PRETENSIONS TO THE DISCOVERY OF THE

LOBELIA INFLATA.

To the Editor of THE LANCET.

SIR,—In the last number of THE LANCET I find a Mr. Whitlaw, of "14, Finsbury Place, South," arrogating to himself the honour of first leading the American practitioners to the use of the *lobelia inflata*. His words are, "In conclusion I have only to observe, that though the plant has been known for many years in the Indian tribes of America, yet to me the Americans are indebted for the discovery of its medical properties." Now is it not very strange, that in so very respectable a work as "Bigelow's American Medical Botany," which treats largely on the virtues of the lobelia inflata, no such acknowledgment is to be found? Nor is Mr. Whitlaw's name, to the best of my recollection, ever mentioned. I certainly have not the work before me, but I am sure I should recollect the circumstance of the celebrated Whitlaw being mentioned as the first person who called the attention of the medical practitioners of the United States to its virtues in asthma, had it been mentioned in the work itself.

Having been employed some few years back on the coast of North America, and having read with great attention Bigelow's Medical Botany, I was struck with the virtues attributed to the lobelia inflata, and requested an officer and friend of mine, who was in the habit of going to Boston, to bring me some from the most pure source in that city, "the Apothecaries Hall," as some of my own immediate friends in England were labouring under asthma, and I wished to give them the advantage of it. At that time it was not known in this country, and was first brought into notice shortly afterwards by a physician of Edinburgh. I shall give the extracts made in my note-book at the time from Bigelow, and, strange to say, Mr. Whitlaw's name does not appear in them. If what he says is really true, he has been badly used by the American practitioners, notwithstanding his puff of his "ethereal tincture" in this country, whose "seven drops are equal to any other man's drachm and a half." Bigelow says, "A communication from Dr. Cutler on the operation of this plant, is inserted in Dr. Thacker's 'Dispensatory.' The venerable writer himself suffered from asthma for ten years, and, during the paroxysms, resorted to many medicines for relief, without experiencing much benefit from any. He was at length induced to make trial of a tincture prepared by himself from the lobelia inflata. 'In a paroxysm,' says he, 'which perhaps was as severe as any I had ever experienced, the difficulty of breathing was extreme, and after it had continued a considerable time, I took a tablespoonful (tincture). In three or four minutes my breathing was as free as it ever was, but I felt no nausea at the stomach; in two minutes I took another spoonful, which occasioned sickness; after ten minutes I took a third, which produced sensible effects upon the coats of the stomach, and a very little moderate puking, and a kind of prickly sensation through the whole system, even to the extremities of the fingers and toes; but all these sensations very soon subsided, and a vigour seemed to be restored to the constitution, which I had not experienced for years. I have not since had a paroxysm, and only a few times some smaller symptoms of asthma.

"'Besides the violent attacks, I had scarcely passed a night without more or less of it, and often so as not to be in bed. Since that time I have enjoyed as good health as, perhaps, before the first attack.'" Dr. Cutler considered his disease to be what Dr. Bree calls the first species, 'An asthma from pulmonic irritation of effused serum.'" Again (vide Bigelow, vol. 1st, art. *Lobelia Inflata*):—"Dr. Randell informs me, he has given the lobelia to many persons of different ages, suffering from asthma and catarrh, and with considerable variation in the form and degree of the dose. In asthma he finds it as successful as any article he has tried, when given in doses of a drachm of the saturated tincture, and two or three times repeated at convenient intervals. Also in the form of other preparations of similar strength," he has found it to remove the paroxysm in a short time, and to restore the patient to quietude and ease. In catarrh, when given in small doses, and frequently repeated, it has operated as a sure and speedy expectorant, producing effects in their most important character very similar to those of antimony and squills. Dr. Randell has not observed any narcotic effect to ensue from moderate doses, nor found it to produce irritation of the coats of the bladder, as has been suggested by some practitioners. In his hands it has not produced any more unpleasant effect or consequence than frequent nausea, and occasional emenis (?) with a copious flow from the glands of the mouth. Dr. Bradstreet 'considers its sensible effects to be very like those of common tobacco, but its medicinal action more speedy and diffusible, and of shorter duration. He thinks it affects those accustomed to the use of tobacco as readily as others.'" Vide Bigelow's "American Medical Botany," vol. 1st, art. "Lobelia Inflata." "The American saturated tincture is ʒij of the dried plant digested

a pint of diluted alcohol. Of this, a teaspoonful given to an adult will generally produce nausea. In certain instances, however, much larger doses have been given without producing any other effect than a flow of saliva."

