

A Sextet of Contrasting Styles

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This paper concentrates on two doctors from each of the groupings: general practitioners, physicians and surgeons, selected from my *Directory of Ulster Doctors*, published in November 2013. I have restricted the doctors chosen to those who practised mainly within Ireland and avoiding those already very well known.

The first general practitioner is **Dr John Simpson** (Fig. 1) who was born at Drumrankin, near Ballymena on 16 November 1844, the son of Edward Simpson, a farmer, and was educated at Cullybackey National School¹. He studied medicine at Queen's College, Belfast, graduated MD in 1879 with many prizes, and then practised in the Great Victoria Street area, living first at 3 Shaftesbury Square².

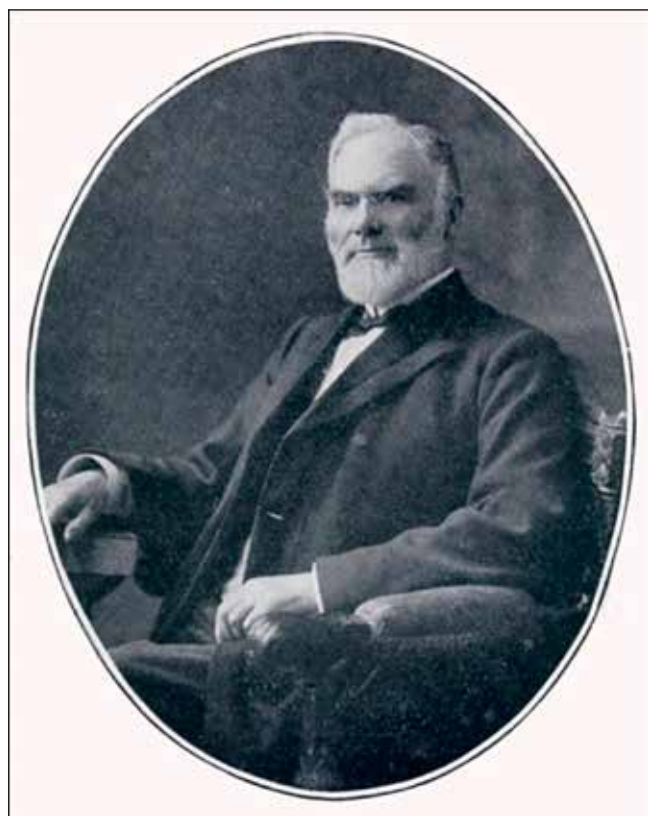


Fig 1. Dr John Simpson

He moved about 1900 to 76 Pakenham Place, where he lived for the rest of his life. This was a Victorian terrace in the Dublin Road, beside the Reformed Presbyterian church, but has now been replaced by a block of shops. Several doctors

and dentists lived there in the years before University Square became the Mecca for doctors, and this practice of giving an address as a 'terrace' rather than as a 'road' was common.

Dr Simpson was founder, with Dr Henry Purdon, of the Provident Institute for Chest Diseases in 1880, based at 116 ½ Donegall Pass. The first circular issued stated that "As there is now no Institution in Belfast, with the exception of the Workhouse Hospital, to which persons ill with consumption can apply for treatment, the Promoters consider that they are fulfilling a public duty in thus endeavouring to meet a want in the medical organisation of Belfast." When it eventually became the Forster Green Hospital he was physician to the hospital for many years³.

His photographs show an unusually smart appearance in top hat and frock coat and often in a horse-drawn brougham but in spite of this rather 'grand' look he was very popular with his patients. His descendant, Dr John B. Martin, has an old ceramic pot in which is a pencilled note of thanks from a patient. Dr Simpson has noted the date 10 September 1897 and it reads "I hope you will not be offended at me sending you this old relic as I have had to sell my house, as my husband has left me. I remembered that you care for this sort of old delph so I take the liberty of sending this to you. Mrs Burns, 3 Wellwood Street." (Dr John B. Martin, personal communication).

His grandson John Simpson Martin remembered him as a kindly old man who loved children, but at the same time he apparently had a fairly casual attitude to his family. One story goes that he was called by letter to see his sister Louisa at Antrim because she had fallen and broken her leg. He wrote back to say that he would come at the weekend. Eventually when he was 'able to go' he wrote to arrange for a pony and trap to meet him at the station. So, he finally arrived three weeks after the leg was broken. He settled it between sand bags, the method at the time, told her to lie in this manner for some weeks more, and went on his way (Dr John S. Logan, personal communication).

