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Richard Bright in Hungary: A Reevaluation

Key Words

Bright

Hungary

Nephrology

Abstract

Richard Bright, the highly respected physician and nephrologist at Guy's Hospital, had a strong liking for travel. In 1815 he traveled in Hungary and made very important observations about the country. His 762-page book, entitled *Travels from Vienna through Lower Hungary* has detailed, sometimes appreciative, sometimes very critical remarks and comments on Hungarian history, art, archeology, religion, the situation of nationalities, education, social conditions, law, farming, and mining. The Hungarians cherished the memory of Bright's travel in their country as reflected in several papers and on two commemorative tablets recognizing him as a true and sincere friend of Hungary.

Literally everyone in nephrology is familiar with the name and work of Richard Bright, who is revered as one of the founders – if not the founder – of the discipline of nephrology (fig. 1).

Richard Bright was born in Bristol, England, in 1789. He spent his most productive years (1820–1858) as a physician at Guy's Hospital in London. His greatest achievement was a clear description of glomerulonephritides, which was published in the magnificent first volume of his *Reports of Medical Cases* in 1827 [1] and which first brought him to the attention of physicians all over Europe, and later all over the world.

In addition to being a highly respected physician, he was also interested in geology, botany, and philosophy, and he had a strong liking for travel. It is probably less well known that as a traveller he made his most important observations in Hungary. His grandniece, Pamela Bright, comments about it in her book as follows: 'These travels of his were to make his name a legend, doing for Hungary what Sir Walter Scott had done for Scotland and Byron for Greece' [2].

In the year 1815, as a recent graduate from Edinburgh he went to Vienna to observe the Peace Congress and, afterwards, armed with letters of introduction to Hungarian nobles, he traveled in Hungary. His original intention was to return to England from Hungary via Venice, Milan, and Paris, but owing to the events in France after the return of Napoleon from Elba, he was forced to postpone his return for a month that he used for a second journey through Hungary.

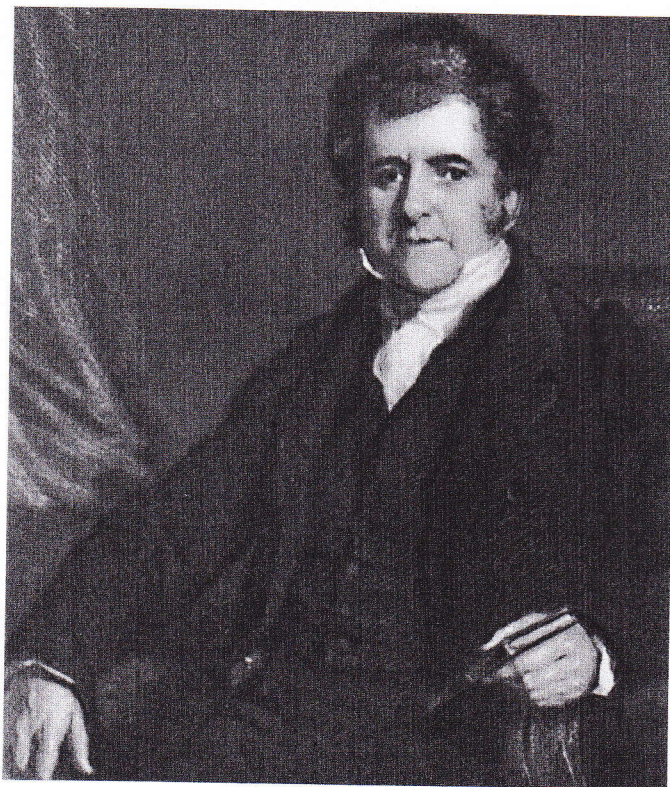


Fig. 1. Portrait of Bright, painted by T.R. Say.

