

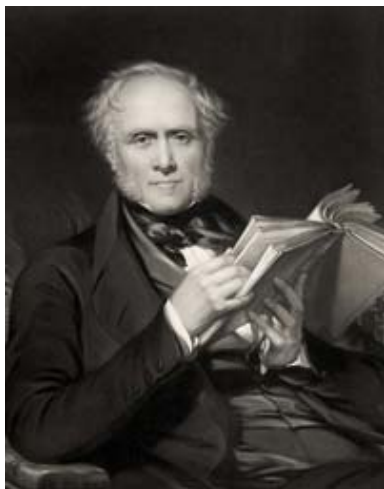
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Sir John Forbes, physician and medical journalist, was born on 17 December 1787 at Cuttlebrae, near Cullen, in the parish of Rathven, Banffshire, on the Moray Firth in North-East Scotland. He was the fourth son of a local tenant farmer, Alexander Forbes and Cicilia Wilkie. The family later moved to Dytac (or Dytach) in the parish of Fordyce, a few miles from Cullen and close to the coast at Sandend Bay, where young John learned to swim in the cold waters of the North Sea.

With his friend James Clark (1788-1870), who also came of farming stock, he walked to the local parish school at Fordyce. They became close friends and their later medical careers coincided as physicians in London. Both were helped financially at Fordyce school by scholarships, which were originally funded from a legacy donated by an ancestor of John Forbes' mother, Cicilia Wilkie. This provided a small annual income for twenty children for five years' education at the school, and for an additional four years of higher education at the University of Aberdeen.

There is a gravestone in Fordyce churchyard bearing the inscription: 'Sacred to the memory of Alexander Forbes...who departed this life on the 11th day of April 1842, aged 92 years; and of Cicilia Wilkie, his wife, who died on the 20th day of July 1831, in the 80th year of her age.' This stone was erected in 1843 by John Forbes, at that time a physician in London, and by his elder brother, Alexander, who had made his fortune as a merchant in Mexico, and by their two surviving sisters, Elspet and Anne. Nearby, there is the gravestone of James Clark's parents, David Clark and Isabella Scott. Because of their lifelong friendship, John Forbes and James Clark named their only sons after each other. Clark named his son John Forbes Clark and Forbes called his Alexander Clark Forbes.

At the age of fifteen John Forbes joined the Rector's class at Aberdeen Grammar School, where he expanded his knowledge of Mathematics, English, French, Dutch and the Classics, the rudiments of which he had learned at Fordyce. He next entered the Arts course of Marischal College, Aberdeen, where he attended classes between 1803 and 1805 but there is no record that he ever graduated BA from the University. In his spare time, in order to develop a new interest in a future medical career, he was apprenticed to two general practitioners in Banff. Perhaps inspired by Nelson's victory at Trafalgar on 21 October 1805, he decided to enlist as a surgeon in the Royal Navy. He went to Edinburgh to obtain the diploma of the Royal College of Surgeons there and passed the examination in February 1806. The following year he entered the naval medical service at the rank of temporary assistant surgeon.

Naval career (1807-1816)

John Forbes' naval career coincided with the latter part of the Napoleonic Wars and, apart from a short period of retraining in naval medicine and surgery at the Royal Hospital Haslar in 1811, he spent his time at sea. He was confirmed in the rank of full surgeon on 27 January 1809, following service in a 100-gun Ship-of-the-Line, the *Royal George*, flagship of the Channel Fleet. In smaller warships, he later saw action against the French in the Caribbean (1809-10) and in the North Sea squadron blockading the Dutch coast and attacking fortified ports on the river Elbe (1811-13). During these commissions, Forbes' knowledge of the French language came in very useful when acting as an interpreter.

One incident which took place during the period on the North Sea station was an early example of Forbes' courage and independence of character. At that time his manner was described as "bluff and hearty but pleasing from the evidence it gave of sincerity and goodness" (Parkes 1862, p 10). Forbes volunteered for a "cutting-out operation", which would have involved approaching an enemy ship at anchor under cover of darkness with a view to its capture by force. The approach in a small boat with muffled oars was under the

command of a Lieutenant, who evidently decided that the operation was too risky and, before coming within range of enemy fire, abandoned it. Forbes, who was all in favour of completing the action (perhaps with a view to sharing in valuable 'prize money'), indignantly tore off his sword and threw it down in the bottom of the cutter, uttering some "strong expressions" and declaring that "he would not be caught on a fool's errand again!" (Parkes 1862, p 15).

