

H. Howard 1195

Cambridge March. 10. 1831

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Dear Sir Your letter 6 Feb. came to my hands about a week after its date, & found me intently occupied in a work of some magnitude now just issuing from the press, which accounts for my not replying sooner.

Samuel Thomson for he abhors being called Dr was advised to call upon me, from being told that I expressed disgust at the shameful persecution he was made to endure from the jealousy envy & malice of neighbouring practitioners who absolutely procured <sup>him</sup> to be indicted for murder in a certain case. He suffered a rigorous confinement in a loathsome cell previous to his trial; & yet in removing him from his place of imprisonment to that of his trial they contrived every means for his escape, which he would not take advantage of, he well knowing that the original plot of the Doctors was not to hang him, but to drive him out of the country. He was acquitted at once by the evidence of his prosecutors, without an opportunity of justifying himself by more than 20 witnesses which he brought into court at Salem. The judge expressed his astonishment to the Attorney General that a man should be arraigned for so solemn a charge on such deficient evidence.

Altho Thomson was bred a hard working farmer with little advantages of education, I could discover through his lack of it a strong & versatile intellect, & as I thought an honest heart. He probably would never have repeated his visit, had I not sought him out & invited him to dine with me, he had left with me his "Guide to Health" & a number of smaller printed documents, in all which I perceived amidst much eccentricity, bright traits of common sense an intense application to diseases, & their vegetable remedies & all the result of his own experiments, & most of them personal trials on himself, for he read nothing but 2 or 3 of our dispensatories, & this was done less for information than to point out their errors, as some of them had denounced him by name. On his 3<sup>d</sup> visit he brought me a sample of all his medicines, & such plants as the Loebelia then in season, he transplanted into my garden; & in every part of his conduct, he held nothing back, so that if he was a Quack he was a Quack, sui generis, for he revealed all his means. — From all I have seen of him, I am led to consider him an able Empiric, in the original & honorable sense of that term, his life has been a series of experiments, & close observation particularly as to the qualities & medicinal virtues in the vegetable kingdom alone; for he has a strong & unreasonable prejudice against all mineral & chemical remedies — He thinks that if the Creator had intended minerals for the cure of diseases, he would not have thus long concealed them underground; but that he has strewed & beautified the earth with vegetables to induce men to gather them for their use, & has given him an instinct to discover the salutiferous ones from the poisonous — I may here remark that what arrested my attention to this unlettered Philosopher was a certain air of grandeur in his theories — In his human physiology heat is his primum

Primum mobile; & without reading, he has the same idea the ancients had — that Apollo i.e. the Sun is the God of Physic & that cold is death — He considers the stomach as the fire place of our food its fuel, & a good Physician a genteel chimney-sweep: & he therefore considers with Hippocrates & with Fothergill, the stomach & intestinal canal as "every thing" in the practice of physic, & the infinite catalogue of compounds in our dispensatories as a farrago foreign to the simplicity of nature, & as so many traps to catch money. In short he sees some of the most glaring absurdities of our Art, & is too much disposed to laugh at them. In doing this he utters too frequently unqualified censure of the three learned professions, & as his business & intercourse is in the middling & lower classes of society, it has operated to lower the dignity of the profession, & resentment has been the consequence. I state facts without meaning to justify all his conduct. He is generally charged plus with ridicule as it regards the faculty, but is I am told extremely attentive to his patients. He never set out to practice as a scheme to make money, but was constrained to follow <sup>it from</sup> the circumstances of his family & neighbourhood. He never turns aside from a poor object, & never tries to increase his practice by the aid of dress or manners. Indeed he seems rather to delight his exterior with those whom he calls "learned Quacks" his objects of ridicule in prose & verse; for his ready wit is like some of his hot medicines. He is a temperate man, with all the democratical feelings & principles of New-Hampshire where he has a farm or 2. such is the man whose business by himself or numerous agents is immense; for instead of powdering his articles in a mortar, he grinds them in a water mill — He has been known to purchase 1200 weight of Cayenne-pepper from Africa & West-Indies — Now the question is, could this practice have spread so wide & continued so long had it been all an imposition?

