



Sir Morell Mackenzie in Vanity Fair  
(1887, October issue)

## ODE TO SIR MORELL MACKENZIE

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**Abstract** : Sir Morell Mackenzie is acknowledged as the "Father of British Otolaryngology." He fell foul of the Prussian Imperial Surgeons, when he gave a second opinion on the Crown Prince's larynx at the behest of HM Queen Victoria (his mother-in-law). This however was based entirely on Rudolf Virchow's pathology report, which found Mackenzie's initial biopsy specimen to contain no malignant cells. The famous story was celebrated every year by an exclusive club of British Surgeons, who presented their worst cases so that they may learn from each other's mistakes. This poem/song was a toast to their Patron.



An artistic alteration by the  
Cock-up Club of the famous  
Vanity Fair caricature  
(opposite page)

*Let us drink to Sir Morell Mackenzie.  
And celebrate what he has shown:  
That a wise man will learn from another's mistakes  
But a fool never learns from his own.*

Queen Victoria sent Morell Mackenzie  
To consult with her godson, the Kaiser.  
Although Hun-spun doctors had seen him  
Our Queen thought Mackenzie much wiser.  
The Prussians had diagnosed cancer  
But Mackenzie had said it was pox;  
All based on Prof Virchow's biopsy report,  
But he opened a Pandora's Box.

*Let us drink to Sir Morell Mackenzie.  
And celebrate what he has shown:  
That a wise man will learn from another's mistakes  
But a fool never learns from his own.*

Kaiser Frederick III fared quite well at first,  
But sadly then died of the cancer  
Mackenzie's reliance on Virchow's report  
Had led him to give the wrong answer.  
Kaiser Fritz of course was magnanimous,  
But his surgeons went into a frenzy.  
They didn't blame Virchow for murd'ring their King.  
But they did accuse poor old Mackenzie.

*Let us drink to Sir Morell Mackenzie.  
And celebrate what he has shown:  
That a wise man will learn from another's mistakes  
But a fool never learns from his own.*

So great was bad feeling in Germ'ny  
 At what they said England had done,  
 It was cited by some Hun historians  
 As one cause of Great World War I!  
 But honourable, honest Mackenzie  
 Only did what he'd believed right;  
 What care we if he upset Old Jerry;  
 He's the reason we're all here tonight.

*So let's drink to Sir Morell Mackenzie.  
 And celebrate what he has shown:  
 That a wise man will learn from another's mistakes  
 But a fool never learns from his own.*

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a very exclusive and rather small club, made up of well known and highly respected British otolaryngologists, who met once a year just before Christmas somewhere in Harley Street<sup>1</sup>. It was affectionately known by the members as the *Cock-up Club*<sup>2</sup> and membership was strictly by invitation only. The aim of this élite group was to learn from each others' mistakes.

The club was inspired by a famous surgeon from the Victorian era, Sir Morell Mackenzie, the leading throat specialist of his time, who was involved in a bitter international controversy over the death of the Kaiser. Queen Victoria's son-in-law (at that time the crown prince of Germany) who had been stricken with a serious throat disease in May 1887. So great was Mackenzie's reputation in Europe, that the Queen had requested for him to attend him. Crown Prince Frederick's illness had been diagnosed the German specialists as throat cancer and he had been told that the only treatment was surgery. Mackenzie disagreed and insisted that the disease was not demonstrably cancerous and therefore that a dangerous operation was unnecessary. Ironically he had based his opinion

absolutely on a biopsy made by the world-renowned German pathologist Rudolf Virchow. It was clearly a difficult case with great political implications. As it was, Morell Mackenzie's opinion was followed: the crown prince went to England, under his treatment, and was present at Victoria's Jubilee celebrations in June. By November, however, the imperial voice-box had become worse and further examination now confirmed it as cancer. Frederick became Kaiser Frederick III of Germany, (known affectionately as "*Kaiser Fritz*") but died the following year. An acrimonious international controversy over his death erupted between Mackenzie and the German doctors.