Forbes' last commission was under Rear-Admiral (later Sir) Philip Charles Durham (1763-1845) in HMS *Venerable*, on the Leeward Islands station. His return to the West Indies as Durham's flag surgeon and secretary was evidence of the high regard in which he was held by the Admiralty. As a fellow Scot, Forbes' relationship with the Commander-in-Chief was cordial - they shared a knowledge of the French language which, in Durham's case, would have included some colloquialisms, as he had lived in France for a couple of years before the wars. In collaboration with the monarchist Governor of Martinique, the Comte de Vaugiraud, Forbes was present at a successful amphibious operation in August 1815 under Durham. This resulted in the capture of the island of Guadeloupe from a force of Bonapartists under the Comte de Linois, just before the onset of the hurricane season in the Caribbean. As his flag secretary, Forbes wrote Durham's despatches to the Admiralty, reporting the satisfactory outcome of this first co-operation between the forces of France and Great Britain following Waterloo. With the end of the war in 1816, Forbes was put on half-pay and returned to civilian life. He would have received the naval war medal in recognition of his service, but there is no family record of this (David Forbes, Buradoo, New South Wales, Australia, personal communication 2008).

Edinburgh and Penzance (1817-1822)

John Forbes enrolled in the flourishing medical school at Edinburgh in 1816, as a 29-year-old mature student. He worked hard. His Latin dissertation, which he dedicated to his naval mentor Philip Durham, was accepted within a year, and he proceeded MD (Edin.) in August 1817, on the same day as his friend James Clark.

During the course of his medical studies Forbes had attended lectures in geology given by Professor Robert Jamieson. The professor was asked to recommend an Edinburgh physician with an interest in geology for a medical practice in Penzance, Cornwall. Forbes was duly recommended and appointed, and he moved to Penzance in September 1817. His duties involved both general medical practice and as physician to the Penzance Public Dispensary.

Between 1817 and 1822 he laid the foundations for his knowledge of the newly invented stethoscope of René Laënnec (1781-1826), an early model of which Clark had brought back from Paris in 1818. Clark was enthusiastic about the French physician's teaching on stethoscopy as expressed in his classical work *De L'Auscultation Médiante* (1819), and, prompted by Clark, Forbes translated this into English in four editions issued between 1821 and 1834. His first translation *A Treatise on Diseases of the Chest* (1821) was a great success and was instrumental in spreading Laënnec's teachings to the English-speaking world.

On 19 May 1820, Forbes married Eliza Mary Burgh (1787-1851) at Great Torrington, Devon. He took a keen interest in local Cornish academic activities, contributing papers to the Royal Geological Society of Cornwall, of which he was secretary. One of his best papers drew attention to the health of Cornish tin and copper miners, including pioneer studies of their working conditions and the stethoscopic signs of pulmonary tuberculosis. He addressed the Penwith Agricultural Society on local natural history and climate, noting its benefits for convalescent patients. Remarkably, he found the time to be the first honorary Librarian of Penzance Public Library, which he had helped to found in 1818. These achievements, together with his translations and later practical use of the stethoscope in Chichester, were recognized when he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1829.

Chichester (1822-1840)

John Forbes and his bride of two years moved to Chichester in 1822, where their only child, Alexander Clark Forbes, was born on 18 April 1824. They settled in well to a practice near the city's cathedral, where a handsome stained glass window dedicated to their memory can be seen today. Eliza Forbes had founded the local Dorcas Charity and the upper roundel of the window shows Dorcas ('Tabitha') clothing the poor, and in the background, St. Peter raising her after she had died (Acts 9: 36-42); the lower roundel shows Jesus healing the sick at the Pool of Bethesda (John 5: 2-8). [Personal communication 2002, Mr RF Brown, Chichester]. It was mainly through John Forbes' fund-raising efforts that the old Chichester Public Dispensary was replaced by a modern infirmary building, which opened for patients in 1826. This became the Royal West Sussex Hospital in 1913.

Forbes was involved in starting the Chichester Mechanics' Institute in 1825 for the promotion of science, literature and the arts. In 1831 he led the establishment of a natural history museum at the Infirmary, which later became Chichester District Museum and, in the same year, the Chichester Literary and Philosophical Society. [Personal communication 2009, Miss Anne Blakeney, Chichester].

