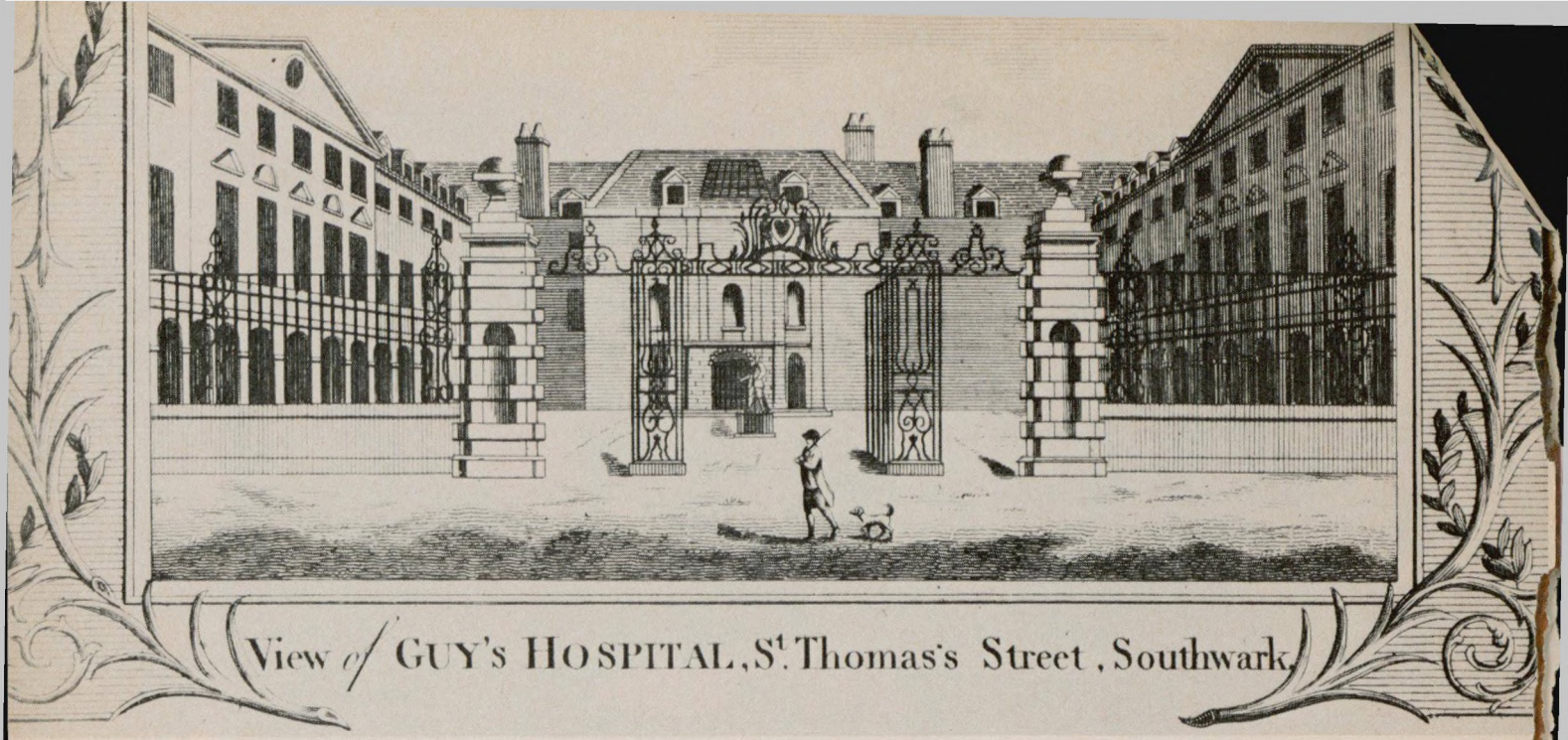
MD ANNIVERSARY

Princely Mead

▪ In an age of affluence Richard Mead was one of the most celebrated and successful British physicians of the 18th century. An inheritor of the age's symbol of excellence, the gold-headed cane, he earned some £7000 annually, an enormous sum for the time. ▪ A collector of antiquities, gems, prints and paintings, he kept several artists and scholars in his pay, cataloguing the largest library formed in his time: more than 10,000 volumes housed in his magnificent mansion which became a Mecca for every distinguished visitor to London. ▪ BEGINNINGS. Born 300 years ago, Mead was the 11th child of a Nonconformist minister of Stepney, Middlesex. A gifted student with a great facility for languages, Mead's education was abruptly interrupted when he was obliged to follow his father into voluntary exile in Holland. Charles II was forced by a strongly Anglican Parliament to strike out against the Noncomformists, and Mead's father, with other Protestants, left the country rather than conform to the Church of England. ▪ Mead lived in Utrecht for three years and then went on to Leyden for his medical training, one of the finest medical schools in Europe and the first Protestant university of the Netherlands. In 1692, the year of Mead's arrival in Leyden, Archibald Pitcairn was appointed professor of medicine. Mead became a student of the celebrated Scottish physician, a follower



of Harvey and the iatrophysical school which explained all the activities of the body on mechanical principles.

