

MARTYN LOVELL

Yellow Fever and the Panama Canal

A Foreign Knighthood, American Surgeon General Gorgas

IN researching the Queen Alexandra Military Hospital at Millbank—which was situated on the River Thames—records of the Surgeon General and President of the American Medical Association, William C. Gorgas from the USA, were noted. He died there on July 4, 1920, after being taken ill a few weeks before while on route to the west coast of Africa to investigate the prevalence of yellow fever. He was most notable as Chief Health Officer during the construction of the Panama Canal in 1904. General Gorgas' efforts led to the elimination of yellow fever and malaria, allowing construction of the canal. He had earlier abolished yellow fever from Havana. It is noted that on June 8, the King called on General Gorgas at the hospital and invested him with the insignia of KCMG in recognition of his services to the British Empire and to the commercial world—perhaps such a house call is unique? An interesting list of foreign Knight and Damehoods is available on Wikipedia; looking at this and other sources, no similar visit is seen.

William Crawford Gorgas was born at Mobile, Alabama, on October 3, 1854. He was the son of Brigadier General Josiah Gorgas, Chief of Ordnance of the Confederate Army. He received his medical education at Bellevue Medical College, New York, and the Southern University in Tennessee. He entered the Medical Corps of the United States Army at the age of 28, with the rank of Assistant Surgeon. He encountered yellow fever in Western Texas and was himself infected with the disease. When war with Spain broke out, he served with the army in Cuba and was later made Chief Sanitary Officer of Havana. He carried out the recommendations of the American Yellow Fever Commission of 1900 and evolved methods for suppressing the relevant mosquito. After less than a year, Havana was clear. A special Act of Congress was passed, promoting him to the rank of Colonel and appointing him Assistant Surgeon General of the United States Army.

In 1904, work began on the Panama Canal. Gorgas attended the site to report on the sanitary condition of the Canal zone and was made Chief Health Officer of the area. For 400 years it had held the reputation of being one of the unhealthiest regions in the world. Gorgas drained the land and oiled the mosquito breeding places, which prevented the mosquitos breathing through a protruding respiratory siphon. Yellow fever was gone in two years and the mortality and sickness rate from malaria massively decreased.

On the completion of the canal, Gorgas was made Director of the International Health Board of the Rockefeller Institute in Washington and visited many tropical countries in connection with his work. Such was the scale of his work, he was awarded the Royal Society's prestigious Buchanan Medal in 1912, Oxford University conferred an honorary DSc, and the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine awarded its Mary Kingsley Medal. He was promoted to Major-General and appointed Surgeon General of the United States Army in 1914 and was entertained in London at a complimentary dinner at the Royal College of Physicians. In 1920, Cambridge University proposed to confer upon General Gorgas an LLD (Doctor of Laws).

During World War I, he undertook the organisation of the Army Medical Service. In September 1918, he went on a short tour of inspection in France but retired under the age rule in the following month.

A further notable area was the size of his funeral service, held on July 9, 1920, in St Paul's Cathedral. Gorgas' coffin was borne from the hospital on a gun carriage of the Royal Horse Artillery. It was escorted by six military pall bearers, Major-Generals Sir W. G. Macpherson, A. P. Blenkinsop, Sir G. B. Stanistreet, and Colonels O. L. Robinson, H. A. Hinge, and J. R. McMunn of the Army Medical Service. He was headed by the Band of the Coldstream Guards, the military escort was under the command of a Brigadier, and a salute of guns was fired in Hyde Park. There was a very large congregation



William Gorgas in uniform (image courtesy of the Wellcome Collection).

“... His body was conveyed to Southampton, returned to the USA and interred in Arlington Cemetery. It was reported that Gorgas was buried with great pomp and his funeral had three separate services ...”



Most Distinguished Order of St Michael and St George (KCMG) awarded to Gorgas.

in the Cathedral with representatives of the Royal persons, governments, colleges and institutions. His body was conveyed to Southampton, returned to the USA and interred in Arlington Cemetery.

It was reported that Gorgas was buried with great pomp and his funeral had three separate services—perhaps because of capacity! It was stated to be the most impressive funeral since that of Admiral Dewey (medal-wise, Admiral Dewey is also of interest—the Battle of Manila Bay Medal, commonly called the Dewey Medal, was struck in honour of Dewey's victory at Manila Bay. Since his own image appeared on the obverse of the medal, out of modesty, Dewey wore his medal reversed).

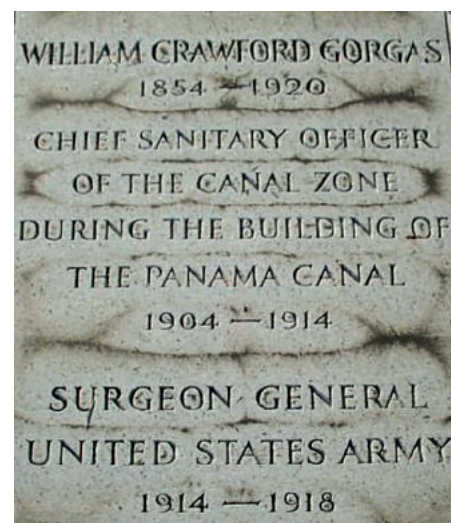
In speaking of the great and the good regarding tropical medicine, we have not heard of others given a similar honour.

Sir Ronald Ross (who received the Nobel Prize for discovering that mosquito bites caused malaria), Sir Patrick Manson (who did massive work in this area and is called the father of Tropical Medicine), Sir David Bruce (who discovered Malta fever which is named after him), and Sir William Leishman (who has the disease Leishmaniasis named after him) seem to have had simple funerals.

References

British Medical Journal July 10 and July 17, 1920.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_honorary_British_knights_and_dames
https://www.nytimes.com/1920/08/17/archives/Arlington_Funeral

With thanks to our American friend Adam Rohloff for assistance.



Gorgas' gravestone in Arlington Cemetery.

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