John and Eliza Forbes lived in the City at the house of Dr William Burnett (1779-1861), who had a very lucrative practice there between 1816 and 1822, when he was recalled from 'half-pay' to improve medical services in the Royal Navy (Lloyd and Coulter 1963). One of Burnett's first reforms as head of the naval medical department was to introduce the use of the stethoscope to naval surgeons (p4). He later became Sir William Burnett Bart. in 1831 and Physician in Ordinary to the King (p6).

At Chichester, Forbes wrote his major innovative medical work *Original Cases with Dissections and Observations illustrating the use of the Stethoscope and Percussion in the diagnosis of Diseases of the Chest* (1824). This included the first English translation of the Austrian physician Auenbrugger's (1722-1809) new technique of percussion of the chest wall. Forbes described thirty-nine patients, treated by him at Chichester, in whom the vital physical signs were verified by autopsy in fatal cases. This was another importation of Laënnec's doctrines into British practice. *Original Cases* was favourably reviewed by *The Lancet*, which complimented the author on his outstanding work (Anon 1824), and also in Edinburgh, where it was highly recommended as being very helpful in the study of chest diseases "as well as in their practical diagnosis." (Anon 1825). There was no doubt that Forbes' book filled the gap that existed in the medical world for a reliable textbook on stethoscopy, and his work helped him to win over the sceptics in his profession. Indeed, Forbes himself had been one of the original doubters!

Forbes successfully combined private medical practice with his hospital work at the new Chichester Infirmary over fourteen years. A potential rival, Dr John Conolly (1794-1866), also an Edinburgh graduate, departed amicably in order to pursue a career elsewhere. They remained good friends and, in collaboration with a third Edinburgh graduate, Alexander Tweedie (1794-1884), they launched a *Cyclopaedia of Practical Medicine* in four volumes (Forbes et al. 1832-35). This was John Forbes' first venture into medical journalism, a new career which was to engage his faculties over the next fifteen years. In addition to contributing his own articles to the *Cyclopaedia*, he was also its main editor. His creation of a *Manual of Select Medical Bibliography* (Forbes 1835) was a yardstick of excellence and also made up for the absence of references in the original articles in the *Cyclopaedia*. The *Cyclopaedia* was a popular forum for the best medical writers in the British Isles and made a handsome profit when it was sold in 1835.

In 1836, Forbes and Conolly started a new publication in 1836: the *British and Foreign Medical Review*, or, *A Quarterly Journal of Practical Medicine*. They shared the editorship from 1836 to 1839, when Conolly resigned to work full time in psychiatry. The *British and Foreign Medical Review* was read widely in Europe and America, its articles helping to promote modern methods of diagnosis and treatment and enhancing the reputation of British medicine.

During the late 1830's, Forbes continued working in his busy clinical practice in Chichester but still kept up his interests outside medicine. His *Lecture on poetry and fiction considered as sources of pleasure and improvement* was printed privately in 1837. He dedicated it to his elder brother, Alexander, who had emigrated to Tepic in Mexico some years previously.

London (1840-1859)

On 15 October 1840, John Forbes resigned as senior physician at Chichester Infirmary in order to take up residence at 12 Old Burlington Street, Westminster. This move was to prove a turning point in his career and an anxious time for his wife and 18-year-old son. Fortunately, he was helped by James Clark, his friend from schooldays in Forgyce. By this time, Clark had been created a baronet for his services to the young Queen Victoria (1819-1901), who had succeeded to the throne in 1837. On 15 February 1841, Forbes was appointed court physician to Prince Albert (1819-1861) and the royal household. The Scottish physician had now reached the peak of his medical and journalistic careers. Further honours followed: Fellowship of the Royal College of Physicians was conferred on him in 1844 and honorary fellowship of the Imperial Society of Physicians in Vienna in 1845.

The *British and Foreign Medical Review* established his reputation in medical journalism and helped in building up his consultant practice in London. Unfortunately, the success of these years was marred by the chronic ill health of his wife Eliza, who died in 1851. His interests outside conventional medicine extended to include such esoteric subjects as animal magnetism, which were based on the ideas of the Austrian physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815), who claimed to cure diseases in séances ([Mesmer 1781](#)) but was exposed as an imposter by a royal commission in 1784 ([Commission Royale 1784](#)). Similarly, Forbes had published an article on 'Sleepwalking, clairvoyance and animal magnetism', written in German and published in Vienna (Forbes 1846). In the previous year, he had ridiculed clairvoyance in an article that had appeared in a London literary journal (Forbes 1845) and was congratulated by a reviewer for his patience in trying to establish whether the demonstrations of clairvoyance and mesmerism were genuine or fraudulent by personally witnessing them. In addition, Forbes was interested in phrenology and homeopathy, which fuelled the flames of professional jealousy in some of his medical colleagues.

