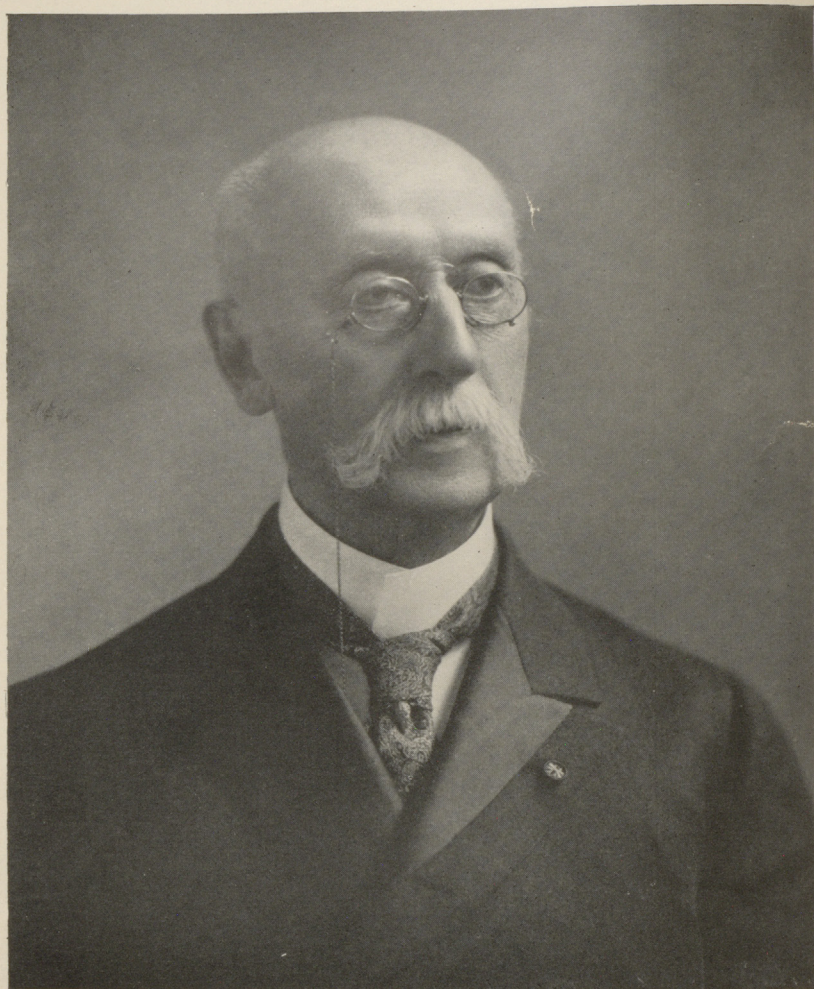

IN MEMORIAM.

DR. ROBERT FLETCHER.

BY W. D. McCaw, M. D.,
Lt.-Col. (M. C.), U. S. A.; Librarian Surgeon General's Office.

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Doctor Robert Fletcher, for thirty-five years the principal [92] assistant librarian of the Library of the Surgeon General's Office, died in Washington, November 6, 1912, in the ninetieth year of his age. The end of such a long and useful life calls for more than passing notice, for to the great learning and accurate editorial work of Dr. Fletcher on the Index Catalogue and Index Medicus the medical profession of America and Europe is deeply indebted.

Doctor Fletcher was born in Bristol, England, March 6, 1823, the son of an attorney and accountant of that city. He was educated at private schools in Bristol and read law with his father for two years before taking up the study of medicine at the Bristol Medical College and later at the London Hospital, of which he was the oldest living graduate. He became Licentiate of the Society of Apothecaries and member of the Royal College of Surgeons in 1844, married in 1843 Miss Hannah Howe of Bristol, and came to the United States in [93] 1847, making his home in Cincinnati.

At the outbreak of the Civil War Dr. Fletcher was commissioned as Surgeon in the 1st Ohio Infantry and was on active field service for two years. In 1863 he was made Surgeon U. S. Volunteers and assigned to the army of General George H. Thomas in the Nashville campaign. He was in charge of Hospital No. 7, Nashville, Tennessee, and subsequently medical purveyor at Nashville and Cincinnati where he wound up successfully the complicated affairs of a war-time purveying depot, receiving for "faithful and meritorious service during the War" the brevets of Lieutenant Colonel and Colonel. The

[93] War Department employed him in 1871 to assist in the preparation of the two valuable volumes of "Medical and Anthropological Statistics" of the Provost Marshal General's Bureau, derived from the examination for military service of over a million men. For this work Dr. Fletcher wrote the introductory treatise on anthropometry, about the only thing of interest to the general reader in this book, and which illustrates very well the extent of his information and his love for the historic and artistic aspects of medical science.