Thomson ought not to be deprived of the honour of first introducing the Lobelia inflata into practice. He used it for years before he knew its proper name. He called it the Emetic weed & when he was about applying for a patent, he was obliged to Dr Thornton for its Linnaean name I can speak decidedly as to its qualities as a safe & efficacious emetic. I use no other myself, or in my own family. I have repeatedly taken as much as 30 grains & have given 40, & have never perceived any bad effects from it. It is much longer in its operation than the Spicaeantha but when it does operate it is a more complete evacuant of the stomach, but not below it, for I never knew it run off by the bowels like Spicae & Tartar. Emetic. When given in tincture it increases the glandular secretions like mercury. It seems to lose its emetic quality by water, infusion, & becomes in a manner effete by boiling. As it rather binds the intestines Thomson generally directs an injection of warm water into them, which he thinks sufficient in most cases without stimulant, for he says the intestines cannot retain even water.

I never myself conducted a patient through the Thomsonian process, but were I to recommend practice I certainly would attend to it carefully, because I think it rational in its theory & consonant to the Hippocratic simplicity of practice — You perceive that I have a good opinion of it in the hands of a careful, discerning, circumspect, judicious man, such a one as

Thomson himself. But the mischief is, & it is a great one, from its being in the hands of so did people, totally void of his experience, & destitute of his rules of caution. I never heard of a well attested case where Thomson was employed from the beginning that would discredit any Physician, considering the avowed conjectural state of our art. Any one of us called in to a hopeless case, after 1/2 dozen practitioners have failed, is hardly allowing fair play to the one last employed. Yet when an unfortunate case occurs it soon circulates through <sup>new</sup> the papers — the matter most to be lamented is, that Thomson is not sufficiently acquainted with the diagnosis of diseases adjunct or pathognomonic to know always when to administer his process — There may be Calculi — Ossifications — internal abscess — Incurable tubercles in the lungs, & Schirrus — & Cancer in some internal organs in both sexes, in which it would be worse than useless, & which nothing short of a long life of experience can give. But there are cases in which I feel confident it has had better effects than any of the means commonly used; & those cases generally chronic which will appear probable from what his process palpably effects — The Lobelia first empties thoroughly that Head quarters of almost all disorders, the Stomach, & leaves left nausea than I see the intestinal canal is next rinsed out with a warm water infusion; for Thomson denounces purgatives taken into the Stomach, as making that prime organ suffer for faults not its own. When he has thus gently, but effectually cleansed the whole alimentary canal, his next object is to increase the glandular secretions, & what, in his language he calls expelling the canker by prickling the glands, which he thinks he effects by certain vegetable stimulents, as enumerated in his book. He then operates on the Capillary system of arteries & veins, principally on the surface of the body, & this he effectuates by a vapor bath — the idea of which, he tells me he first caught from the practice of the Savages. He pursues this course once — twice or thrice as the case may be; & then he thinks he can say — that he has wrought a change in the system as great as that which is made by a salivating course of mercury & avoided all its ill effects — If this be really the case it is a valuable discovery, & a great improvement for which Thomson deserves the thanks & not the abuse of the faculty. In my public Lectures during 30 years I cautioned my pupils against the very free use of mercury by reminding them, that, salvation was inflicting on the patient one very severe disease in order to overcome another, & that not unfrequently the first was more formidable than the last. Thomson uses his process in the cure of Gonorrhoea with, they tell me success, by increasing the glandular secretion. If this be so, it is certainly a great point gained; & it behoves the regular bred Physician to try it, & not to speak evil of the things <sup>he</sup> they know not.

After having devoted 60 years of my life to the study of medicine, I confess that I have learnt some valuable facts from the unlettered man in question, having been led to view the same object from a different point of view. I estimate all such discoveries by the good effects produced, & care not whether they were made by drunken Paracelsus, or the negro Quack. Every Physician knows, or ought to know that the most valuable

articles in the *Materia Medica* were found out by half crazy chemists, hunting after the Philosopher Stone, or else by people belonging to unenlightened life. I am fully of opinion that the celebrated Boerhaave, as well as my Grandson & Preceptor Dr. Fothergill would have valued the numerous experiments & Discoveries of Samuel Thomson, & would not have been afraid or ashamed to give them a fair trial.

