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PRESENTATION  
OF THE  
GOLD MEDALS

AWARDED TO REAR-ADMIRAL WILLIAM HENRY SMYTH  
AND TO CAPTAIN ROBERT J. LE M. M'CLURE, R.N.

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You have gathered from our Council Report that our Founders' Medal has been awarded to an active member of our Society, Rear-Admiral William Henry Smyth. If it were necessary for me to undertake anything in the nature of a vindication of this award, I might be tempted to enter at somewhat Homeric length into the Odyssey of this distinguished surveying officer's professional career. It would, however, puzzle Mr. Arrowsmith, who, at our evening meetings, kindly points out with his wand, "describit radio," the paths of travellers by sea or land, to trace on the Mediterranean chart the courses which Admiral Smyth has steered, the positions which he has laid down, and what is of scarcely less consequence and convenience to the navigator, the fallacies he has exposed, during years of toil and danger. It must be a satisfaction to him, which no public tribute can much enhance, to feel that no man living has contributed more to make safe and passable that highway of nations which for legitimate purposes is the property of all, but which, since the time of Alfred, has been the peculiar path of England to wealth, to eminence, and to glory. He knows also that when he at last laid down the instruments which he had used so well, he did but resign them to hands which his instruction had rendered able as his own—

"Plants of his hand, and children of his care"—

to such men as FitzRoy, Beechey, Raper, Owen Stanley, and an old friend of my own, well known to Mediterranean travellers and navigators as Graves of the Beacon. The father of English marine surveying has good reason to be proud of his children. Nor when he left the field to them was his an idle retirement. He has given to this Society from its origin the benefit of his assistance to its councils and its vigorous superintendence in the chair. He has cultivated for its own sake that noble science of Astronomy which he had turned to so much practical account, with a zeal and success which have won him an European reputation, and a name familiar to the observatories of

the world. He has lately made accessible to the general reader the results of his labours in the Mediterranean, condensed in the valuable work which is by this time probably in the hands of most of my present audience. If I add that to such objects as these he has devoted a large expenditure from his private means, exclusive of all Government support, I shall have said much, but shall have left much unsaid which I might allege in vindication, were it needed, of this award of our Founders' Medal. His engagements have not allowed him to receive it in person, but I have the pleasure to place it in the hands of an old friend and intelligent appreciator of his merits, Sir Roderick Murchison, who has kindly undertaken to convey it to its destination.

Sir Roderick Murchison replied:—

“As a sincere admirer of the achievements of Admiral Smyth, including his successful efforts to advance the best interests of this Society, I am, indeed, proud to have been the individual who, in the terms which have been enunciated, recommended your Lordship and our Council to confer on so eminent a geographer the medal of our Royal founder.

“As this distinction has been awarded for researches of the highest order of merit, followed by results of vast utility to mankind, I feel assured that all true physical geographers, whether at home or abroad, will approve a decision which will also, I am certain, afford real gratification to the members of the Royal, Astronomical and Antiquarian Societies, in which our distinguished associate has so long played so conspicuous and honourable a part.”

The award of the other, our Patrons' Medal, is one which, as I conceive, cannot but obtain here that unanimous concurrence it met with in our Council. It is true that science has long ceased to expect from the discovery of that Arctic communication between the Atlantic and the Pacific, commonly called the North-West passage, those advantages to commerce and navigation, the hope of which stimulated its first explorers. Still I can hardly think it necessary in this Society to defend that spirit of scientific curiosity which has led in our time to the endeavour to solve the great geographical problem of the North; nor can I think it any mean jealousy of other nations, which has made us desire that its solution should be reserved to British enterprise. The honour of its accomplishment has fallen on Captain Robert J. Le M. M'Clure; and it is my belief that no one since the time of Baffin and Barentz, has embarked in the pursuit more worthy to win and wear that honour. I have, indeed, in saying this, no personal acquaintance with that officer, but I know something of the estimation in which he is held by his comrades. This kind of evidence to character should, in my judgment, be accepted with discrimination. I have myself had opportunities of large acquaintance and intercourse with naval men, and I hold it wise and just to attach no weight whatever to anything which may pass current in conversation to the prejudice of any officer. Nothing short of legal evidence can justify unfavourable conclusions. I think it far otherwise when something like common consent, and what I may call

gun-room reputation, exists to the advantage of particular men, and with respect to particular qualities attributed to those men. I remember the moment when the account reached this country, of Captain M'Clure's parting with his companion vessel north of Behring Strait. The latest report described him as making straight for the ice, and I know the language which was held at that time in naval circles. It was to this effect:—"That man will not return by the way he is gone, unless at least he should meet with Franklin, or find reasons connected with his rescue for retracing his course; he will return eastward or return no more." Such was the verdict founded on professional knowledge of the man, and has it not been justified? I wish indeed I could use the word 'return' in its complete sense, and that it implied something more and better than the knowledge of his position and assurance of his safety to a certain date, with the reasonable anticipation that we may yet have occasion to give him our geographical welcome upon his personal reappearance among us in health and safety. That satisfaction is as yet denied us. I cannot place in his hands this tribute of our Society: I can but confide it to the care of one whose stern experience in Arctic regions by sea and land enables him peculiarly to appreciate those qualities of skill, courage, and endurance, essential to the achievement of the great exploit which will henceforth be associated with the name of M'Clure. Sir George Back has kindly accepted this office, and from no hands can Captain M'Clure be better pleased to receive this token of our applause and appreciation, than from those of his old commander.

Sir George Back replied:—

"My Lord,—It is with no ordinary satisfaction I receive this Medal, which the successful services of the gallant officer have obtained from the Royal Geographical Society: for Captain M'Clure began his Polar career under my orders in H.M.S. 'Terror,' where more than once, amid great dangers, he evinced by his steady conduct what might be expected of him on any future occasion.

"Among the many calls for decision in his late remarkable voyage, perhaps in no instance did Captain M'Clure show more judgment, than in taking immediate advantage of the information, accidentally gleaned, of there being a navigable passage through the Aleutian or Fox Islands.

"To effect so important an object, every sail was crowded on the 'Investigator;' and having passed safely through the group, he was enabled to arrive near Cape Barrow at one of those fortunate moments in the Polar Sea, when a 'lead' through the ice opened out to him the first cheering prospect of advancing along the American coast.

"He did not hesitate; and thus encouraged, battled with the frozen element, beset with shoals and treacherous rocks, until he nobly achieved the object of his ambition—the discovery of the North-West Passage.

"My Lord, it shall be my care to treasure this proof of the Society's admiration for my gallant friend Captain M'Clure, nor will I fail to inform him of the courteous manner in which your Lordship presented it."