Dr Simpson married Elizabeth Crickard on 14 February 1871 and was father of John Edward (Jack) Simpson^{3,4}. He was

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educated at the R.B.A.I. ("Inst") and also studied medicine at Queen's College, graduating in 1903. He practised first in Belfast, then in London and after this because of ill health took the post of Assistant Surgeon on the SS *Titanic*. This involved responsibility for the 2nd and 3rd class passengers and he now has undying fame, along with Thomas Andrews, having drowned on her sinking on 14 April 1912. A plaque was erected to their memory in the Common Hall of Inst in 1913, and this has recently been replaced in the new hall. The Latin quotation from Virgil reads "*Fortunati ambo nulla dies unquam memori vos eximet aevo*" (Fortunate are you both. No day will ever erase you from the memory of time)⁵.

Dr Simpson senior died at his home of 76 Pakenham Place on 11 January 1922 and was buried, with other family members, in Bangor Abbey graveyard.⁷



Fig 2. Dr George Matthew Thompson

Dr George Matthew Thompson (Fig. 2) certainly exemplified many of the characteristics of the ideal rural general practitioner and fortunately we have a warm personal description of his work by his daughter Frances, who succeeded him in the practice.⁹ He was born in June 1859 at Windmill Farm, Coagh, county Tyrone¹⁰, the youngest of seven children of William George Thompson, a linen manufacturer in Coagh. He was educated at Methodist College, Belfast, and went on to study Arts at Queen's College, Galway, presumably simply for a year's higher education, as he was still only 16. He then moved to Queen's College, Belfast, a transfer not uncommon at the time, especially between the three provincial Irish colleges of Belfast, Cork and Galway. He took his final qualifications in medicine, surgery and obstetrics in 1881. After a spell as ship's doctor, the following year, at the early age of 20, he was appointed Medical Officer to the village of Bellaghy, county

Londonderry. His daughter records that "He had been there for a short time when, one day, whilst driving his horse along a narrow bog road he stopped for a chat with an old man who was standing by the roadside. As they chatted the old man looked at the youthful face of my father and exclaimed "Och doctor, ye look so young no one will have trust in ye. I'll tell you what, you'll have to grow a beard." The doctor took the old man's advice and had a beard until the day he died."⁹

Apparently he had an encyclopaedic knowledge of general medicine and kept up to date in every way possible. This was, of course, necessary as he rarely had the option of sending his patients to hospital. For instance, if a patient developed 'curvature of the spine' he would hang them up from a hook in the kitchen ceiling (there for drying food) to straighten the spine before applying a plaster jacket. Tonsils were taken out without anaesthesia, while the child was held by its mother. There was one quick snip and when one child was told what had happened she only complained "My poor wee throat!" It was not very different in Downpatrick when I was a student there in the early 1950s. I was allowed to give the child ether but it had hardly lost consciousness before Surgeon Jack Robb put in the guillotine and whipped both tonsils out. When Dr Thompson did need the help of a surgeon, perhaps for an appendectomy, they would both arrive at the patient's house and direct the headlights of their cars through the front window, to illuminate the patient lying on the kitchen table. Usually the surgeon would have brought his assistant and Dr Thompson would have to give the anaesthetic. As there were no druggists except in large towns, another side-line was for the doctor to do his own dispensing, with iron tonic, bismuth mixture, cough syrup and various colours of aspirin.