One of Mead's closest friends at the university was Herman Boerhaave with whom he maintained a correspondence for the rest of his life. Like Boerhaave Mead based his medicine on Hippocrates and Sydenham, whom he referred to as the English Hippocrates. Mead accepted the teachings of Boerhaave who did not believe in a single medical system and cautioned against the excessive confidence in iatrochemistry, preferring the iatrophysical theories which placed greater reliance on physics, anatomy and physiology.

After leaving Leyden Mead travelled through Europe, obtaining his degree of medicine from Padua in 1695. The following year he returned to his parental home in Stepney, and although he did not have a license from the College of Physicians, he began the practice of medicine.

While in Stepney he wrote his first medical treatise, *A Mechanical Account of Poisons* (1702), which included sections of the anatomy of the viper, rattlesnake, spider, bee and tarantula, poisonous minerals and plants. Mead conducted experiments on himself, he tasted the venom of deadly vipers and injected it into the veins of animals. The animals and Mead survived; an abstract of the study was published in the *Philosophical Transactions* and the following year Mead was elected to the Royal Society.

In 1703 Mead contributed another paper proving the parasitic nature of scabies. Inspired by the observation that poor women used the point of a knife to remove "bladders of water from the scabby," he followed their example. He found an infected child and removed a small white globule which he observed under a microscope. Wrote Mead: "I found it to be a very minute living creature, in shape resembling a tortoise, and at last, by good fortune, from the hinder part I saw drop a very small and scarcely visible white egg, almost transparent and oblong."

That year Mead was elected physician to St. Thomas', a medieval hospital rebuilt in the reign of queen Anne, where he was responsible for the teaching of anatomy. Later he joined the staff of St. Bartholomew's* where he served as a governor of the hospital and a member of the apothecary committe. It was Mead who was responsible for trying to narrow the breach between the physicians and the apothecaries; some of the physicians wanted the Royal College to dispense pills, the apothecaries were furious and threatened to boycott the physicians. Mead brought about a compromise and in 1707 his medical degree from Padua was finally acknowledged by Oxford, which granted him its MD degree.

GOLD-HEADED CANE. England of the early 18th century was known as the country of the "Good Queen Anne," a land of art and elegance that had entered a time of relative peace and prosperity. The physician of repute lived the life of an aristocrat;

* In 1973 St. Bartholomew's celebrated its 850 anniversary.

On the frontispiece are a painting of Dr. Mead planning Guy's Hospital with Thomas Guy and the architect Stear, and the Mead family crest. Opposite are a view of Guy's Hospital and a portrait of Hermann Boerhaave.

The goldheaded cane, left, was given to Mead by John Radcliffe, below left, who left funds to Oxford for a library, infirmary, observatory and traveling fellowship named for him. Mead acquired his house in Bloomsbury Square with its 60-ft. library, below, where he housed his collection of some 10,000 books.

he was elegantly dressed and wigged and usually carried a cane, the most famous of the period, a goldheaded one that belonged to six successive presidents of the Royal College.*

Mead, the second physician to carry the legendary cane, had it passed on to him by John Radcliffe, a gruff physician who both cowed and attracted his patients. Radcliffe one of the wealthiest doctors in London, much admired Mead's ability to read Hippocrates in the original and promised him that at his death he would inherit the "throne of physic in this great town."

Three months before his death, Radcliffe gave up his house in Bloomsbury Square, his gold cane and his practice to Mead. To his successor, he wrote: "Mead, I love you and I'll tell you a sure secret to make you a fortune, use all mankind ill."

But this was not Mead's style: he was charming, courtly, polished and invariably kind. Among his illustrious patients were queen Anne, George II, members of the royal family and Sir Isaac Newton. Mead and his friend the chief surgeon of St. Thomas' hospital, William Cheselden, attended Newton during his last illness. They were both responsible for the care of the controversial literary dictator of the age, the poet Alexander Pope who wrote:

"Weak though I am of limb and short of sight
Far from a lynx, and not a giant quite,
I'll do what Mead and Cheselden advise
To keep these limbs, and to preserve these eyes."

In addition to his private patients, Mead had a lively coffeehouse practice. The coffeehouse was a center of social life, and every respectable Londoner had his favourite one; at fixed hours Mead would meet at Tom's, in Covent Garden, with apothecaries who brought him written or verbal reports describing the symptoms of their customers. For his diagnosis Mead charged a half-guinea, half his usual fee, a large sum for the period. Mead treated unbeneficed clergymen without fee, but when one compared Mead's diagnosis unfavorably to a rival physician, Mead demanded ten guineas. The patient paid reluctantly, Mead gave him a lecture on medical ethics and returned six of the ten.