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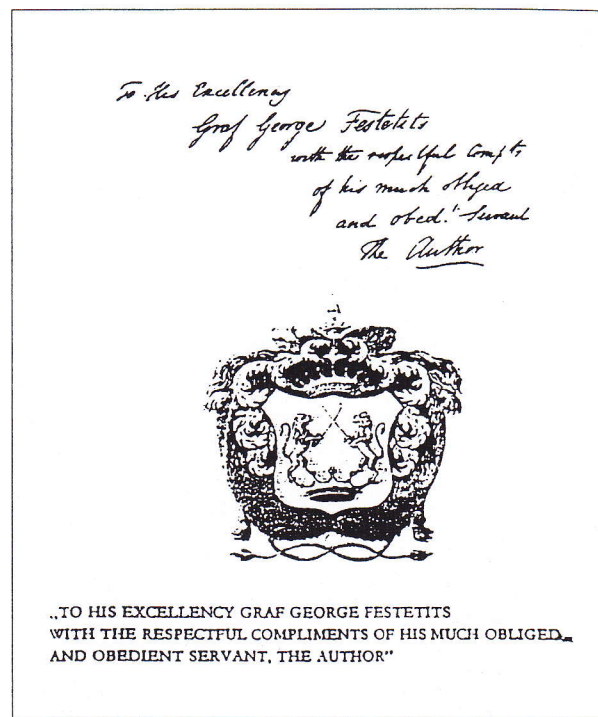
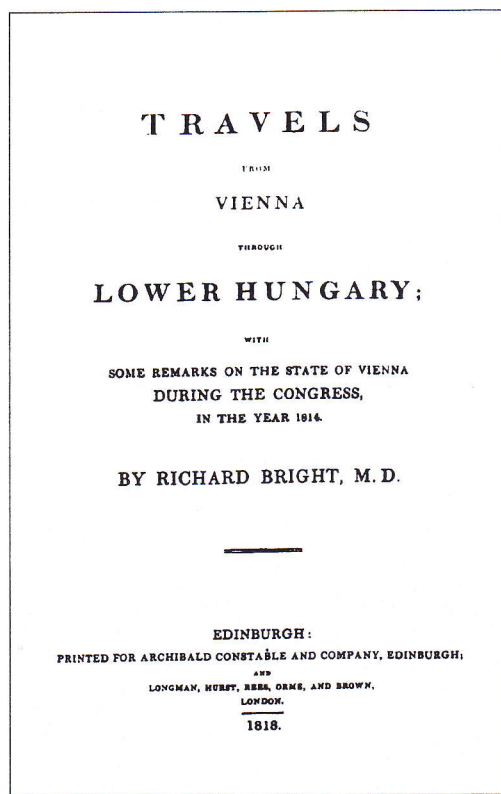


Fig. 2a, b. Bright's book on Hungary. **a** The frontispiece. **b** Dedication by Bright on a book to Graf G. Festetics.

Three years after his return to England, he published a 762-page book entitled *Travels from Vienna through Lower Hungary* [3]. Figure 2 shows the frontispiece of the book, and his handwritten dedication of the copy to Count G. Festetics, who was one of Bright's hosts in Hungary. In this book, he described things outside the sphere of his main interest, medicine and science, with the same meticulousness with which he analyzed kidney diseases. The book is full of remarks and comments on Hungarian history, art, archeology, religion, the situation of nationalities, education, social conditions, law, farming, and mining. All the illustrations and maps in the book were made by him. Some maps show the routes of his journey. At the beginning of each chapter there is a picture of his experiences, such as a prison he visited, gypsies he encountered, and a peasant's cart that he used for traveling. He also illustrated the dance of Hungarian Hayducks (fig. 3).

The most interesting feature of Bright's visit to Hungary is his account of the medical institutions [4]. In Buda-Pest, he went to the University Hospital. As Bright describes it, the hospital consisted of several wards, each containing six beds. There were separate wards for medical, surgical, gynecological, obstetrical and ophthalmological patients, and one for those with syphilis. The fourth- and fifth-year students attended the patients in the different wards, and each was required to report

Table 1. The program of the medical students at the University of Buda-Pest in 1815

First year: anatomy, chemistry, botany, natural history, general pathology, and surgery
Second year: physiology, more minute anatomy, the theory of operations, surgical instruments, and midwifery
Third year: pathology, materia medica, and diseases of the eye
Fourth year: therapia of acute and chronic diseases, with clinical lectures both in medicine and surgery, veterinary art
Fifth year: the particular therapia and the clinical studies are continued, to which are added medical jurisprudence and medical police

the case in Latin and to write a monthly report about the cases he had seen. 'I was much pleased with the order and regularity with which this hospital is conducted', says Bright [3]. However, with the exception of Professor Kitaibel, the botanist, who showed Bright around the hospital, there were no medical men of importance in Buda-Pest at that time.