Dr Thompson was a popular and highly respected doctor and as a result his practise extended from Ballymena to Cookstown and from Randalstown to Glenshane Pass. In the earlier days before cars this meant that he needed a stable of about six horses and a pony and trap, as well as one or two grooms available at all times. There were many tales about Paddy, his driver who was a witty companion but rather fond of the bottle and his fighting made a lot of unwelcome work for the doctor. Once the motor car arrived, the doctor, of course, had to have the first in Bellaghy. Provided one had a skilled driver, this was much less demanding in terms of maintenance than transport by horse and in his old age Dr Thompson travelled round supported on a pile of cushions and hot water bottles. Apparently, on one occasion, two little boys seeing his car, rushed into the house shouting "Ma, come and see the ould man that travels round on his bed."⁹

The country doctor usually liked a prestigious house, but few houses could compete with Bellaghy Bawn, a Plantation fortified house on a hill with surrounding wall. His main relaxation was farming and Dr Thompson was a very successful breeder of Dairy Shorthorn cattle. He knew all the tricks for making his bulls look their best and won prizes in both Ireland and Scotland. Arable farming for him was mainly for feeding his animals. This, of course, made good

use of the large house and outbuildings, supplementing a G.P.'s meagre remuneration. I had two medical cousins; one, Dr Arthur Martin of Dungiven who was also a noted cattle breeder, and passed the practice on to one son and the farm to another. The other cousin, Dr James McMaster of Broughshane, was a successful breeder and trainer of racehorses.

Dr Thompson married twice and had nine children⁹, three by his first wife and six by his second, many of whom had an association with medicine:-

1. Anne Ellison Thompson, botanist, married Dr Robert Spence.
2. Dr Mary Georgina Thompson, DBE, married Prof Donald Blacklock, MD.
3. William George Thompson, surgeon probationer, was severely injured in the Battle of Jutland.
4. Dr Frances Courtenay Thompson, married Dr Edward Thomas and took over the practice.
5. Arthur Courtenay Thompson studied medicine but entered the linen business.
6. Joseph Matthew Thompson founded the motor firm of Thompson-Reid.
7. Dr Edith Eileen Thompson married Dr Alfred Moore of Kings Road, Belfast.
8. Rose Duff Thompson became matron of the Presbyterian College in Belfast.
9. Doreen Thompson was a school-teacher and married the Rev James D.B. McAlister.

Dr Thompson died on 19 May 1944, at the age of 84 and is buried in Bellaghy Graveyard (gravestone inscription).

The first of my Ulster physicians is one who achieved fame and fortune in Dublin, **Sir James Murray** (fig.3). He was born at Culnady near Maghera in 1788 and studied medicine at Edinburgh and Dublin, qualifying in both Colleges of Surgeons in 1807 and 1808^{11,12}. His first post was as apothecary to the Belfast Fever Hospital in 1807-8 and he then set up business in High Street, Belfast. At this stage he was patronised by the Marquis of Donegall who also lived in High Street, in the old Belfast Castle. He married Margaret Sharrock in 1809, the daughter of a clock-maker and brewer of Downpatrick, and bought a plot in 1813 in Clifton Street Graveyard for the burial of two of his young children¹³. After her death he married in 1848, Mary Allen.

From the outset he concentrated on producing a soluble form of magnesia. He had invented Milk of Magnesia by 1817 when he was only 29 and was wise enough to patent the process and start manufacturing the product commercially. Epsom Salts (magnesium sulphate) had long been known as a laxative, but Murray's Fluid Magnesia (magnesium

carbonate) which was flavoured with lemon, was much more pleasant and was marketed as an antacid, mild laxative and treatment for gout. This continued to be a successful enterprise for the rest of his life. As a bi-product of this work he was able to produce fertilizers, notably what is now called superphosphate, which he was also able to patent¹⁴. He took the Edinburgh MD in 1829 with a thesis (in Latin, as usual) on dilution and temperature¹⁵.



Fig 3. Sir James Murray

In 1831 he was appointed resident physician to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, the Marquis of Anglesey and moved to Dublin. He travelled abroad with the Marquis, sending home enthusiastic letters about the historical and architectural glories of Florence and Rome. Over a ten year period he was physician to three Lords Lieutenant. He remained on the staff of two Dublin institutions, the Netterville Dispensary and the Anglesey Lying-In Hospital, and also had the post of Inspector of Anatomy for Ireland, until his retirement in 1857. He was a Catholic but was sufficiently successful in the competitive Dublin medical scene to receive an honorary MD from Trinity in 1832 and was knighted in 1833. At the same time he kept up his contacts with Belfast and his name appears on a presentation gold box to Dr Samuel S. Thomson of the Belfast General Hospital in 1834. He gave lectures in Dublin and Belfast on chemical fertilisers but probably the main reason for visits to Belfast were his commercial chemical interests. Certainly trials and demonstrations of the value of fertilisers were conducted in both Dublin and Belfast and he published a book on the subject. In the end this side of his

work was less rewarding financially and his main competitor, John Bennet Lawes, bought his patent in 1846^{11,14}.