Mead was as quick to defend a friend as he was his professional dignity: when John Freind, a medical historian, was accused of mixing politics and medicine and committeed to the Tower for high treason, Mead interceded with Sir Robert Walpole to free him. The famous prime minister was reluctant, but that day he suffered intense pain caused by vesical stones and Mead refused to treat him until

* In the 19th century the goldheaded cane, a symbol of culture and art in medical practice, was given to the Royal College of Physicians where it now resides.

an order for Freind's release was signed.

The order was signed and Freind was released on bail in Mead's charge. That evening Mead held a large party for his friend at his home on Great Ormond Street. Just as Freind was about to leave with the physician-writer John Arbuthnot, Mead took him into his private study and presented him with a large case containing the fees he had received from the doctor's patients during his imprisonment: a sum of 5000 guineas.

On another occasion Mead had reason to caution his friend to try to stay out of trouble. Freind had written a prescription after a long evening of drinking and Mead was called in to verify the prescription. With characteristic delicacy toward his professional friends Mead noted with good humour: "Pon my honour, Dr. Freind can write a better prescription when drunk than I can while sober."

For two decades Mead held regular gatherings in his spacious library for the most famous literary and scientific personalities of England. Among them were Pope, Addison, Steele, Swift, Sterne, Goldsmith, the physicians Garth and Blackmore. Noted Samuel Johnson, a frequent visitor: "Mead lived more in the broad sunshine of life than almost any man."

Lining the walls of Mead's 60 ft. library were thousands of books, rare manuscripts, prints, bronzes, gems, Etruscan vases, valuable coins, marble busts of Greek philosophers, Roman emperors, the English poets and the great Harvey. But Mead did not consider himself merely a collector; he considered it his duty to promote the arts and encourage learned men.

He threw open his gallery in the morning for the benefit of struggling painters and sculptors and lent the best of his collection to artists eager to copy the great works. He gave regular grants to artists and scholars, and in the view of one friend there was "scarcely a curious undertaking in any artistic or scholarly field that did not find a patron in Mead."

His hospitality was legendary: he maintained two tables at his home, one for friends and acquaintances, another for men of intellectual if not social standing. One friend noted that he earned huge sums from his practice which he spent lavishly, and died not so rich a man as one might have expected because he believed that "the dignity of the physician was founded on his scholarly and artistic attainments."

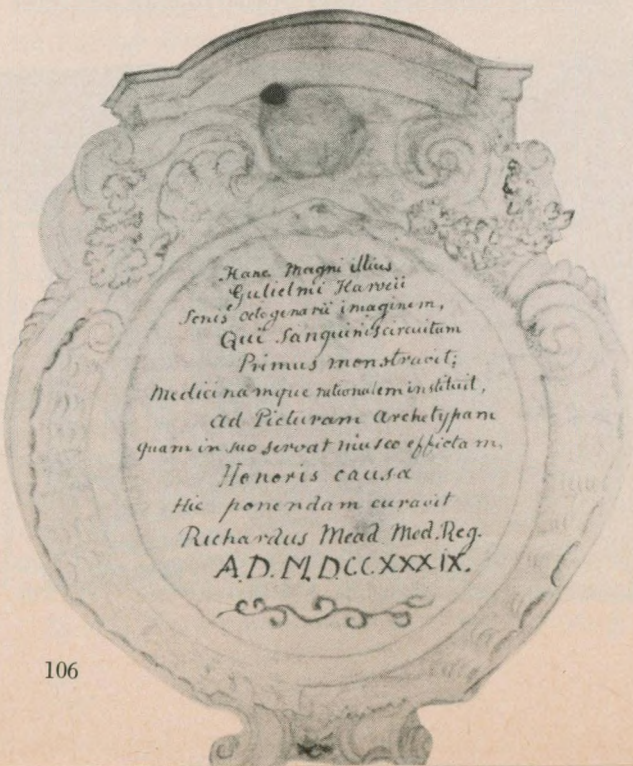
Mead contributed generously to charities and helped to found the Foundling Hospital. He persuaded Mr. Guy, the bookseller, to contribute to the beginning of the hospital which now bears his name. Mead took an active interest in scientific research. He was one of the early supporters of experiments investigating the nature of electricity and was present during the famous experiments on the Thames of an electric circuit.

