

WALTER ESSEX WYNTER (1860-1945). M.D. (Lond.), F.R.C.P. (Lond.), F.R.C.S. (Eng.). - The Fight against Tuberculosis.

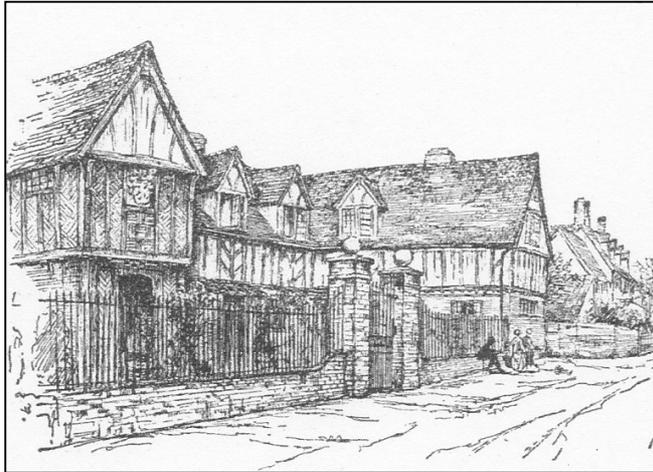
“When they looked together at the banded bacilli of tuberculosis, they saw more than just a specimen under a coverglass: they saw the chosen and bitter enemies of genius, the malignant, insensate spores of lowest life that had banished Keats to fade in Rome, Shelley to drown by Via Reggia, and Robert Louis Stevenson to perish in Samoa.”

Francis Brett Young. ‘The Young Physician.’ (1919).

Walter Essex Wynter (1860-1945) [Epsom College 1873-1878. prefect] was the son of Dr Andrew Wynter, a general practitioner, who practised in Chiswick and who edited the *British Medical Journal* (1855-1861). His brother, Dr Andrew Ellis Wynter, M.D. [Epsom College 1873-1881], was a surgeon who served in both the Cuban and Boer Wars. Walter Wynter won an Open Scholarship to the Middlesex Hospital, where he played in the Rugby XV, was Captain of the Rowing VIII, and President of the Medical Society. Although he initially trained as a surgeon, he later gave up surgery in favour of medicine, was elected a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians in 1897, and was then appointed Consultant Physician at the Middlesex Hospital in 1901. Prior to this appointment he was Demonstrator in Chemistry and Anatomy, Tutor in Medicine, and Medical Registrar. He soon established a high reputation as a physician and a very fine teacher, but it was during his earlier appointment as medical registrar at the Middlesex Hospital that he really made his name. At that time, up to 25% of deaths in Europe were caused by tuberculosis, and the death toll only began to fall as living standards improved at the start of the 20th century, and it was not until the 1940s that effective anti-tubercular medicines were first developed. In 1889, Wynter became the first physician to perform a lumbar puncture in attempting to treat four young patients with raised intracranial pressure from tuberculous meningitis. The children were aged from thirteen months to three years. He made a small incision at the level of the second lumbar vertebra, inserted a fine tube into the spinal canal and withdrew a quantity of the infected fluid to reduce the pressure and confirm the diagnosis. Unfortunately this heroic procedure afforded but short-term relief and all four patients died, and it would be over 50 years before effective drugs were developed that Wynter could have injected into the spinal canal. He published his findings in *The Lancet* (1891) and advocated that lumbar puncture was an important diagnostic test, before it had become a routine procedure throughout the world. Later that year Heinrich Quincke, a German physician, developed an improved technique for lumbar puncture using a needle rather than a cannula, although he credited Wynter with the earlier discovery. Two years after this the new lumbar puncture procedure reached the United States and Dr Arthur Wentworth, an enthusiastic advocate, published a paper on diagnosing meningitis by examining spinal fluid taken by lumbar puncture. Unfortunately his career was short-lived as antivivisectionists prosecuted him for having obtained spinal fluid from children. He was acquitted, but was then rejected by authority from Johns Hopkins Medical School where he should have been the first professor of paediatrics.



Today, thousands of lumbar punctures are performed each day throughout the world. The technique (known colloquially as a 'spinal tap') is commonly employed to collect samples of cerebro-spinal fluid in a case of suspected meningitis, since there is no other reliable tool with which



meningitis, a life-threatening but highly treatable infection, can be excluded. The fluid is then bacteriologically analysed to identify the causative organism and thereby define appropriate antibiotic therapy. Lumbar puncture is also commonly used to inject medication into the cerebro-spinal fluid, particularly for spinal anaesthesia or chemotherapy, and it may also be used to detect the presence of malignant cells in some cases of brain tumour. It is unlikely, however, that Walter Essex Wynter knew at the time how important his procedure would become, particularly as he first performed it as a

young medical registrar aged just 29 years.

Apart from being the first physician to use lumbar puncture as a diagnostic technique Wynter was the first physician to recommend splenectomy in cases of pernicious anaemia for which it has since been accepted as a treatment. He was also the author of *A Manual of Clinical Pathology* (1890). During the First World War Walter Wynter served as a Major in the R.A.M.C. (1914-1918) and was mentioned in dispatches. He was also a member of the Epsom College Council. Possessed of considerable means, he built a retirement home for Middlesex Hospital Nurses in the grounds of his home, Bartholomew Manor, at Newbury, in Berkshire (see illustration).