In January 1846, he published anonymously in the *British and Foreign Medical Review* a commentary

entitled '*Homeopathy, Allopathy and the "Young Physic"*'. This drew on nine British and foreign authors on homeopathy, including three by its founder, Samuel Hahnemann (1755-1843), and one by a doctor at Forbes' *alma mater* in Edinburgh. Forbes' remarkable commentary is featured in the James Lind Library ([Forbes 1846](#)). It opens by remarking that the subject of homeopathy had never been formally addressed in the *Review* and admits that, by comparison with "every country in Europe", it had been neglected in Britain as a system of medical doctrine and practice.

As indicated by the title of his article, Forbes broadened his approach to the subject by extending it beyond homeopathy to include an examination of the evidential basis for contemporary mainstream medicine. He was firmly of the opinion that drugs were often prescribed prematurely and in too large amounts without waiting to see whether masterly inactivity (the *vis medicatrix naturae*) would be effective. He felt that this dictum applied particularly in the case of young, inexperienced doctors, fresh out of medical school, where passing final qualifying examinations had depended on unquestioning obedience to the dictates of their professors. He concluded that the practice of medicine should be based on a combination of art and science and that this could only be done by improving standards of medical education. It is clear to anyone who takes the trouble to read the forty pages of the article that Forbes, as an impartial editor, kept an open mind on Hahnemann's 'like cures like', but that he had no time for medical quackery, whether promulgated by unorthodox practitioners or by mainstream doctors.

In his later little philosophical book *Of Nature and Art in the Cure of Disease* (Forbes 1857), Forbes goes as far as to say that "a large proportion of cases of disease [which] recover under homeopathy...recover by means of the curative powers of Nature alone." He concluded that homeopathy is "one of the greatest delusions...of the healing art" and the only good that ensues from its practice is the reduction in "the monstrous polypharmacy which has always been the disgrace of our art – by at once diminishing the frequency of administration of drugs and lessening their dose." (Chapter VII, pp 162-63).

In spite of Forbes' even-handed approach, the London medical establishment considered his views iconoclastic and this view of Forbes persisted in some circles, as was reflected in an unflattering obituary notice which appeared in *The Lancet* nearly sixteen years later, which referred to the Scottish physician's "obnoxious articles" published in the *British and Foreign Medical Review* (Anon 1861). An article entitled *Medical Errors* written by a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians of London (Barclay 1864, pp 3-4) questioned Forbes' claim that Nature was often the chief cause of success in the treatment of disease, as opposed to the 'inductive logic' that guided Barclay's own therapeutic philosophy. This curt dismissal of Forbes' dictum ignores the main thrust of his sensible approach to therapeutics, namely, that too many drugs administered too often may have a disastrous effect on prognosis. It must be remembered that, at the time that Barclay and others were expressing these views, specific remedies for most diseases did not exist, although the medical world stood on the brink of basic scientific discoveries in microbiology. Historical evidence from the epidemic of yellow fever in the West Indies a half-century previously supports Forbes' conservative approach: in contrast to the reliance of British doctors on bleeding and purging, the French method was to 'let nature take its course' and to give their patients symptomatic relief and 'careful nursing' (Brockliss et al. 2005, p 54).

John Forbes' general reputation was unharmed, however, as, in 1846, he was appointed as one of the first two consulting physicians to the Brompton Hospital for Consumption and Diseases of the Chest. He resigned as editor of the *British and Foreign Medical Review* in 1847, unrepentant for challenging the medical establishment. This may, in part, have resulted in his journal's commercial failure and in its subsequent amalgamation with Johnson's *Medico-Chirurgical Review* in 1848, to form the *British and Foreign Medico-Chirurgical Review*. Further evidence that Forbes' reputation as an unbiased editor and of his integrity as a physician were unharmed by his challenge to orthodox medicine is provided by the fact that, in 1858, one of his colleagues at the Brompton Hospital dedicated a textbook on pulmonary tuberculosis to him. The author describes Forbes as "one who, through his long life, has exerted no inconsiderable influence over his profession, and who, amongst his other distinguishing qualities, has had the courage to question the groundwork of some of the principles of his art, and with a view to their correction has boldly expressed his convictions" (Smith 1858).