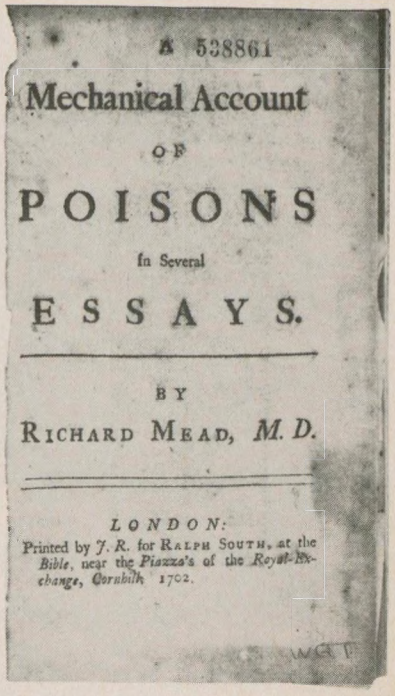
CLINICIAN. In 1722, when Lady Morty Wortley Montagu introduced inoculation from Constantinople, Mead was asked by the prince of Wales to experiment with the new method. With pus from smallpox lesions, Mead inoculated seven criminals who were offered pardons for their assistance. The prisoners recovered and Mead went ahead with the inoculation of members of the royal family. Mead described his observations in a treatise written in Latin on smallpox and measles which included a translation of Rhazes' commentary on smallpox obtained from Boerhaave in Leyden.

Although inoculation had the support of the royal family and many doctors strongly recommended it, the subject was embroiled in violent controversy. On June 10, 1719, in the quadrangle of Gresham College, Mead and another physician, John Woodward, fought a duel over the virtues of inoculation that was aborted by bystanders when Woodward lost his footing, fell to the ground and Mead agreed to end the fight in a war of words.

That same year an epidemic of plague broke out in Marseilles that eventually took the lives of some 50,000 people. The British government asked Mead to find the most effective means of preventing the spread of the plague. Mead conducted an investigation and presented to the government his *Short Discourse concerning Pestilential Contagion and the*

William Harvey Award of 1739 was a fitting tribute to Mead, a student of Harvey's follower Pitcairn, who commissioned a bust of Harvey for Merton College.

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Mechanical Account

OF

POISONS

In Several

ESSAYS.

BY

RICHARD MEAD, M. D.

LONDON:

Printed by J. R. for RALPH SOUTH, at the Bible, near the Piazza's of the Royal-Exchange, Cornhill. 1702.

Cartoon lampooning Edward Jenner reflects the same opposition to inoculation against smallpox that Mead faced when he practiced variolation on members of the royal family in 1722. At right is the title page of Mead's first medical treatise, 1702.

Methods used to Prevent It (1720) which accepted the theory of contagion and advocated quarantine. Alarmed citizens exhausted seven editions in 12 months, and an act of Parliament was passed based on Mead's suggestions of how to deal with the plague should it spread from France.

English libertarians opposed the act and Mead because they feared too much power in the hands of the government, which by law could remove the sick from their homes and isolate an infected district. But Mead pointed out that if the plague should unhappily be brought again into England, the people themselves would cry out for help, "notwithstanding the wrong notions of liberty which overpossess certain minds and make them impatient of restraint, even under the best of governments."

In 1751 Mead published *Medical Precepts and Cautions*, in which with great candor and simplicity he outlined what long experience and practice had taught him concerning diseases and the difficulty of effecting a cure. For depressive hypochrondria he recommended exercise, adequate enough to bring a patient to a good sweat, and discussed his experiences in treating a great variety of diseases including dropsy, liver and kidney disease, leprosy, and diseases of the head, breast and skin.

Mead's contributions to preventive medicine were a discourse on scurvy, in which he attested to the antiscorbutic value of lemon and orange juice and his insistence on the necessity of personal hygiene and sanitary reform in the cities. Noted Mead cogently: "As nastiness is a great source of infection so cleanliness is the greatest preventive."

LAST YEARS. Mead retained his intellectual powers almost to the end, but in the last three years of his life he had become very corpulent. He spent his declining years reading the classics, the Bible and writing. He finished a treatise on "Old Age As a Disease" and worked on a *Medica Sacra* in which he planned to account for the symbolic description of disease in the Scriptures.

In *Medica Sacra* Mead quoted at length from *Ecclsiastes* 12:1-7. Solomon, he wrote, was "the wisest of humans who thought it proper to express all the ills and infirmities of the mind and body allegorically." Mead interpreted Solomon's words "and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail" as a euphemism for scrotal hernia, and the reference to the "wheel broken at the cistern" as a failing heart.

Solomon's words, "Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it" were interpreted by Mead as giving unshakable confirmation of God's truth that the soul is immortal and will not perish with the body. Firm in his faith, Mead died in his 81st year on February 16, 1754; he was buried in the Temple Church and was said to have been mourned by all who knew him.

SUMMING UP. By one of Mead's friends: "I highly esteem and love that worthy man. His unaffected humanity and benevolence have stifled much of that envy which his profession would otherwise have drawn out. Of all the physicians who had ever flourished, he gained, spent and enjoyed the most."