By-the-by, Mr. Editor, a certain person of the name of Whitlaw, some years ago pretended he could cure all manner of scrofulous diseases, and had obtained the secret from "North American Indians." Many of our great folks believed and supported him, among whom was the late Sir Joseph York. Can you tell me what has become of the said ———?

Yours very truly,
J. Gooch, Surg. R.N.

March 2, 1833.

MR. COW'S "FRACTURE-BAG."

REPLY OF MR. COW TO MR. BROWN.

To the Editor of The Lancet.

Sir,—I must beg to trespass on your liberality and patience whilst I offer a few remarks on the article which appeared in your number of Jan. 12th last, from Mr. Brown, Assistant-Surgeon, Royal Navy, headed "Objections to Mr. Cow's Caoutchouc Fracture-Bag, with a description of a new mode of treating fractured limbs." The reason that so much time has elapsed since the publication of this article without my noticing it, arises from my not being of the medical profession. I consequently do not see The Lancet regularly, and it is only within this day or two that it has come under my observation.

I must here distinctly state, that I have not, or ever pretended to, the slightest knowledge of surgery, excepting that when a limb is fractured it requires to be bound up, and that it would be desirable to do it in a manner as little painful, and to give as much ease and comfort to the patient as possible, but as this apparatus has proceeded from a "foreman of shipwrights" (as Mr. Brown is pleased to designate me), and is made public in a work which I understand is universally read by medical men, it becomes necessary that I should state by what means and under what circumstances it was at all introduced to notice.

In the course of my duty as master boat-builder of this dock-yard, I had frequent communications with the manufacturers of the patent water-proof canvas, which brought to my notice various air-proof articles which they made, and considering that the principle might be useful for surgical purposes, I mentioned it to Dr. Dunn, the surgeon of this establishment, who approved, and intimated that it might be very useful as a bandage for fractured limbs. I therefore made patterns, and got two bandages, one for the arm and one for the leg. These I showed to several naval and army surgeons, also to physicians and surgeons in private practice, who all concurred in opinion that the principle was likely to be of essential use, particularly for the naval and field services.

It was not only at the suggestion of the medical gentlemen above alluded to, but they informed me I should be guilty of a dereliction of duty to the service, and to suffering humanity, if I omitted to take every means possible of bringing it to the notice of those who had the power of getting its merits more particularly inquired into, and even aided me in doing so. I therefore, on the 25th May 1829 (not "about a year and a half ago" as Mr. Brown states), wrote officially on the subject to the heads of the medical department of the navy, and was directed to furnish some for trial at Haslar Hospital. They were tried "in two instances of very severe fractures;" and I have in my possession copies of the reports from the principal surgeon, and also one from the whole of the medical department of that hospital, which appears to be satisfactory, and exceeded my expectations. After these reports were received, I was directed to supply sets for the naval hospitals at Plymouth, Chatham, Malta, and Fernando Po, also for the dock-yards at Portsmouth and Woolwich, and for many surgeons in private practice; and I must be permitted to remark that those orders were given me without the least solicitation on my part or any of my friends, and I may add that I have testimonials from numerous medical men, some of them of the highest rank in their profession.

This, Sir, is the history of what Mr. Brown calls the "fracture-bag;" and I must beg to trespass a little more on your patience, whilst I offer a few observations on what Mr. Brown says on the subject. In the first place, I think I may safely assert that Mr. Brown never saw them in actual practice, therefore all he assumes can be but a matter of opinion; and I may ask how it happens, that Mr. Brown *has changed* his opinion without seeing them tried; for when they were first shown him, and for a considerable time after (indeed I did not know he had changed his opinion until I saw the article in question), *he gave them his unqualified approbation*, only recommending a different *mode* of inflating them, and *offered to write in their favour to several medical societies in Scotland, with whom he said he was in correspondence.* As to what Mr. Brown states concerning their form, he well knows that they can be made to any form, and he likewise knows that I never