

# Richard Bright's *Travels from Vienna through Lower Hungary: A Glimpse of Medicine and Health Care in the Early Nineteenth Century*

PATRICK J. ROONEY  
BÉLA SZEBENYI  
GÉZA P. BÁLINT

Richard Bright was an outstanding figure in the history of medicine during the nineteenth century, the most distinguished of the famous Guy's triumvirate whose eponymous diseases are still recognized today, Thomas Addison, Thomas Hodgkins, and Richard Bright. Bright is most famous for his classical clinical description of nephritis and the nephrotic syndrome—Bright's disease—but these observations form only a small part of the original clinical observations and of his life's work in correlating bedside observation with pathological investigation. Although he devoted many years of his life to the study of the natural history of renal disease, his original observations on hydatid disease, on malignant obstructive jaundice, and on neuropathology would each have sufficed to earn him a secure place in medical history. In her 1983 biography Pamela Bright states that "with Richard Bright the observational study of disease finally came of age."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Bright was a prolific writer, but his fame largely rests on the two-volume work produced in 1827, *Reports of Medical Cases Selected with a View of Illustrating the Symptoms and Cause of Diseases with a Reference to Morbid*

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Patrick J. Rooney, Department of Medicine, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario L8N 3Z5.

Béla Szebenyi, National Institute of Rheumatology and Physiotherapy, 1525 Budapest, 114, Pf54 Hungary.

Géza P. Bálint, National Institute of Rheumatology and Physiotherapy, 1525 Budapest, 114, Pf54 Hungary.

*Anatomy*, of which the first 126 pages are devoted to renal disease. This whole work is evidence of Bright's abilities to observe, and, more importantly, to interpret his observations.

When Bright died in 1858, the *Lancet* of 25 December that year wrote:

The sudden unexpected demise of Dr. Bright has created a deep impression of grief, and regret such as only a sense of irretrievable loss could occasion. In him all felt the medical profession of England has lost one of the most original, observant and philosophic minds. A man of peculiar independence of thought, of high morale, and untiring energy, he contributed more perhaps than any other to form the medical opinion of his day. . . . By the singular devotion of pathological investigation which characterised his career, he was at once enabled to accomplish investigations which have immortalised his name.

R. M. Kark recently observed:

Richard Bright set standards of excellence in the controlled study of patients which challenge all those engaged in the study of human disease. What he achieved places him second only to William Harvey in British, and perhaps World Medicine. William Harvey is revered because he successfully introduced the scientific method into the study of physiology and medicine, but Richard Bright taught us how to investigate disease in man. As Thayer says in his oration reported in the *Guy's Hospital Reports*, Volume 77, No. 3, his gift was his ability to observe, record, tabulate and communicate.<sup>2</sup>

However, Richard Bright's interests were not narrow. He was a traveller, geologist, writer, artist, linguist, physician, pathologist, and researcher. He was a founding member of the geological society, and he lectured at Guy's on Botany and *Materia Medica*, as well as on medicine. In the autumn of 1814, Bright, but 25 years old and recently graduated from Edinburgh Medical School, travelled through Europe. When he set out, Napoleon Bonaparte has just been exiled to Elba, Louis XVIII was on the throne of France, and Holland, Belgium, and Germany were rejoicing in their new-found freedom. Bright's first stop was Amsterdam followed by Rotterdam, Leiden, Frankfurt, and Berlin.

By the time he reached this last city, Europe was agog with the news that statesmen and delegates from all over the continent were converging on Vienna for a major political congress. This news sent Bright hurrying to that city in spite of being falsely informed in Prague, while he was en route, that the congress was over. He arrived in Vienna in the middle of Metternich's Congress of Europe.

While in Vienna, Bright met some of the Hungarian nobility, who persuaded him to visit their country. Eventually, he made two journeys into Hungary from Vienna. On the first, he crossed the Danube at Pozsony or Pressburg (now Bratislava) in Czechoslovakia, and travelled northeast by way of Nyitra to the Carpathian mountains, where he visited gold and silver mines. He then travelled south into what is

now modern-day Hungary, to Vác and Pest-Buda. He returned to Vienna via Győr (Raab) where he learned that Napoleon had escaped his exile, had landed at Antibes, and was marching with an army to Paris. Bright had originally intended to visit Venice and Milan and to return home via Paris; instead, in the summer of 1815 he re-entered Hungary. This time he travelled south to Lake Balaton (Plattensee) and on to Varasdin (now in Yugoslavia). Turning east he came to Pecs (Fünfkirchen) and travelled up the west bank of the Danube through Szekszárd to Pest. His final return to Vienna was via Styria and Graz. (If this long journey were to be repeated today, instead of visiting only one country, the trip would encompass four countries and involve seven international border crossings.)