Retirement

On his retirement from medical practice in 1848 John Forbes remained at Old Burlington Street, where he was joined by his brother Alexander. When living in London, Forbes enjoyed the theatre, especially Shakespeare. He would treat actors without charge and, in appreciation, the managers of the Covent Garden Theatre presented him with a handsome silver cup in 1849. Perhaps mindful of his own unpretentious rural upbringing, Forbes helped others in less fortunate circumstances. While living in Chichester, he had befriended and become patron of the struggling Cicestrian 'shoemaker poet', Charles Croker (Agnew 2002, p 40).

In London, a further opportunity arose to demonstrate his generosity and lack of snobbery. Between 1845-

9 the failure of the potato crop in Ireland caused a famine which created "new conditions of demographic decline [and] large scale emigration..." (Foster 1988, p 318). Forbes had visited Ireland in 1852 in the aftermath of the Great Famine, and had published an account of his visit the following year (Forbes 1853). John Egan cites Forbes as a doctor who empathized with the plight of emigrants, the majority of whom were bound for the United States of America (Egan 2005a). Forbes was a member of the council of the Royal Literary Fund, a benevolent fund to help British authors in financial straits, as well as being a fervent supporter of the temperance movement (Couling 1862, pp 296-297). These associations led to Forbes' meeting with the impoverished shoemaker/poet, John O'Neill, at Forbes' house in Old Burlington Street, in 1851.

John O'Neill (1778-1858) had been born in poverty in Waterford and published his memoirs - *Fifty Years Experience of an Irish Shoemaker in London* - as 41 weekly instalments in the journal *St. Crispin*, "a weekly journal devoted to the interest of boot and shoe makers, and all engaged in the leather trade", whose proprietor and editor was the Chartist, John Bedford Leno (1826-1894) (Egan 2005b, p 288). This is how John O'Neill recorded his visit to John Forbes (O'Neill 1870):

"The doctor desired James Devlin [another shoemaker/writer] to tell me to call on him, any morning I could make it convenient, as he had a wish to see me. Though I was personally unknown to Dr Forbes, still my name was not unknown to him, he being of the literary gentlemen who formed the committee of the Royal Literary Fund at the time of my application to the society for relief. This was a gratifying announcement to me, the honour of the notice of a gentleman of such eminence in the literary world, was a distinction I never hoped to enjoy, so that I soon availed myself of the permission to make a visit at his residence, No.12 Old Burlington Street.

"Dr. Forbes received me very kindly and conversed with me in a friendly and affable manner, asking me many questions concerning my writings and my opinions of the works of many of the popular authors of the day, and when I was taking my leave he presented me with a copy of Mr D Pain's *Task of the Age*, of which he requested me to give my opinion. He desired me to add his name to my list of subscribers [to a new edition of a temperance poem entitled *The Drunkard*, price one shilling] and presented me with a sovereign, telling me I need bring him only four copies for himself and friends, but I begged that would permit me to put down the entire twenty copies to my names, as I would consider it a great honour. He smiled and said I might do so if I considered it either a gratification or a benefit. As I was leaving he said, "Any morning you are coming this way, I would be glad to see you." Dr Forbes proved himself to be the high-bred scholar and gentleman with manners so kind and conciliating, that when a few minutes in his company I felt at ease, as if I was with the most familiar of my acquaintances. The gentleman and high distinguished scholar assumed no superiority in his manner and bearing over the poor, uneducated cobbler. I left Old Burlington Street, both gratified and grateful, believing that there was more humanity and generous sympathy for the poor among the higher classes of society than the world gave credit for.

"My visit to Dr Forbes gave me fresh ardour to go on; it added a new motive for exertion. In our conversation, among other things, he said I ought to put a good short sketch of my life to the work, as it would make it more interesting, for those who read it would wish to know something of its author. I said I would endeavour to get a friend to do it, when he said, "No one can do it as well as yourself, but, however, it is necessary such a thing should be done."

