

A Case of Eye Trouble

Robert Crichton Wyllie was a Scotsman, a successful man of business with international investments, a world traveler, and for 20 years minister of foreign relations of the Hawaiian kingdom. He also practiced medicine and surgery at various times during his many-faceted life, though it seems likely that he ". . . acquired his surgical skill in the manner of Roderick Random, not at an ancient seat of learning, but by serving as assistant to some practitioner willing to supervise his apprenticeship in the medical art."¹ In Hawaii his duties as a government officer very nearly absorbed Wyllie's formidable energies; it is with some interest, then, that we note a well-documented instance in which he took the role of physician.

His patient, Francis Funk, had a peripatetic and spotty career in the islands; one is tempted to label this specimen a typical adventurer whose constitution contained more brass than gold; certainly he was plunged, periodically, into difficulties not entirely fortuitous. At any rate, his eye trouble was a genuine affliction with which anyone of ordinary sensibilities can sympathize:

Wailuku 1847 Aug. 13

His Excellency

R. C. Wyllie H.H.M. Minister &c,

Sir

On my last visit to Honolulu Your Excellency had the kindness to take notice of the bad condition of my eyesight, and to prescribe some remedies, which you thought would remove the evil.

Since my return here I have applied and do continue to apply those remedies according to your directions and they have been of some, but very little benefit.

I should not dare to intrude upon you any further than your kindness induced me to do in Honolulu if my poverty did not prevent me from calling in medical assistance; and I have too much at stake, as that even the fear of being taxed with ill breeding should deter me, from applying to Your Excellency for further assistance. I do therefore under these circumstances pray, that you will pardon my forwardness in lying [*sic*] before you the history of the evil from which I suffer.

It was about the month of August, 1845, when suddenly I found myself unable to read or write. The change was so sudden, that it overtook me book in hand. After suffering it to remain in that state for 2 or 3 days, I applied to Dr. Rooke [a prominent

English physician of Honolulu], who prescribed blisters behind the ears, and powders, one to be taken every other day in molasses. This restored my sight in a very few days but in October 1845 I had a relapse, which by applying the same remedies was but partly removed. Ever since then I have been obliged to use spectacles.

I left Honolulu for this place in December 1845, and ever since my eyesight has impaired more and more. I have applied several medicines internally, but externally only a solution of zink [*sic*] prescribed by Dr. Hawkes, who resided here for some time. All has been to no effect. Bleeding in the arm is amongst the remedies used. The symptoms of the evil are as follows.

A heavy head, the eyesight obstructed by a nebulous formation swimming and fluctuating before the eyes, giving straight things the appearance [*sic*] of crooked ones. This fluctuating is so bad that it prevents me from reading any type not considerably larger than the Polynesian print [referring to the weekly English-language newspaper published in Honolulu]. There is no kind of soreness on the eyes and all I can say is, that mornings by opening them they feel heavy and they feel, as if the lid would not open for want of moisture to assist the opening. Now and then, but not often, there is a sensation, as if sparks of a very pale colour were moving slowly past the eyes.

If under these symptoms you deem it advisable either to continue the medicines prescribed by you or to make some alteration, I would respectfully request that if a continuance of the present cursus is necessary you will kindly furnish me with a prescription for the pills, which I have used up the ointment will last a good while yet. If necessary to alter the present course please forward the necessary directions.

Your Excellency may rest assured that nothing but the threatening loss of my eyesight could have induced me to occupy part of your time with matters extraneous to your situation.

I have the honor to remain
Your Excellency's

Sir

most obedt humble servt
Francis Funk^a

Honolulu August 26th 1847.

Sir

I am sorry to perceive by your letter of the 13th instant, that your eyes are still affected.

It appears to me that after losing say 16 ounces of blood from the arm, the medicines would have a better effect.

To draw the disease action from your eyes, a succession of blisters to the nape of the neck, continued for about a month would also be useful.

But besides, you ought to continue the ointment, the wash for the eyes, and the pills as directed.

The Pills are those known under the name of Plummers Pills

A gentle dose of salts every eight days will also be useful.

You must carefully abstain from Brandy, wine and every kind of stimulant.

It will please me to hear of your recovery, & I remain

Sir

yours truly

R. C. Wyllie^a

Francis Funk Esquire
Wailuku
Maui

A MEDICAL NOTE

The patient, Francis Funk, complained of poor vision. He was treated by blood-letting, catharsis and Plummer's Pills. What is the diagnosis?

His symptoms included: painless diminution of vision of both eyes, with a tendency toward recurrence. This can be accounted for by the formation of a cloud of vitreous opacities; distortion of images (metamorphopsia) and the appearance of sparks before the eyes (photopsia), which suggests chorioretinitis with macular involvement; heavy, droopy sensation of the eyelids that may have been caused by tarsitis; an inability to read small print which indicates iridoplegia. None of these symptoms improved following treatment.

The combination of tarsitis, chorioretinitis and iridoplegia strongly suggests the diagnosis of ocular syphilis. It is unfortunate that in 1845-1847 there were no accurate methods of diagnosing syphilis nor specific drugs to control it.

WILLIAM JOHN HOLMES, M.D.

August 25, 1967.

NOTES

¹ A. L. Korn, *The Victorian Visitors* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1958), p. 292.

² FO & Ex, AH.

³ FO & Ex, AH.