#### BACKGROUND TO RICHARD BRIGHT'S BOOK ON HUNGARY

Bright's travels in Hungary led to the publication in 1818 of a large, handsome quarto volume entitled *Travels from Vienna through Lower Hungary, With Some Remarks on the State of Vienna during the Congress in the Year 1814*. The copy of Bright's folio which is held in the Keszthely Helikon Library was dedicated personally to Count George Festetich, one of his hosts on his journey. It is considered in very high regard in Hungary even today.

Bright's publication was well known to the Hungarian scientists and scholars in his day. In 1819, János Trattner, a respected book editor of the time, wrote a critique of the book in the leading contemporary scientific journal of Hungary, *Tudományos Gyűjtemény* or *Scientific Collection*. In this he gives what is considered to be a very careful, strict but fair review of the work. He rightly points out that Bright makes some unwarranted generalizations about Hungary, having travelled what was, after all, only a very small part of it as it existed at the time, and what was, perhaps not even the best part of the country.<sup>3</sup>

The wide variety of interests covered in Bright's book included politics, economy, history, art, agriculture, industry, education, social conditions, archaeology, religion, law, ethnography, and medicine. As can be seen, Bright's interests in Hungary were catholic and the closest modern-day equivalent of such a book might be, perhaps, the reports of the National Geographic Society. However, Bright was actually the first of many medical travellers in the nineteenth century, many of whom wrote reports of their experiences in the Europe of their time. His folio on his Hungarian travels is modelled on the report on Iceland by Sir George McKenzie published in 1811. (Bright and a fellow medical student from Edinburgh, Henry Holland, had volunteered in the previous year to join Sir George on his expedition; during this trip they had narrowly escaped death on two occasions, once by being stranded

in Iceland with winter approaching, and once by shipwreck in the Orkneys.)

Bright's report on Hungary also differs from the later writings of medical men in nineteenth-century Europe and more closely resembles those of other earlier travellers such as Edward Brown, whose reports were of a geographic nature.<sup>4</sup> Brown offers much information similar to that gleaned by Bright one and a half centuries later. On the other hand, later nineteenth-century medical authors, such as Elisha Bartlett, James Jackson, and Sir James Clark, have as their primary focus the clinical pathology and the diseases they encountered in Europe at that time.

#### ANALYSIS OF THE MEDICAL INFORMATION IN BRIGHT'S BOOK

During 1989, the bicentenary year of Bright's birth, we undertook to re-view his book on Hungary. Although medicine and medical care comprise only a very small part of its contents, our interests centred on the insights it offers into health, health care, and medical education in Hungary, in the early nineteenth century.

Despite his subsequently proven clinical observational skills, Bright's report on Hungary contains very few direct comments on the health status of the people he encountered during his travels. He does report a fairly sweeping assumption that the climate of Hungary is a healthy one on the basis of the longevity of some members of the population: he recounts first- or second-hand reports of 28 individuals reaching the age of 100 years or more in Hungary during the preceding 20 or 30 years. This information is likely to be accurate because of the full birth and death records kept in each parish throughout the country at that time. Bright, himself, however, seemed to retain a healthy scepticism that this reflects an accurate estimate of the overall health of the Hungarians of his day.

Perhaps politeness to his hosts prevented Bright from commenting on the level of hygiene of the nobility of Hungary, but he certainly conveys the impression that the hygiene of the peasants was very low. Many of them demonstrated "*plica polonica*." Describing one peasant, Bright noted:

To add, indeed, to the filthy appearance of this figure he was afflicted with that unseemly disease, known by the name of *Plica Polonica*, in which the hair grows so matted that it is impossible to disentangle it, and it becomes actually felted into balls, which from an unfounded apprehension of bad consequences, the peasants are very unwilling to have removed.<sup>5</sup>

In 1812, Hungary had been largely spared the ravages of Napoleon's Grande Armée and of its foes. While Bright does not refer to diet di-

rectly, it seems fair to assume that, regardless of any economic and political deprivations the peasants of Hungary had to endure, they at least were well nourished at that time. He reports, in particular, of the peasants at Martonvásár, that "It was truly gratifying to find the peasant taking pleasure in the cultivation of his flower garden, which is perhaps one of the most certain marks and best promises of rural civilisation."<sup>6</sup> It seems highly unlikely that flowers would take precedence over food crops if the cultivator did not have an adequate diet.