Other lines of study included papers on cholera and the curative value of electricity, but one has to say that his theories on these subjects seem now rather eccentric. He died in Dublin on 8 December 1871 and was buried in Glasnevin, receiving glowing tributes in the Dublin and Belfast newspapers, as well as in the *Lancet*.¹⁶ He also has a long entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*¹¹ and for his work on fertilisers and Milk of Magnesia he should be remembered as both an original mind and benefactor of humanity. He is now commemorated by a Blue Plaque on the site of his original shop, at the junction of High Street and Bridge Street.



Fig 4. Dr Robert Esler

The first great historian of the Ulster Medical Society, **Dr Robert Esler** (fig.4), is unusual for the diversity of his career¹⁷. He was born in the townland of Lisnamurrigan near Broughshane in 1836, the eldest son of Robert Esler, described as a farmer and mill-owner, but this was presumably a small water mill attached to the farm. He was educated at the little village school in Lisnamurrigan, and then worked for a time as a woollen draper. In May 1860 he married his first wife, Elizabeth Beattie, and shortly afterwards followed the impulse of so many young Irishmen and headed off to the gold-fields of Australia to seek his fortune. His eldest son, Alfred was born in Australia, going into medical practice there, and his first wife died there. We have no real detail of his activities in Australia but his obituary states that he had a successful business career and the proceeds started him on

his future education and medical career, when he came back home in 1870. He entered Queen's College to study medicine in 1872 at the mature age of 36 and qualified as MD MCh Dip Mid in 1876¹⁸.

He now settled down to practice medicine in Belfast and moved into 64 Pakenham Place about 25 years before Dr John Simpson moved into this terrace.¹⁹ In the same year, as well as his medical practice in the town, he was appointed visiting physician to the Ulster Hospital for Children and Women which was at that time in Chichester Street. His most notable contribution in Belfast was probably his involvement with the Ulster Medical Society as member, contributor to the *Transactions*, historian and President in 1887-8.^{20,21} In addition, his papers on the Early History of Medicine in Belfast and a Sketch of the Ulster Medical Society and its Presidents, published in 1875-6, are very useful continuations to Andrew Malcolm's *History of the Belfast General Hospital* of 1851. He also wrote a *Guide to Belfast* for the first visit of the British Medical Association to the city in 1884. In these papers he records the success of medicine in his lifetime with the development of anaesthesia and antiseptics, and most recently the performance of five successful ovariectomies by members of the Society in 1886.

He remarried in 1883 Erminda Rentoul, who was daughter of the Rev Alexander Rentoul, minister of Ray Presbyterian Church, county Donegal, and also an Edinburgh MD. They had two further medical sons, Dr Alexander Esler who joined the RAMC, and Dr Maberly Esler who succeeded his father in his practice and as police surgeon.¹⁷

His views on the place of women in medicine were certainly ahead of some of his colleagues. He says:- "They are entering the ranks of the profession; they will soon knock at the door of our medical societies. The time is past for discussing the capacity and adaptability of women for medical studies. It is said that women are fascinated by gold and men by beauty. The latter assertion is admitted, but regarding the former, I think there are other attractions than gain for women in the medical calling. Women make patient nurses; they will be quick observers and safe prescribers."²² This may sound rather patronising, but it must be remembered that the first women were only admitted to Queen's College as medical students in 1889 and they were blocked from receiving prizes and scholarships until 1896.²³

Surprisingly, although having a large private practice and the esteem and affection of his colleagues and patients, he felt that he needed to be on the move again. So, the year after his finished his term as President of the Ulster Medical Society (1889), he moved to London. Again, he threw himself into work outside his medical practice, and was soon appointed surgeon to the P Division of the Metropolitan Police Force and in due course became Chairman of the London (South) Police Surgeons' Association and of the Local Panel Committee. He lived on in the South of England for thirty years, retaining his faculties to the last, but kept his Ulster links and returned in 1912 to sign the Covenant. His best

years were probably those in Belfast and Sir William Whitla wrote a glowing obituary when he died on 23 July 1919 at Herne Bay, Kent.²⁴ In his will he left £100 for a prize for the scholars in his old village school at Lisnamurrigan and he asked to be buried “dressed in an evening suit as if in life”. He was to be buried in any cemetery that his executors might select, with a plain marble headstone bearing his name and the following

