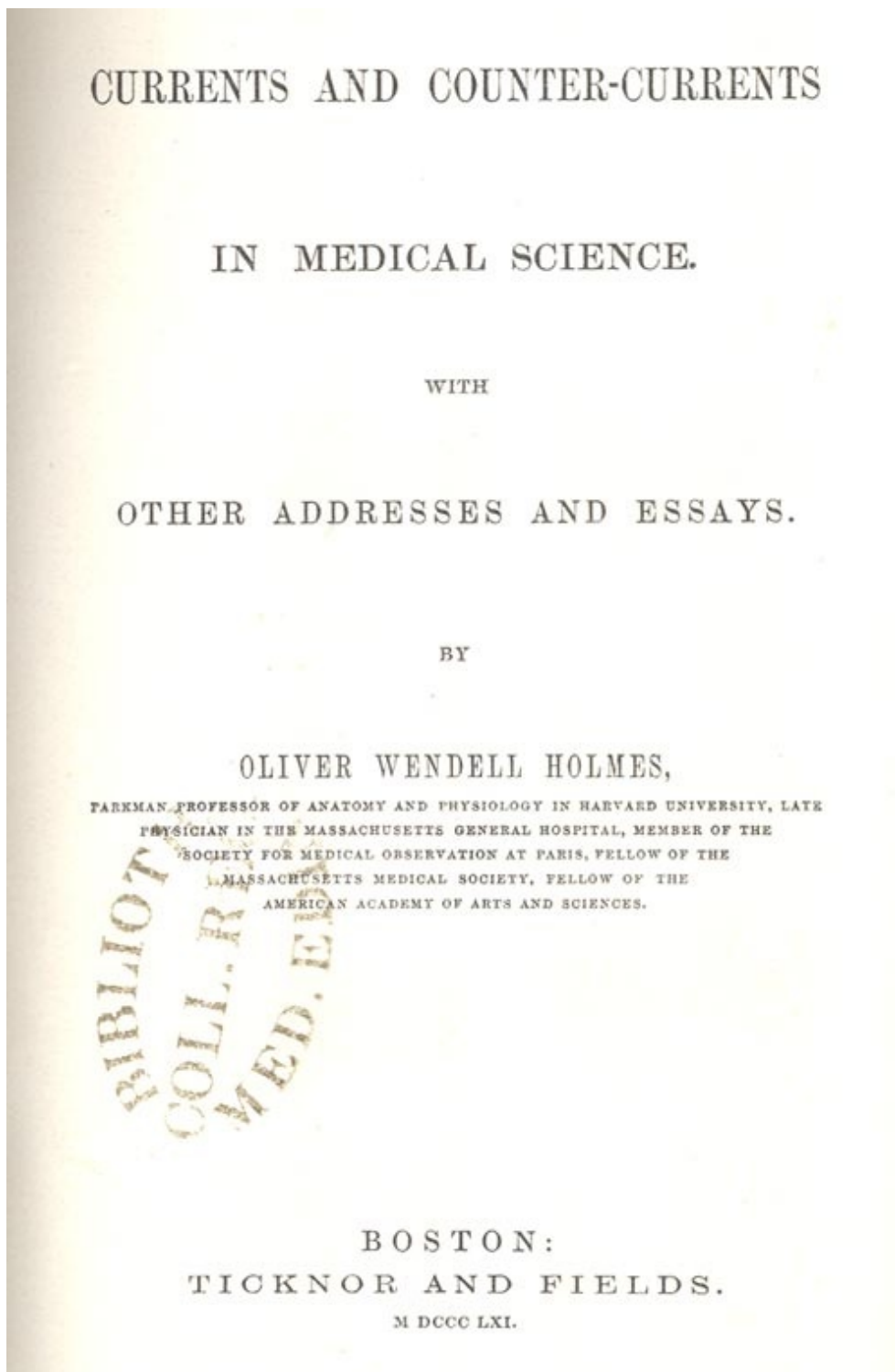
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Holmes OW (1861). Currents and counter-currents in medical science with other addresses and essays. Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1861.

Title pages



CURRENTS AND COUNTER-CURRENTS
IN MEDICAL SCIENCE.

AN ADDRESS,

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

MASSACHUSETTS MEDICAL SOCIETY,

AT THE ANNUAL MEETING,

MAY 30, 1860.