In 1852, the University of Oxford conferred on Forbes an honorary degree of Doctor in Civil Law and, in 1853, he was knighted by Queen Victoria. A walking holiday in Switzerland led to a published account, which ran to three editions between 1849 and 1852. He was a prolific letter-writer, corresponding among others with Sir Robert Peel, Sir Walter Scott and, towards the end of his life, with Florence Nightingale. Forbes published one other travel book about a visit to Germany and the Tyrol in 1855 and, as already mentioned, a final work on his favourite subject *Of Nature and Art in the Cure of Disease* (Forbes 1857).

In the Introduction to *Of Nature and Art in the Cure of Disease*, Forbes writes (p vi): "It is my intention, on some future occasion, to publish another volume of the same size as the present, consisting of the original article 'On Homeopathy, Allopathy and Young Physic' *written by me* (my italics), in 1845, together with a selection from the correspondence elicited by it, at the time, from my medical friends. The first of these papers will be found in No. XLI of the '*British and Foreign Medical Review*' (then edited by me), and the remainder in the subsequent numbers of the same journal. This additional volume, though it will afford considerable support to the author's views as promulgated in the present work, will still leave the subject in a very incomplete state." LONDON, February 1st 1857. (Forbes 1857).

In the first chapter in *Of Nature and Art in the Cure of Disease* Forbes explains his reasons for writing the book, and this makes clear that his views had changed from scepticism to outright condemnation of the unorthodox doctrines of mesmerism and homeopathy, while still advocating the benefits of the curative properties of Nature and medical "*secundum artem*" (Forbes 1857, pp 11-16). Unfortunately, ill health

prevented the appearance of an "additional volume" on the *vis medicatrix naturae*, but I strongly recommend reading the original. A signed copy, presented by Forbes, is in the library of the Royal College of Physicians of London.

Closing years

In 1854 Sir John Forbes had reluctantly declined an invitation to set up a military hospital at Smyrna (Izmir) at the time of the Crimean War (1854-56). He missed the opportunity of working alongside Dr Edmund Parkes (1819-1876) at the Civil Hospital at Renikoi (Parkes was editor of the *British and Foreign Medico-Chirurgical Review* from 1852-1855). For three years, Forbes was a neighbour of Florence Nightingale (1820-1910) who, in her struggle to improve military hygiene and civilian nursing, had established her headquarters at the Burlington Hotel annexe (No. 30) in November 1856. Forbes and Nightingale never met but they corresponded (she from her sick bed with what may have been chronic brucellosis), and they exchanged copies of each other's books with expressions of mutual respect and admiration.

In 1859, after suffering several minor strokes, Forbes retired with his brother, Alexander, to live at the home of his son, Swanston House, in Whitchurch-on-Thames. There he enjoyed the tranquil surroundings of rural Oxfordshire and was visited by his longstanding friend Sir James Clark, but he was frustrated by paralysis of his legs for the last three months of his life. Sir John Forbes died peacefully on 13 November 1861, just before his seventy-fourth birthday, and was buried in St. Mary's churchyard, Whitchurch, six days later. In December the body of his wife, Eliza, was exhumed from her grave at Kensal Green Cemetery and buried alongside his. Their only son, Alexander Clark Forbes, also arranged for two memorial plaques to be placed side by side on the wall inside the church. Ironically, on 14 December, the Prince Consort, to whom John Forbes had been appointed court physician twenty years previously, died of typhoid fever in the Blue Room at Windsor Castle.

Sir John Forbes, MD, FRCP, DCL (Oxon.) FRCS, was honoured by his membership of many esteemed academic societies, both at home and abroad. His obituary notice in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society* (1862-63) concluded: "Although Sir John Forbes cannot be ranked among those who have advanced the science of medicine by the discovery of new facts or the promulgation of new principles, he must be regarded as having done most essential service to the cause of progress... by the determined onslaught which he made upon prevalent errors, and the vigorous earnestness with which he pleaded for generally-neglected truths."

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Agnew RAL (1994). John Forbes (1787-1861), in memoriam: from Cuttlebrae to Whitchurch. *Journal of Medical Biography* 2:187-192; and

Agnew RAL (2005). John Forbes FRS (1787-1861). The James Lind Library (www.jameslindlibrary.org).

Detailed accounts of John Forbes' life are available in:

Agnew RAL (2002). *The Life of Sir John Forbes (1787-1861)*. Bramber, West Sussex, Bernard Durnford Publishing, an imprint of Heritage Books Ltd. [ISBN 978-0-9535670-7-9]

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