“Peace, peace, he is not dead, he doth not sleep
He hath awakened from the dream of life”.²⁵



Fig 5. Mr James Moore

Turning now to the surgeons, **James Moore** (fig. 5) is unusual in being also a skilled painter. He was born in Belfast on 29 March 1819, the son of Dr David Moore, a naval surgeon who had served with Nelson, married Margarita Medin from the Italian island of Curzula, and was later attending surgeon to the Belfast Fever Hospital. James was educated at Inst and studied art here in his teens, before starting his medical course in Edinburgh in 1837. During his period as a student in Belfast he had a drawing made of him by Felice Piccione.²⁶

He obtained the degree of MD in 1842 for a thesis entitled “Can acquired habits and physical configuration of the body descend to the offspring?”²⁷ He must have continued with his art studies as a medical student for the great Professor Syme of Edinburgh asked him to illustrate his *Principles of Surgery*, published in 1842 and refers to him as his “friend and pupil”. He passed his MRCS examination in London in the same year and spent some time studying in London and Paris, before returning home to Belfast in 1843. He immediately began work in the district or domiciliary side of the General Hospital

and soon he was working with the physician, Dr Andrew Malcolm in this field. Both appreciated the opportunity this gave to students to see patients and treat conditions that they could not see in hospital wards.²⁸

He was appointed attending surgeon to the Belfast Fever Hospital in 1846 (the same year as Andrew Malcolm was appointed physician) and remained in post until 1877. His appointment coincided with the first use of anaesthetics for a surgical operation in Boston in 1846 and he notes in his Annual Report of the Hospital five years later that chloroform was being used now “in almost every case of surgical operation” without any unpleasant results.²⁹ He notes that in this year, 501 surgical patients were admitted and 26 “capital” (or major) surgical operations were carried out. He also notes that he viewed his ward as a school where students in surgery could see the nature and treatment of severe accidents and diseases and learn manual skills. He appears to have been a skilled surgeon since he attracted medical students from far outside Belfast to watch his operations.

His eminence as a surgeon was never in doubt and was recognised by Sir Charles Bell and Professor Goodsir of Edinburgh and Dr Thomas Reade of Belfast, who all left him their cases of surgical instruments.³⁰ In the wider world of Belfast medicine, he joined the Belfast Medical Society in 1845 and became President of what was by then the Belfast Medical and Pathological Society, in 1857. These two societies amalgamated in 1862 to form the Ulster Medical Society and he was its President for the season 1865-6.

It is perhaps worth stressing all this detail of his surgical career since he is better known outside medical circles as a water-colourist. The Ulster Museum has over four hundred of his drawings and paintings, landscapes in the style of Andrew Nichol, but it is mainly sketches rather than finished paintings that have reached the Ulster Museum. He painted a scene at the Maze Races as well as the Giant’s Ring and the Kempe Stones at Dundonald, and landscapes all over Ireland and on several holidays to the continent. He exhibited frequently in Dublin and was made an honorary member of the Royal Hibernian Academy.²⁶

He was apparently a humane man who sheltered under a rough and brusque exterior, which tended to intimidate people who did not know him. There is a story told by his friend John Vinycomb: that on the occasion of a bazaar in aid of the Royal Hospital, he was induced to paint a series of a dozen small water-colours, the sale of which he hoped would realise at least a guinea each. The lady at whose stall they were sold and at whose instigation he undertook to paint them, met him afterwards and, radiant at the success of her sale, gushingly said to him “Oh, Mr Moore, I have sold all your pretty pictures, and I got half a crown apiece for them!” As John Vinycomb says “I don’t know what he said to the lady, but his expressions to me were pretty rough.”³¹

He married Thomasina McDonnell and, dying on 28 October 1883, is buried in the McDonnell grave in Knockbreda Churchyard.³²