The *Lobelia* or a variety of it was first noticed by Plumier a learned Jesuit in South America who named it in honor of his friend Dr. Lobel, but there is no account of its having been used in medicine until our countryman Thomson discovered its emetic qualities, & brought it into use, & in justice it ought to be called *Thomsonia*. The Rev. Dr. Cutler speaks of the plant in a communication made to the American Academy of Arts & Sciences, & infers that from its sensible qualities he should imagine it might be useful in medicine. We know that there are at least 4 species of *Ipueacuhana* & one of them found native in Maryland, all varying somewhat in their qualities. it may be so with the *Lobelia* & is worthy investigation. In speaking of Thomson's *Lobelia*, our Botanists, & Dispensatory compilers have most unfortunately called it the *Indian Tobacco* (*Nicotiana rustica*) which is a rank poison. If I mistake not, the United States Pharmacopoeia so denominates it, by which name it has been mentioned in this part of the Union with execration, as if the man gave the *Indian Tobacco* — yet have our elementary books, while they call Thomson an ignorant pretender, published their own ignorance.

You will easily gather my opinion from what I have rapidly written. I consider Samuel Thomson's Discoveries & experiments highly valuable in the hands of a consummate Physician, as facts capable of much improvement. Thomson, like most of us aimed to be too knowing, & instead of confirming his views & practice to a few disorders, has in his book treated of several he knows little or nothing about, as the Dysentery & some others. I consider him as having made one or two steps more than any of us in the right road, & he has opened a prospect to my eyes that will lead to much good; & hence I consider him in the light of a reformer; as much so as Paracelsus — my general idea is that his practice is best adapted to acute than to chronic Disorders. It may as you suggest be proper in the forming state of a distemper. It seems to exclude pretty much children, not but what he has many valuable remedies for worms & the like, & a peculiar theory respecting them, I consider his theory as well as his practice more valuable than the *Boerhaavian*; for Boerhaave who I knew personally had no knowledge of diseases, pulse, tongue, excretions, or in a word, diagnosis of disorders, whereas Thomson was a keen observer, & a judicious experimenter.

I know not of more than two regular Physicians <sup>in Boston</sup> who have pursued the

