

## DR ROBERT LAWSON TAIT: THE FORGOTTEN GYNACOLOGIST

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Dr Robert Lawson Tait (1845-1899) had a profound influence on the development of gynaecology, and an intriguing personal life.

He was born in Edinburgh on 1 May 1845, the second son of Isabella Stewart Lawson and Archibald Campbell Tait (a cousin of the Archbishop of Canterbury of the same name). Robert's father must have died while he was a boy, for he was educated at Heriot's Hospital School, an institution established to provide schooling for 'puir, faitherless bairns', before taking up a scholarship at the age of 15 to study Arts at the University of Edinburgh. He lasted a year on the Arts course, before changing to Medicine. By the time he was 17 he was present in operating theatres: watching if not assisting, eminent surgeons such as James Young Simpson, who had discovered the anaesthetic properties of chloroform and was the first to use it to assist in childbirth, and James Matthews Duncan, who had an international reputation in obstetrics.

Lawson Tait qualified as LRCP (Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians) and LRCS (Licentiate of the Royal College of Surgeons) in 1866, at the age of 21. In 1867, he was appointed as a House Surgeon in Yorkshire – the only House Surgeon in the 12-bed Clayton Hospital, part of the Wakefield General Dispensary. In addition to his inpatients there were large numbers of outpatients, plus home visits a-plenty to challenge him.

It was in Wakefield that Lawson Tait performed his first ovariectomy a year later. It was a brave move. He had witnessed many attempts at this operation during his training in Edinburgh, and on every occasion the patient had died. "The results of ovariectomies I have seen in Edinburgh were truly awful... some 30 cases and not a recovery," he said. His own first ovariectomy patient died, but he performed four more similar operations over the next three years, and in all of these the patient survived. It was a great personal triumph.

In 1870, aged 25, he moved to Birmingham where he was, in 1871, one of the founders of the Birmingham and Midland Hospital for Women, an institution devoted entirely to 'the alleviation of diseases peculiar to women'. He became one of the three Chief Surgeons. In the same year he married Sibyl Stewart, whom he had met in Wakefield. It is ironic, and rather sad, in the light of his specialisms, that he and his wife had no children. It's possible that he was a difficult husband; on the cross over their joint grave was inscribed the phrase, "She hath done what she could."

Over the next few years he performed many operations, including several 'firsts'. These included further ovariectomies (also known as oophorectomies) – for sepsis and for menstrual problems – along with the first successful appendicectomy and cholecystectomy. The subtle difference between ovariectomy and oophorectomy is that the former removes diseased ovaries, whereas the latter removes ostensibly healthy ovaries in order to alleviate a range of 'women's disturbances', generally mental aberrations thought to derive from the functioning of the ovaries. Lawson Tait, in his early days in Birmingham, believed that the procedure was helpful for nervous afflictions such as 'menstrual epilepsy', although he later changed his mind over this, as more information became generally available.

His pioneering work in the operating theatre continued through the 1870s and 1880s. In 1873, he performed a laparotomy to remove a full-term, extra-uterine fetus and developed the technique of leaving the placenta in situ to reduce the risk of haemorrhage. In 1874, he performed an abdominal subtotal hysterectomy for fibromyoma, and in 1880 he performed the first successful hepatectomy to remove a hydatid cyst.

Figures from Birmingham suggest that by 1884 he had performed a thousand abdominal operations, by 1888 a further thousand, and another two thousand in the following ten years. Such numbers were unparalleled; the volume and quality of his work led to an international reputation, and to many visits from American and European surgeons. He also travelled abroad to lecture, notably to Canada and the States, where he made a great impression.

He had an extensive private practice, for which he could, on occasion, attract fees of up to £1000, although he is also known to have offered his services pro bono where circumstances dictated. He worked closely with anaesthetist Dr Ann Elizabeth Clark ('Dr Annie'), a pioneer in her own right: one of the first women to qualify in medicine in an unwelcoming professional milieu. He paid her poorly, but that was common practice where anaesthetists were concerned, and he did at least value her contribution to the process.

Robert Lawson Tait kept detailed records of his work, and wrote for a range of medical publications. He described, for example, 'Tait's operation' – the excision of the fallopian tubes and ovaries for inflammatory disease – and wrote about the involvement of the tubes and ovaries in pelvic inflammatory disease. Following this he described a second 'Tait's operation' – the repair of the perineum by bringing together the levator muscles after reflection of the posterior vaginal wall. Repair of the rectum and anal sphincter were also explained.

In the late nineteenth century ectopic pregnancy had an extremely high mortality rate, and one of Lawson Tait's greatest achievements was the development of laparotomy and salpingectomy to remedy the condition. He performed his first operation for a ruptured ectopic pregnancy in 1883. Sadly the patient died shortly afterwards, but Lawson Tait continued his work undeterred, and in over 40 subsequent cases, all but one woman survived: a major improvement in the management of this life-threatening condition.

His surgical successes were due in part to his 'aseptic' techniques. He did not agree with Lister's use of carbolic acid for antisepsis and instead used soap and water to wash his hands thoroughly: an innovative approach that sounds simple enough now, but, back in the 1870s, was revolutionary. His instruments were boiled and laid on newly-laundered linen. He wore only the cleanest of clothes, and laid down similar rules for his nurses, who were also instructed to attend to their personal hygiene and bath regularly. The operations –

which took place in The Crescent, the small hospital for women in Birmingham, or in the patient's own home – were performed quickly to reduce the risk of infection. He tended to use a small incision, and post-operatively he removed excess blood from the abdomen and used a peritoneal 'wash-out' of boiled water. Some of his methods are still part of the recommended procedure for ectopic operations today.

In 1885, he founded and became president of the Medical Defence Union (MDU). However, his strong and outspoken views against vivisection brought such criticism that he was forced to resign.

After 1891, there were no more 'discoveries' and he presented few papers. He was, apparently, offered a baronetcy in 1892, but refused it. His reputation and practice declined dramatically after two significant events – he was sued for libel, and he was accused by one of his nurses of being the father of her child. He denied it, of course, but the damage had been done. Financial loss meant that he had to sell many of his possessions: his New Forest country house, his house boat and steam launch on the Severn, his yacht on the Solent.

A short, stout, portly man, Lawson Tait was well known for his enjoyment of food, alcohol and cigars. Indeed, he smoked and drank to excess, in the style beloved of the Victorians. He died on June 13, 1899, at the early age of 54, from 'nephritis', having nearly expired during an operation to remove a urethral calculus. Just before his subsequent death, he smoked one of his favourite cigars, realising – and announcing to the locum doctor in attendance – that this would be his last.

An eccentric, then... but a man with a far reach, a passion for upsetting the status quo and a mission to improve reproductive health. Women dying in pregnancy? Can't have that. I can hear him saying it...

The legacy of Mr Robert Lawson Tait lives on. The Ectopic Pregnancy Foundation (EPF) is a registered medical charity (No 1122286). As he was the first gynaecologist in the United Kingdom to successfully treat a patient with ectopic pregnancy (1883), the Foundation is dedicated to his memory.