“Νούσων φύσις ἡγροί.”

“Facultate magis quam violentia.”

HIPPOCRATES.

The inveterate logical errors to which physicians have always been subject, are chiefly these:—

The mode of inference *per enumerationem simplicem*, in scholastic phrase; that is, counting only their favorable cases. This is the old trick illustrated in Lord Bacon's story of the gifts of the shipwrecked people, hung up in the temple.—Behold! they vowed these gifts to the altar, and the gods saved them. Ay, said a doubting bystander, but how many made vows of gifts and were shipwrecked notwithstanding?—The numerical system is the best corrective of this and similar errors. The arguments commonly brought against its application to all matters of medical observation, treatment included, seem to apply rather to the tabulation of facts ill observed, or improperly classified, than to the method itself.

The *post hoc ergo propter hoc* error: he got well after taking my medicine; therefore in consequence of taking it.

The false induction from genuine facts of observation, leading to the construction of theories which are then deductively applied in the face of the results of direct observation. The school of Broussais has furnished us with a good example of this error.

And lastly, the error which Sir Thomas Browne calls giving "a reason of the golden tooth;" that is, assuming a falsehood as a fact, and giving reasons for it, commonly fanciful ones, as is constantly done by that class of incompetent observers who find their "golden tooth" in the fabulous effects of the homœopathic materia medica,—which consists of sugar of milk and a nomenclature.

Another portion of the blame rests with the public itself, which insists on being poisoned. Somebody buys all the quack medicines that build palaces for the mushroom, say rather, the toadstool millionnaires. Who is it? These people have a constituency of millions. The popular belief is all but universal that sick persons should feed on noxious substances.

One such instance will do as well as twenty. Dr. Rush must have been a charming teacher, as he was an admirable man. He was observing, rather than a sound observer; eminently observing, curious, even, about all manner of things. But he could not help feeling as if Nature had been a good deal shaken by the Declaration of Independence, and that American art was getting to be rather too much for her, — especially as illustrated in his own practice. He taught thousands of American students, he gave a direction to the medical mind of the country more than any other one man; perhaps he typifies it better than any other. It has clearly tended to extravagance in remedies and trust in remedies, as in everything else. How could a people which has a revolution once in four years, which has contrived the Bowie-knife and the revolver, which has chewed the juice out of all the superlatives in the language in Fourth of July orations, and so used up its epithets in the rhetoric of abuse that it takes two great quarto dictionaries to supply the demand; which insists in sending out yachts and horses and boys to out-sail, out-run, out-fight, and checkmate all the rest of creation; how could such a people be content with any but “heroic” practice? What wonder that the stars and stripes wave over doses of ninety grains of sulphate of quinine,* and that the American eagle screams with delight to see three drachms of calomel given at a single mouthful?

Add to this the great number of Medical Journals, all useful, we hope, most of them necessary, we trust, many of them excellently well conducted, but which must find something to fill their columns, and so print all the new plans of treatment and new remedies they can get hold of, as the newspapers, from a similar necessity, print the shocking catastrophes and terrible murders.

Besides all this, here are we, the great body of teachers in the numberless medical schools of the Union, some of us lecturing to crowds who clap and stamp in the cities, some of us wandering over the country, like other professional fertilizers, to fecundate the minds of less demonstrative audiences at various scientific stations; all of us talking habitually to those supposed to know less than ourselves, and loving to claim as much for our art as we can, not to say for our own schools, and possibly indirectly for our own practical skill. Hence that annual crop of introductory lectures; the useful blossoming into the ornamental, as the cabbage becomes glorified in the cauliflower; that lecture-room literature of adjectives, that declamatory exaggeration, that splendid show of erudition borrowed from D'Israeli, and credited to Lord Bacon and the rest, which have suggested to our friends of the Medical Journals an occasional epigram at our expense. Hence the tendency in these productions, and in medical lectures generally, to over-state the efficacy of favorite methods of cure, and hence the premium offered for showy talkers rather than sagacious observers, for the men of adjectives rather than of nouns substantive in the more ambitious of these institutions.*

I firmly believe that if the whole *materia medica, as now used*, could be sunk to the bottom of the sea, it would be all the better for mankind, — and all the worse for the fishes.