Bright did not comment directly on the diseases and disabilities he encountered on his travels, even in the context of his report on the University Hospital in Pest, which, as will be seen, he commented on at length in his book. However, from the fact that one whole ward, or 12 percent of the beds of this institution, was set aside for the treatment of syphilis, it seems likely that Hungary, in general, and Pest, in particular suffered from their fair share of the venereal infections of the era. In his report on the University of Vienna, Bright commends the efforts of Dr. DeCarro to control smallpox, using the new vaccination methods which he had travelled to England to learn. He also makes an intriguing oblique reference to plague. He found praiseworthy the efforts of Count Harrach to control the recurrent epidemics of plague in Turkey. These attacks are attributed to the practices of Islam, but exactly how is not made clear.<sup>7</sup>

Among the benevolent projects which have occupied the mind of this excellent man it was his anxious wish to discover means for restraining the frequent extensions and ravages of the plague in the Turkish dominions, where, as is well known, religious scruples oppose the adoption of those measures of prevention which have been found so efficacious in other countries.<sup>8</sup>

Apart from these few comments, Bright makes no mention of disease in any specific way.

The hazards and inconveniences of travel in Hungary at the time of his journey are described graphically by Bright, and his comments on the state of the roads are ruefully picturesque. He was dismayed but undaunted by the state of some of the hostelries on his route, although he was largely spared from this because he was generally an invited guest of the local nobility. He expresses concern about the sources of drinking water in Hungary, especially on the Hungarian plain. However, these comments were made during his stay at Veszprém where this was not a problem because the water of the mineral spring at Balatonfüred was freely available to him. Even at that time this water was being bottled and exported.

A lot of information on the system of health care in Hungary at the time of Bright's journey can be gleaned from his text. It seems likely that the majority of physicians was based in the major cities such as

Vienna, Pressburg, and Buda, and that their practice was limited to the nobility. Health care for the peasantry was haphazard, and what few comments Bright makes on this, although indirect, are quite disparaging. For example, in his report on the hot springs at Hévíz, which are now world renowned, he notes that

As a bathing place, it is little worthy of mention and is evidently fitted up by the Graf only for the lower class of people who came there during the summer, and finding a surgeon on the spot to administer their favourite remedy of scarification and cupping. The only dwelling is a miserable house converted into an inn during the summer and offering very mean accommodation. As a hot spring, however, it is curious from the quantity of heated sulphureous water which it discharges in the middle of a low and marshy plain in which it has formed a pond.<sup>9</sup>

The peasantry, according to Bright's account, depended largely on such surgeons whose training and education he considered inferior to that of physicians. Bright does not seem to have any high regard for the practices of cupping and scarification which he encountered in many places in Hungary. This is not surprising since in 1811 he had presented a paper to Guy's Physical Society on the limitation of blood-letting.<sup>10</sup> He is even more scathing about the "cure" he observed in Buda at the "bruch" or rudas baths. He was interested in the history of this building—which dates back to the Turkish occupation, having been built by Pasha Sokoli Mustafa in the latter part of the sixteenth century—but he was quite disgusted by the scenes he observed during its use.<sup>11</sup>

With respect to the public baths, little can be said in their praise. A slight account of the first I visited and which I think was called the Bruch bath, will supply a faithful description of the whole. On entering from the open air, the room filled with steam, was so insufferably hot as almost to oblige us to retire. In addition to this, it appeared dark but in a few moments, both our bodies and our eyes became accustomed to their new situation. The apartment was spacious, the centre being occupied by a circular basin under a dome supported by pillars, the descent into this by two steps ranging round the whole of its circumference. Here we beheld ten or twenty persons of each sex, partially covered with linen drawers and long tresses which fell loosely from their heads, amusing themselves by splashing in the hot sulphureous water. Disgusting as this was, it formed the least disagreeable part of the scene. On the outside of the pillars the floor was paved and there lay at full length, numerous human creatures indulging, among the fumes, a kind of lethargic slumber. Others lay upon the steps and submitted to the kneading practised upon them by old women employed for the purpose. Some, as if resting from their labours, lay stretched upon benches and in different corners were groups of naked families enjoying their midday meal, sour crout and sausages, amidst all the luxury of a profuse perspiration. To complete the scene, there was a row of half-naked figures on whom a poor miserable surgeon was practising the operations of cupping and

scarification studiously inflicting as many wounds and making as much show of blood as possible in order to satisfy the immoderate appetite of the Hungarian peasant for this species of medical treatment. With such a mixture of disgusting objects it never before happened to me to meet, and almost faint with heat, I was glad to make my escape; yet my curiosity led me to several others but in none was the construction of the chamber so picturesque. The enjoyments of the bath, however, were the same.