The library of the Surgeon General's Office, an absurdly small and insignificant collection of books in 1861, had increased during the war to about 1700 volumes. In 1865 Dr. John S. Billings, then Assistant Surgeon, U. S. Army, was put in charge and began to develop what is now perhaps the largest and best known medical library in the world, a monument to the energy and forethought of its founder. As the library rapidly increased in size and importance, Dr. Billings prepared the plan of the present Index Catalogue in which under a single alphabet and in dictionary order a combined index of authors and subjects appears. The "specimen fasciculus" of the proposed catalogue was printed in 1876 and submitted to libraries and bibliographers for comment and suggestions. Soon after its appearance the services of Dr. Fletcher were secured as principal assistant to Dr. Billings in the work of preparing and printing the Index Catalogue of which the first volume was published in 1880. From that time to the past year (1912) a volume has appeared annually, and the first series A to Z having been completed in 1895, the second series now reaches the letter T. On these 33 massive quartos averaging nearly 900 pages to a volume and containing to date 327,000 author titles and 1,333,079 subject titles of books, pamphlets and original papers in periodicals, Dr. Fletcher labored to within a few weeks of his death, supervising, proof reading, and correcting with tireless patience and extraordinary accuracy. Much original work of a high order is called for in the grouping and subdivision of the subject matter of the Index Catalogue, requiring a vast amount of information which must be kept abreast of the times by constant study. The almost revolutionary changes in medicine and surgery

and the evolution of many specialties which characterized the [93] last years of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, found Dr. Fletcher already an old man, but to the last he constantly added to his great store of knowledge and his fine intellect as readily appreciated the latest medical paper of real value as the venerable volumes of the old masters of medicine in which his bibliophile's heart delighted.

The Index Medicus, a monthly publication based upon the card catalogue of the Library of the Surgeon General's Office, and which supplements the Index Catalogue by bringing to the public notice the current medical literature before it can be reached in alphabetical order, was begun in 1879 with Dr. Billings and Dr. Fletcher as co-editors and ran until 1899 when the publication ceased. It was revived in 1903 under the auspices of the Carnegie Institution with Dr. Fletcher as editor-in-chief until his resignation in the early part of 1912.

Away from his editorial work Dr. Fletcher found time for many social and literary interests. He was sometime president of the Anthropological, the Philosophical and the Literary Society of Washington and the president of the Cosmos Club. He lectured on medical jurisprudence at the Columbia University of Washington, 1884-1888, and at the Johns Hopkins University, 1897-1903. In spite of, or perhaps on account [94] of, his tireless editorial research he was led to pursue some of the side paths in medicine of special interest to him, and as a result he produced many original essays on anthropology, early jurisprudence and medical lore, as known to the old poets, dramatists and artists. In his writings, he is always master of his subject, clear and simple in style and with a certain quiet humor which is most attractive.

A complete list of his literary productions will soon appear in the Index Medicus, the last essay "On Some Diseases Bearing the Names of Saints" having been published after his death in the December number of the Bristol Medico-Chirurgical Journal preceded by a graceful "In Memoriam" by Sir William Osler, a friend of many years standing.

Doctor Fletcher was a handsome soldierly man, dignified and courtly in manner. He also possessed to the full the blessed sense of humor and was a philosopher who had learned

[94] to extract all that is best in life. Time dealt very gently with him. Except for the feebleness of extreme old age his health was excellent and his mind remained unimpaired.

Dr. Fletcher's service to the profession was acknowledged by many honors, among which was a banquet given by leading physicians and scientists on January 11, 1906, with a loving cup and a commemorative album which was one of his most prized possessions. In 1910 he was awarded the gold medal of the Royal College of Surgeons, a rarely conferred distinction. He was an associate fellow of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, honorary M. D. of Columbian University and a few weeks before his death received a degree in medicine from his first medical school in Bristol. He had many devoted friends, young men as well as old, who delighted in his company and enjoyed his conversation at his favorite club or in his charming private library where he lived alone with his books.

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