He also visited the Medical University of Buda-Pest. He describes the medical courses as over 5 years in duration. Lectures and discussions about patients were held in Latin. He carefully described the program of each year (table 1).

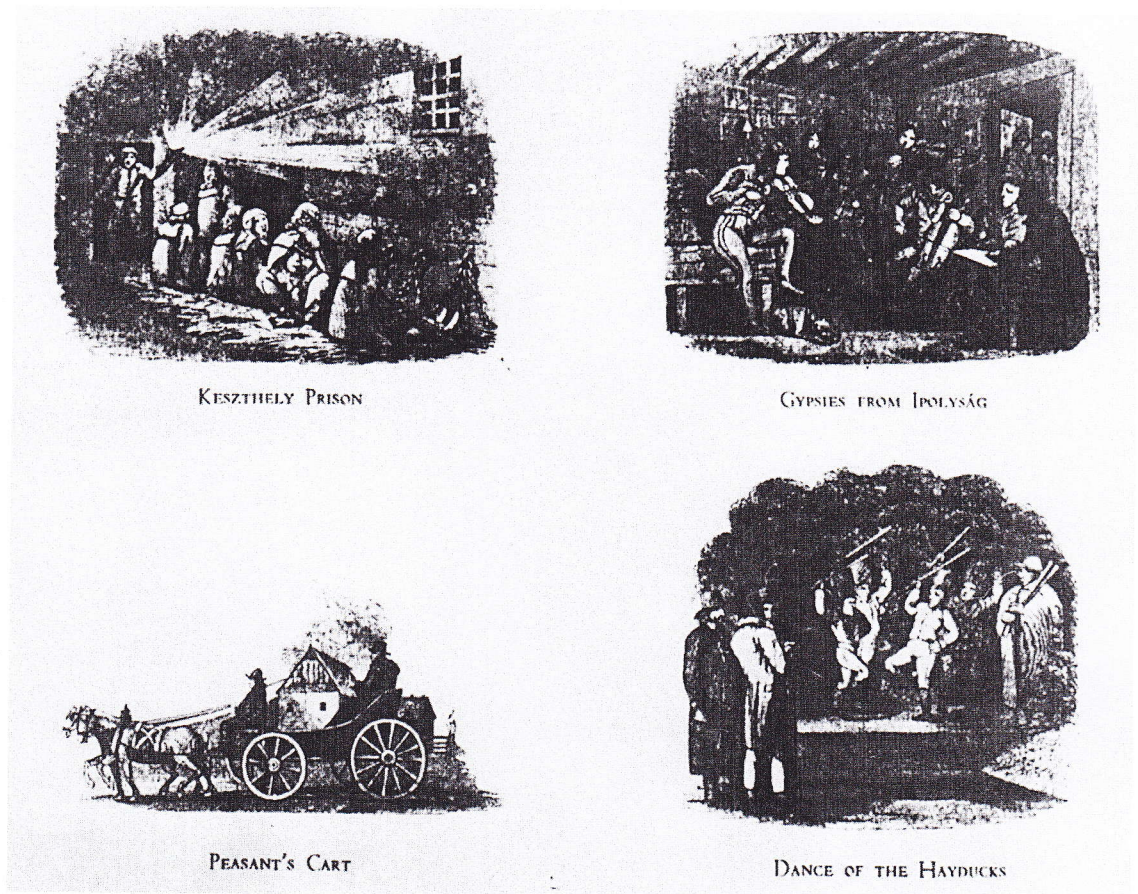


Fig. 3. Illustrations in Bright's book: a prison, gypsies, a peasant cart, dance of the Hungarian Hayducks.

He also visited the University library, which had 50,000 books. 'This public library of the University is conducted on a more liberal footing than such institutions are in England', he wrote [3].

The view of Buda-Pest at his arrival impressed him so much that he painted it (fig. 4). Pamela Bright describes it as follows:

Arriving at Budapest in a storm, he saw the Danube in all its magnificence caught in the rays of a rainbow: Later he viewed it from the top of Gellert mountain where he sketched the panorama which lay below him: the castle, the water district, the river with its pontoon bridge and the hills of Buda in the background [2].