In his description of the much more fashionable resort of Baden, Bright comments neither on whether the nobility also utilized the surgeons in a similar fashion, nor on whether they also indulged in the cupping and scarification of which he is so disparaging. He is certainly fulsome in his praise of the other entertainments that this resort provided. Overall Bright appeared to be more interested in the hot springs of Hungary as an interesting geological and natural historical phenomenon rather than as useful or helpful in health care.

Bright reports on his visits to four hospitals in his book, two in Hungary and two in Austria. However, two of these he classifies as no more than Poor Houses; for example, the one in Hungary, at Keszthely he describes as "a Poor House rather than an institution for the sick, managed with much attention, and inmates receive many little conveniences and even luxuries from the pious offerings of persons in humble life, who from religious motives and the fulfilment of vows bring gifts according to their means."<sup>12</sup>

The other two hospitals, the General Hospital of Vienna and the University Hospital of Pest are dealt with at much more length. In Vienna, the General Hospital was a very large institution designed for 2,000 patients, although it rarely seems to have been full. At the time of Bright's visit only 800 patients were resident. The reason given by him for this has a familiar ring to it: there was a problem with funding at the time.

A system of rotating the wards was in place which allowed each ward to be empty for a six-month period for thorough cleaning and airing to remove infection and disease. Bright reports that there were four resident physicians and four resident surgeons for these 800 patients. The clinical ward of Professor Hildebrand impressed him greatly. This clinician commenced his teaching round at 7 a.m. and followed it with a clinical lecture course conducted in Latin. Bright also reports enthusiastically on the wax anatomical models of the Josephine Museum which were used as teaching tools and which are now world famous.

The much smaller university hospital in Pest rated much higher in Bright's estimation and there is no doubt that he was very impressed by the whole of the University of Pest, now the Semmelweis University of Budapest.<sup>13</sup> He was very enthusiastic about his distinguished host, Dr. Pál Kitaibel, whose renown as a botanist was already great. However, his greatest praise was reserved for the medical faculty and

for the university hospital. At the time of Bright's visit, this hospital was located in the former Jesuit House on the corner of what is now Lajos Kossuth and Semmelweiss streets. This building no longer exists. When Bright made his visit there were six, six-bed wards: one ward for each of male and female medical patients, surgical patients, eye diseases, lying-in patients, and patients suffering from syphilis. The training of surgeons in medical diseases also merited a ward, as these surgeons would provide the bulk of medical care for the peasant population of the country.

Bright affords us a clear picture of the program of undergraduate medical education. He describes the course structure on a year-by-year basis (see table below).

UNDERGRADUATE MEDICAL COURSE, UNIVERSITY OF PEST, 1812<sup>14</sup>

First year	Anatomy, Chemistry, Botany, Natural History, General Pathology, Surgery.
Second year	Physiology, more minute Anatomy, theory of operations, Surgical instruments, Midwifery.
Third year	Pathology, materia medica, Disease of the eye.
Fourth year	Therapia of acute and chronic diseases, Clinical lectures in Medicine and Surgery, Veterinary art; may be postponed until the fifth year or until the course is completed, but must be pursued before a diploma can be granted.
Fifth year	Particular therapia continued, Clinical lectures continued, Medical jurisprudence, Medical police.

This is essentially the same as that of the Medical School of Vienna. It is intriguing to note that his own alma mater, Edinburgh, and many other medical schools in Britain, maintained an almost identical course structure for the first three years of medical education, at least until the 1960s. It appeared to Bright that the final medical examination in Pest was a rigorous one and included a difficult clinical examination. He did not appear to be disconcerted by the attrition rate of the undergraduates which, from the numbers of students he gives, was probably about 40 percent. Such figures would no doubt cause a major furore if they were issued by any modern medical school. Bright tells us that the education at Pest was offered in both German and Hungarian, although many of the clinical lectures were delivered in Latin. He also comments that the number of the faculty in 1812 seems to be excessive for a total student population of 119, being 60 physicians and 59 surgeons.

