

## Book Review

### FELIX SEMON 1849–1921 A VICTORIAN LARYNGOLOGIST

Donald Harrison; The Royal Society of Medicine Press Ltd, London

ISBN 1-85315-413-X. Price: £20.00

When I revised the entry on Felix Semon for the latest edition of the *Dictionary of National Biography* I admired the man for his achievement but I admit I ended up unimpressed with him as a person. When Sir Donald set out to research this book I speculated that he would either end up loving or hating the man. Now that the book is published I have learnt a great deal more about Semon but I have detected in the conclusion that Sir Donald has come out more on the side of love than hate!

This is a fascinating book which covers not only the life of Semon but also the history of laryngology as an emerging speciality and of those who contributed to its development. The main sources of the book are the posthumously published *The Autobiography of Sir Felix Semon*, edited by his eldest son Henry Semon with T. A. M. McIntyre, his many papers, and reports of meetings at which he presented or presided. Much new material has been made available to the author by Semon's family, in particular, the diaries written on his visit to the United States in 1904 and throughout his post retirement world tour in 1909–10.

Has Sir Donald made me like Semon any more? Certainly I was pleased to learn about his musical talents as a pianist and composer, which skills he continued to practice mostly for the enjoyment of others throughout his life. His marriage to Augusta Redeker, herself an accomplished singer, enhanced this aspect of his life.

Given that Semon abandoned his Jewish faith and his German nationality because he knew that he would not reach the height of medicine in an anti-semitic Prussia and chose to settle in a class ridden society of Victorian Britain his task was certainly formidable. There is little doubt that Semon was driven to succeed. As is the case with ruthless men those who assist their ascent are often left by the wayside with little thanks or acknowledgement. Such was the fate of Morell Mackenzie whose character Semon later discreetly helped to destroy; of St Thomas' Hospital who made him the first laryngologist in a general hospital but who when his practice increased were presented with his premature resignation; and of Victor Horsley, Professor of Pathology at University College and Assistant Surgeon at University College Hospital, who provided Semon with laboratory facilities for animal research into the physiology of the laryngeal nerves. It would appear that

most of the work was done by Horsley as indeed was the research associated with myxoedema following total thyroidectomy. Nevertheless Semon must have charmed Horsley enough to gain his support in his appointment as laryngologist to the National Hospital for the Paralysed and Epileptic ('Queen Square').

Perhaps the biggest ladders in Semon's career were offered by his patients many of whom he sought to befriend to enhance his social position. The actress Lily Langtry effected his introduction to the Prince of Wales who subsequently welcomed Semon into his circle and enabled Semon to practice not only laryngology on the rich and famous but also his love of field sports and bridge.

Maybe his charm won him through but one obstacle he could not influence was the anti German feeling engendered by the First World War. This, occurring near the end of his life, was more than Semon could bear. It is here that his friends left him, even his journal *Internationales Centralblatt für Laryngologie, Rhinologie und verwandte Wissenschaften* (renamed *Semon's Centralblatt* in honour of his retirement in 1909) perhaps somewhat spitefully removed his name from the title in 1915.

Despite all the honours which Semon sought and obtained what was his real contribution? Apart from the promotion which laryngology achieved from the work of Semon (or was it perhaps the other way round?) could he in those times have achieved more? After all this contribution to surgery was limited in part by his own skill which was second to Mackenzie and in part by the inability at the time to operate externally as this was the province of the general surgeon. It must be remembered though that Semon was a physician and that laryngology at this stage was still a medical speciality. Despite this would laryngology have moved faster to becoming a surgical speciality had Semon been able to lead on a surgical front? Semon was an exceptional individual and did play an important part in the establishment of laryngology. He used his German background and royal connections to the full but it seems never achieved the size or wealth of Morell Mackenzie's practice perhaps because he performed fewer intralaryngeal procedures.

Sir Donald has written a very readable book. He tells a good tale of this self-promoting occasionally contradictory but nevertheless highly intelligent and industrious warm-hearted man. I feel though that the time has come for us all to re-evaluate the work of Morell Mackenzie and perhaps to bring his portrait into the limelight. Another task for Sir Donald?

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