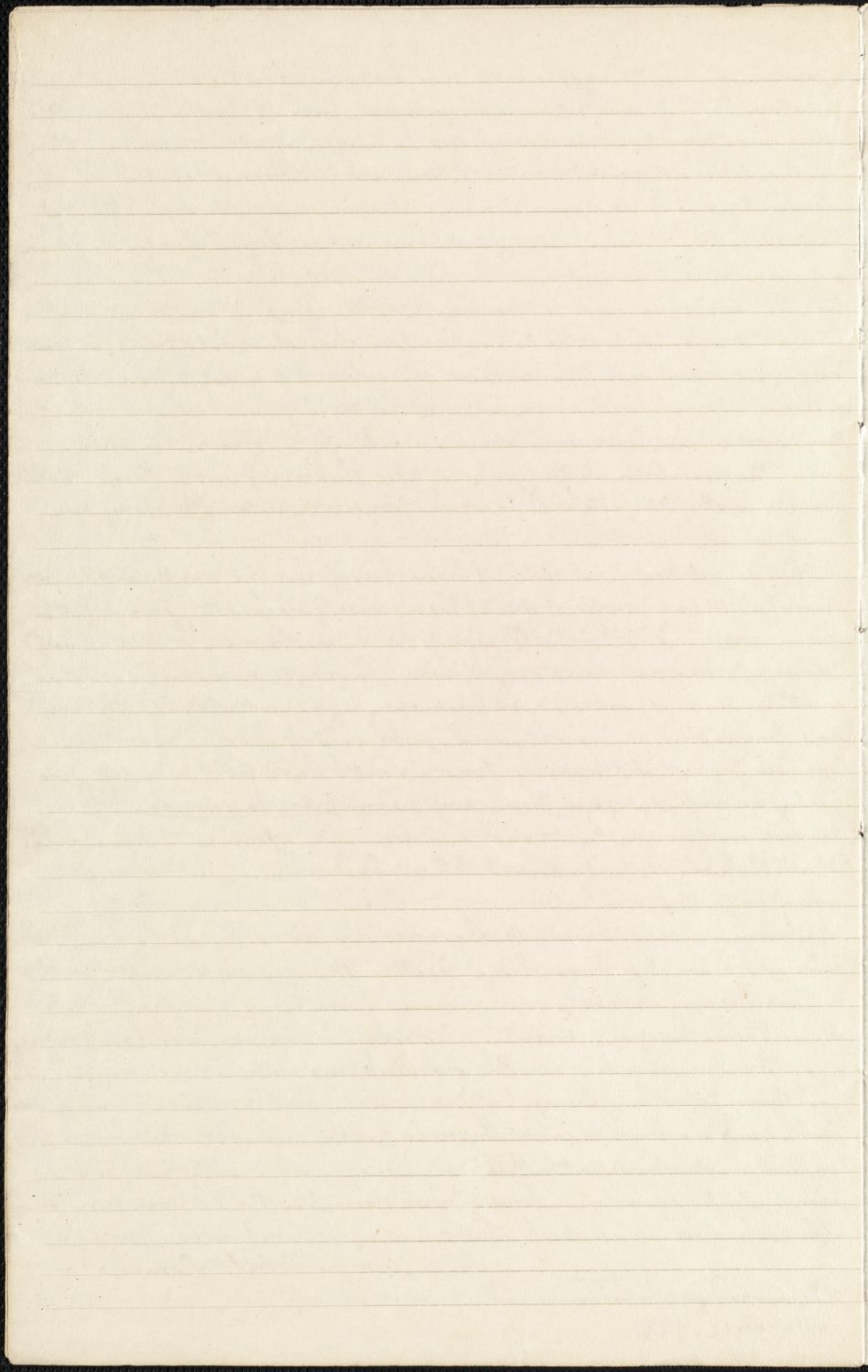
practice of these Dr Ingalls is the most distinguished for his science & extensive practice. I myself having retired many years since from all practice excepting epistolary consultation & extraordinary cases. In this case of Mr Thomson my feelings revolted at his most cruel persecution, & therefore I felt disposed to intervene my slender Argis, to shield a meritorious & unobtrusive man from destruction, & I have the satisfaction of believing that I have in some degree effected it. I know not where he is, I have not seen him for a year past, when he called upon me last, he said he was going to take a walk to the Ohio - From these particulars you may infer that he is an excentric character, but I think an honest one, & a generous one. Under these impressions I have now & then interposed a shield between him & invenomed shafts of men "prone to speak evil of those they know not" & have been abused accordingly by some of the most glittering of the profession on the banks of the Hudson; but of these I include not the worthy Dr Mitchell to whom physic & natural history are very much indebted.