*Whose mistake was it?*

All this talk nowadays about evidence-based medicine deals with the interpretation of diagnostic test results. That is just what Mackenzie did. Was the fault therefore the English surgeon's or the German pathologist's? Morell Mackenzie was pilloried for it by the German medical world. They published an account of the illness, vilifying Mackenzie<sup>3</sup>, who promptly replied by writing a best-selling book, entitled *The Fatal Illness of Frederick the Noble* (1888)<sup>4</sup>. It was so successful that the publication then earned poor

<sup>1</sup> Harley Street is a street in the City of Westminster in London, England which has been noted since the 19th century for its large number of private specialists in medicine and surgery.

<sup>2</sup> A cock-up is slang for a blunder or mistake.

<sup>3</sup> Bardeleben, von Bergmann, Bramann, Gerhardt, Kussmaul, Landgraf, Moritz Schmidt, Schrotter, Tobold, Wald-eyer, Kaiser Friedrich III: Die Krankheit Kaiser Friedrich des Dritten dargestellt nach amtlichen Quellen und den im Königlichen Hausministerium niedergelegten Berichten der Aerzte (1888) Berlin Kaiserl. Reichsdruckerei, 8°, (2).

<sup>4</sup> This surprisingly interesting and readable book is still available (reproduced Nabu Press 2011; ISBN: 1178639398) There is even a free Google version on the internet! I can wholeheartedly recommend it. The original edition was, somewhat unbelievably a blockbuster and sold thousands of copies (more than James Bond novels!)



old Sir Morell censure from the Royal College of Surgeons, since in those days it could have been considered as advertising. .

Mackenzie had acted in good faith for his patient, believing the findings of the most eminent pathologist in the world at the time, Professor Rudolf Virchow. Over the years, the Cock-up Club became known as the Mackenzie Meeting. Members wore ties with (garish) representations of the unfortunate British physician and solid silver cuff-links, showing the thumbs-down sign<sup>5</sup>.

At the end of their dinner, one of the members would recite the poem above and the chorus would be sung by all the members to the tune of *Land of Hope and Glory*<sup>6</sup>.

Most presentations at medical meetings are by physicians and surgeons anxious to let their colleagues know just how bright they are and how excellent at their art. They often present their own new operations or ideas and go on to show just what an outstanding contribution they have made. These presentations are usually thinly disguised attempts at self-aggrandisement.

Nothing could have possibly been further from the truth with cases presented by the members of the Cock-up Club. Members present the worst case they have had during that year. They give details of their biggest "cock-up" and then tell the other members just how, why and where they went wrong. Usually like Mackenzie they had acted in best faith, but luck had run against them and their judgement had been proven wrong.

Members of this privileged society need to be extremely carefully selected. One black ball excluded a potential candidate for admission. It would be no good having anyone amongst them who was so egotistical that he couldn't admit to being occasionally

infallible: that's the whole point. Like the Order of the Garter, there were only thirteen surgeons allowed to be members at any one time. When one retired, another was admitted.

Even if this club were still in existence, it would be proscribed by the General Medical Council of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Doctors do not make mistakes. Perish the very thought! And if they do and one of their colleagues gets to hear about it, he then has an absolute duty, which exceeds his every other duty to report that mistake to the GMC. Now there's a thing!



*Frederick III on a canvas painted 1867 by Oscar Begas*

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<sup>5</sup> It is assumed that "thumbs down" was the signal that a defeated gladiator should be condemned to death; "thumbs up", that he should be spared.

<sup>6</sup> A intensely patriotic British song, with music by Edward Elgar (Military March No. 1 in D Major, Op. 39, "Pomp and Circumstance": No. 7) and lyrics by A. C. Benson, written in 1902.

*Land of Hope and Glory, Mother of the Free,  
 How shall we extol thee, who are born of thee?  
 Wider still and wider shall thy bounds be set;  
 God, who made thee mighty, make thee mightier yet,  
 God, who made thee mighty, make thee mightier yet*