His journeys also took him to Pécs, whose name was Fünfkirchen ('five churches' in English) at that time, and he drew a picture of the cathedral. While walking in the town, he visited the monastery and the Hospital of Fratres Misericordiae sancti Johannis de Deo ('Brothers of Mercy of St. John of God') which had 24 beds for the poor (fig. 5). His note about the hospital shows some irony:

it was not wanting in neatness, but the importance of ventilation seemed little understood, and the careful brethren were only anxious to conceal, by the fumes of incense, that which a little fresh air would have driven completely away [3].

Bright writes that he was deeply impressed with the hospitality of the Hungarians. 'That is' to quote his own words

truly characteristic of the kindness with which I met unceasingly in Hungary, a hospitality which consists not in forcing upon their visitors a pompous display for the gratification of their own vanity but in a sincere desire to meet his wishes and gratify his fancies [3].

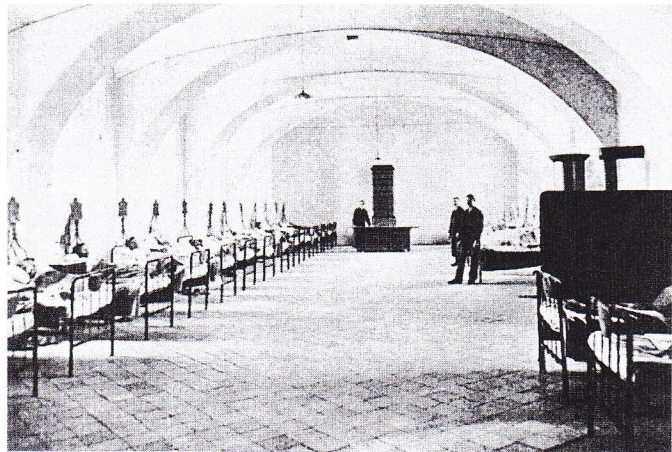
The Hungarian reaction to his book was quick. His earliest reviewer, Trattner, in the Hungarian Scientific Publications of 1819 agrees with some of Bright's criticism, e.g., about the bad conditions of the peasants and about the horrible circumstances in the prisons all over Hungary [5]. However, he suspected that Bright had obtained some information only by hearsay and this is why some of his information may have been



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Fig. 4. Bright's painting of the view of Buda-Pest.

Fig. 5. The only large sick room of the hospital of the Brothers of Mercy of St. John of God in Pécs (J. Schick).



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incorrect. Parts of Bright's book were translated into Hungarian and published in a small book by Szerecz [6] in 1970.

In 1972 and 1974, Honti [7, 8] in his summary of Richard Bright's work in the contemporary Hungarian literature, and in his paper comparing Bright's, Brown's and Paget's travels in Hungary, emphasized that Bright belongs to those few objective foreign writers who judge Hungary from a more correct point of view than some of the earlier visitors and that some of Bright's statements served as a rehabilitation of the country.

In the introduction to a paper about Bright written by Korbuly [9], it is stated that

there were numerous English travellers at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries whose writings furnish valuable material for students of Hungary. Richard Bright, the pioneer of the pathology of the kidneys ... originally intended to visit Hungary ... because of the history of Hungarian literature but had to give up his plan because

and here he cites Bright: 'upon this interesting subject it is not possible to write with a hasty pen.' Korbuly states that, 'Bright prepared himself conscientiously for his journey' and made correct observations and a faithful description of the country [9].



Fig. 6. The tablet (a) commemorating Bright's visit to the 2nd Department of Medicine in Pécs with the plaque of Bright (b) on the tablet.

The Hungarians realized the importance of Bright's work in the field of kidney diseases soon after the publication of his observations. Between 1842 and 1847, four papers were published in the medical journal, *Orvosi Tár*, about the very detailed clinicopathological picture of Bright's disease [10–13]. Korányi, the famous Hungarian physician and nephrologist, wrote a chapter in his book about kidney diseases on the basis of Bright's descriptions. The book was subsequently translated into German [14].

The Hungarians cherished the memory of Bright's travel in their country as reflected in several papers [15–28], and on two

commemorative tablets. One of them is at the entrance to the Festetics castle in Keszthely. The other is in the corridor of one of our departments, the 2nd Department of Medicine in Pécs, which is situated in the old Monastery of the Brothers of Mercy of St. John of God that was visited by Bright (fig. 6). The latter was placed there by the Hungarian Nephrological Society and by the University Medical School of Pécs in 1985 in memory of Richard Bright, recognizing him as a true and sincere friend of Hungary.

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