Fig 6. Mr Howard Stevenson

Our later surgeon is **Howard Stevenson** (fig. 6), notable as a brilliant operator and part of one of the many dynasties of Ulster doctors who followed a similar career. He was born on 15 April 1876 in Railway Street, Lisburn, son of Alexander Stevenson, merchant.³³ Before outlining Howard Stevenson's career, one should record that he had two medical brothers; Gerald Hoey Stevenson, born in 1882, qualified at Queen's College in 1904, joined the RAMC in 1906 and served in both World Wars, winning the DSO in 1917; Alexander Leslie Stevenson, born in 1883, qualified at Queen's in 1907, joined the RAMC in 1908 and also served in both World Wars.³⁴ Howard was educated at Methodist College and Queen's College, graduating BA in 1897 and MB BCh in 1900. After graduating he worked briefly in Ventnor, Isle of Wight, and the Middlesex Hospital, London, but completing his training in the Royal Victoria Hospital before taking his FRCSI in 1904. He then worked in junior posts as surgeon and anaesthetist in the Ulster, Throne and RVH, before being appointed assistant surgeon to the RVH in 1911 and attending surgeon in 1918.³⁵ This period of waiting of 18 years for a bright and highly regarded young doctor was not unusual. Sir Ian Fraser spent 25 years in various posts before being appointed consultant and even allowing for his 6 years at the War, the promotion ladder must have been pretty frustrating. Once established in the post of attending surgeon, Howard Stevenson's talents were widely recognised and he was elected President of the Ulster Medical Society in 1929-30 and Chairman of the RVH medical staff in 1940-1.

The notable features of Mr Howard Stevenson's surgery are described in the *Lancet* obituary "... abdominal surgery where his sureness of touch and economy of manoeuvre gave him a phenomenal operating speed without any suggestion of haste. He will long be gratefully remembered by all who worked with him for his unfailing courtesy and consideration of staff and patients alike."³⁶

TABLE 1:

Medical MPs of Queen's University (from Moody and Beckett (1959)³⁷)

Westminster (1 seat)	
Sir William Whitla	1918-23
Prof Thomas Sinclair	1923-40
<u>Stormont</u> (4 seats)	
Dr John Campbell	1921-29
Prof Robert James Johnstone	1921-38
Dr Hugh Smith Morrison	1921-29
Dr Arthur Brownlow Mitchell	1935-42
Mr Howard Stevenson	1938-49
Dr William Lyle	1942-45
Dr Frederick McSorley	1945-48
Mr Samuel Thompson Irwin	1948-50
Dr Eileen Mary Hickey	1949-50

(Parliamentary representation abolished in 1950)

About the time Howard Stevenson was thinking of retiring, at the age of 62, he decided to stand for election as Unionist MP for Queen's University in the Northern Ireland Parliament. He was elected and was Chairman of the Select Committee on Health Services in 1943 and 1944. It is an indication of the prominence of the medical faculty in University life that in the period of university representation in Parliament (1918-50) two of the three Westminster MPs were doctors (Sir William Whitla and Prof Thomas Sinclair) and nine of the sixteen Stormont members (Dr John Campbell, Prof R.J. Johnstone, Dr Hugh Morrison, Mr A.B. Mitchell, Mr Howard Stevenson, Dr William Lyle, Dr Fred McSorley, Mr S.T. Irwin and Dr Eileen Hickey).³⁷ Howard Stevenson resigned his seat in 1949. He died following a road traffic accident on 16 March 1950.

Howard had married in 1919 Charlotte Liddell, daughter of Sir Robert Liddell, linen manufacturer, and had children including Howard Morris Stevenson, a thoracic and cardiac surgeon, who shared the speed and surgical skill of his father. Terry Fulton at the time of Morris's RVH oration, brought out the interesting fact that they were one of nine families who had a father and son on the staff of the Royal Victoria Hospital and one might add that Morris Stevenson's son Howard Stevenson is a plastic surgeon in Dundee.

Similar interesting material could easily be found in many other groups of six Ulster doctors, for both within and outside medicine most of us find excitement if only we are able to

specialise or research in the fields of our choice. Some the greatest figures from Hans Sloane and William Drennan to Jack Kyle have managed to combine medical practice with their wider interests and I suppose that is what makes them truly interesting for us.

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The author has no conflict of interest.

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