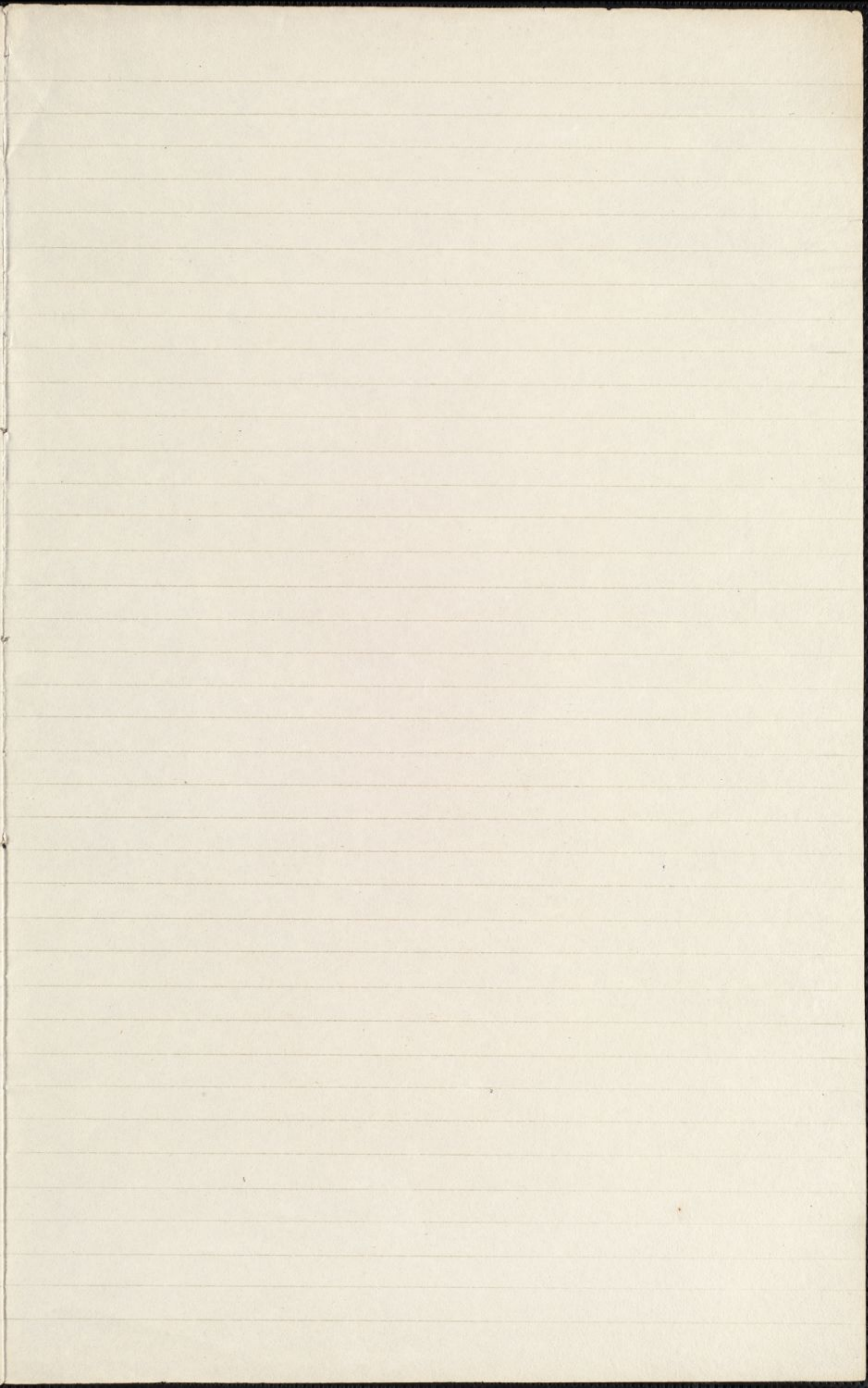
This is not the first letter I have had from the south on the question of Thomsons practice. One of them mentions having seen a letter from me to Dr Mitchell which leads me to say I was always sorry it was ever written. It was a hasty & unadvised scrawl written in a spurt of good humour, & never intended for any eye beyond his - how it came published I never knew. I guess however by one of Thomsons sons. What I said in it was not properly qualified, & you have my permission to say so. It contained a censure too broad & justly gave offence. I have seen Dr Mitchell & had several letters from him, but he never mentioned the subject.

I have never discussed the question so fully as to you, of whom I have no knowledge farther than your sensible letter, & therefore if I receive any more from your quarter, I shall refer them to you, for writing is not so easy a task as it was 20 or 30 years ago. Thomsons books like even that of Sydenhams contains sense & nonsense good things & trifling things, but enough of the first to make it impossible in the hand of a learned & candid Physician, & on this account it is that I have written thus much on the subject without considering myself a competent judge of a process which requires more time & close observation than I have ever been able to bestow upon it. I remain very respectfully yours

Benjamin Waterhouse

Cambridge Boston  
March 12. 1831





HMS  
c. 16.1