What is meant by ‘rheumatism’?

The term ‘rheumatoid arthritis’ is now established in the nosology of rheumatic diseases. Its origin can be found in the following statement by the London physician Alfred Baring Garrod, who proposed this term as an alternative to ‘rheumatic gout’, which was previously used. ‘Although unwilling to add to the number of names, I cannot help expressing a desire that one may be found for the disease under consideration, not implying any necessary relation to gout or rheumatism. Shortly before the first edition of the present work was published, about 1858, I proposed the term Rheumatoid Arthritis, by which I wish to imply an inflammatory affection of the joints, not unlike rheumatism in some of its characters, but differing materially in its pathology. As was clearly stated in a comparative table in Garrod’s book, rheumatic gout is a pathological condition that is now known as rheumatic fever. Therefore, rheumatoid arthritis was then introduced as a new nosographical term associating two ideas: first, that of a comparison with another nosological entity established in the XVIth century; and second, that of a joint-like swelling. After more than a century, today the term rheumatoid arthritis remains a useful tool, despite some dismemberment as a result of advances in biology, pathology, and medical imaging. The term ‘rheumatism’ was first used by Archibald, the son of A B Garrod: ‘For this name, which, was introduced by my father, I have naturally a particular respect, but I am fully alive to its shortcomings. It was certainly an advance upon the term “rheumatic gout”, which it superseded in the middle of the last century, but this in turn has lost its utility, and might be superseded by a better name if such could meet with general acceptance.’ Archibald Garrod also said that one of the questions ‘is whether there be any one specific disease to which the name rheumatoid arthritis may be applied, or whether the condition so called is rather a syndrome ...’. Nevertheless the persistence of the term illustrates the words of the philosopher John Locke: ‘...language had yet a further improvement in the use of general terms, whereby one word was made to mark a multitude of particular existences ...’. In parallel, it is interesting to note that the term rheumatism had already been proposed in 1826 by the physician Louis-André Gossé of Geneva: ‘Although far away as I may be from a pedantic neologism, I was forced nevertheless to create new terms to generalise my ideas; the term Rheumatism (*) seemed to me a convenient term to assemble this group of diseases with which I am dealing, of which the commonest example is Rheumatism ...’. The asterisked footnote indicated, with Gossé’s characteristic, a caution, fluctus and from oidos, similar to.

In fact, unlike A B Garrod, Gossé used rheumatism with the general meaning of aligic fluxion not restricted to the joints, a meaning in line with that used by Galen, which today remains in popular use, parallel with the nosographical nomenclature. He emphasised the relationship of such congestive changes with cold (particularly a rapid passage from warm to cold) and with the nervous system. His ‘ideas’ of rheumatism were the basis of an extension of the above mechanisms to a large panoply of conditions including practically all those which are painful, congestive, or inflammatory. The study was obscure, as regards today’s nosology, and was obviously expressed in the words of its day, before knowledge of the aetiological data that were revealed by advances in bacteriology. However, it foretold the modern investigations into the diffuse role of non-specific vascular disturbances and of neurotransmitters in neurogenic inflammation.

While each of these meanings of rheumatoid had its own logic, a long term follow through confirms that the term had a useful place in the progress of an already established nosography, though it was abandoned when it served only to extend an already unclear pathogenic picture. At a time when modern biology is providing a plethora of basic information in rheumatology, the origin of the term rheumatoid arthritis must not be forgotten. In extinctions such as rheumatoid nodules or rheumatoid factor, the adjective rheumatoid is elliptical, as the changes which are thus named cannot be directly explained by the etymology, but are indirectly related to it through a nosological entity.