R. T. Williamson has emphasized the accuracy of Richard Bright's observations and the graphic skills with which he illustrated his text.<sup>15</sup>

There are also many Hungarian commentaries which emphasize the detail with which his text has been reviewed.<sup>16</sup> The enthusiasm of his Hungarian reviewers is perhaps understandable. Although Hungary, at least in theory, shared the imperial crown of the Habsburgs, the seat of power, even after the Napoleonic wars, remained firmly in Vienna. In addition, the languages of communication in the Empire were German or Latin. Thus there were few vehicles by which Hungary could be opened to the ken of Western Europe. Bright's folio was a major publication for the Hungarian establishment and even the most critical of the Hungarian commentaries on the book, that of János Trattner in 1819, emphasizes in its conclusion that "it must also be said that the published volume is technically marvellous, with wonderful engravings and sketches which does great honour to the country in which it was produced, as well as giving great delight to the country it describes." There have been many other reviews and commentaries on Richard Bright's journeys in Hungary from English-speaking authors. In more recent times, Honti echoed these comments.<sup>17</sup> However, this current review is the first attempt to consider the medical historical information offered by Richard Bright's *Travels in Lower Hungary*.

## NOTES

- 1 Pamela Bright, *Dr. Richard Bright 1789-1858* (London: Bodley Head, 1983).
- 2 R. M. Kark, *Physician Extraordinary, Dr. Richard Bright 1789-1858*, Fitzpatrick Lecture 1983 (Montpelier: Horn of the Moon Enterprises, 1986).
- 3 János Trattner, "Critics on Bright's Book," *Tudományos Gyűjtemény*, Scientific Collection, 3 (1819): 93-107; 4 (1819): 105-19 (in Hungarian).
- 4 For example, Edward Brown, *A Brief Account of Some Travels in Hungary, Serbia, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Thessaly, Austria, Styria, Corinthia, Corniola and Friuli. Also, some observations on the gold, silver, copper, quicksilver mines, baths and mineral waters of these parts* (London: Printed by T. R. for Benj. Took, 1673). See also J. D. Spillane, "Richard Bright in Hungary 1814-1815," in *Medical Travellers: Narratives from the Seventeenth, Eighteenth, and Nineteenth Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 173-93; and Imre Szerecz, "Travels through Lower Hungary by Richard Bright M.D., 1815," *Veszprém Megyei Múzeumok Igazgatósága 1970* (in Hungarian, with summaries in English).
- 5 Richard Bright, *Travels from Vienna through Lower Hungary: With Some Remarks on the State of Vienna during the Congress, in the Year 1814* (Edinburgh: Printed for Archibald Constable and Company, Edinburgh; London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1818), p. 130.
- 6 Bright, *Travels*, p. 609-10.
- 7 Erna Lesky also comments on Dr. De Carro's efforts to introduce smallpox vaccination into the very conservative medical practice of Vienna in the early years of the nineteenth century and confirms that it was through his efforts that the practice was introduced to Turkey and the Balkans. She makes no reference to plague, however. See her books, *The Vienna Medical School of the Nineteenth Century*, translated by L. Williams and I. S. Lerij (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).
- 8 Bright, *Travels*, p. 81.
- 9 Bright, *Travels*, p. 497.

- 10 J. C. MacKenzie, "Dr. Richard Bright—A Man of Many Parts: His Bicentenary Year (1789-1858)," *Bristol Medico-chirurgical Journal*, 104, 3 (August 1989): 63-67.
- 11 Bright, *Travels*, p. 284-85.
- 12 Bright, *Travels*, p. 492.
- 13 Erna Lesky notes that the University of Pest, at the time of Bright's visit, was one of a series of provincial satellite universities in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The staff in these outposts generally followed the lead in education of the central Viennese school, and often the staff were appointed from Vienna. However, Lesky notes that the University of Vienna was largely under the direction of the reactionary and stifling influence of Dr. Stift and that perhaps the provincial setting allowed for more freedom of academic thought and practice. It is perhaps for this reason that Bright rated the University of Pest so highly in comparison.
- 14 Bright, *Travels*, p. 272.
- 15 R. T. Williamson, "Richard Bright, His Early Travels," *British Medical Journal*, 2 (1927): 67.
- 16 G. Korbuly, "The Travels of Richard Bright in Hungary in 1815," *Hungarian Quarterly* (Budapest, 1938); G. Lipták, "A British Doctor at the Lake Balaton in 1815," *The New Hungarian Quarterly*, 11, 2 (1961): 129-36; and J. Honti, "Richard Bright, Edward Brown and John Paget's Travels in Hungary," *Proceedings of the XXIII Congress of the History of Medicine* (London, September 1972), p. 690-93.
- 17 J. Honti, "Reflections of Richard Bright's Works in the Contemporary Hungarian Literature," *Proceedings of the XXIVth Congress of the History of Medicine* (Budapest, 1974), p. 565-68.