

Reminiscences of medical teaching and teachers in New York : an address introductory to a course of lectures, at the College of Physicians and Surgeons, New York, session of 1850-51 / by Valentine Mott.

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AN

ADDRESS

INTRODUCTORY TO A

COURSE OF LECTURES,

AT THE

COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS AND SURGEONS,

New York.

SESSION OF 1850—51.

BY

VALENTINE MOTT, M. D.

EMERITUS PROFESSOR OF OPERATIVE SURGERY AND SURGICAL ANATOMY,

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 1850.

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1850.

An Address.

GENTLEMEN :

Before I proceed to deliver the remarks introductory to the few lectures which I am to deliver to you, I cannot refrain from expressing the satisfaction I feel in once again addressing the class of the College of Physicians and Surgeons, as one of its Professors, nor from acknowledging the kindness of my present Colleagues, of the Trustees and Regents, who have so willingly conferred upon me the rank which enables me to assume the responsible duty of instructing you. A considerable period of time has elapsed since my last connection with its Faculty ceased ; and if, during that time, I have been placed in the position of an opponent to its success, believe me to be candid in saying that I have witnessed its successful struggles against powerful competition with pleasure, and with all the interest and enthusiasm of an Alumnus, for such, almost, I am, have marked its gradual progress in usefulness, and in the esteem and favor of the profession. Among its Professors and Trustees are many of my oldest and most valued friends and pupils, and I should be callous to the best feelings of our nature, could I reflect upon my past connection with this School, and not rejoice in its prosperity, or feel pleasure in my re-association with its interests and occupations.

I have arrived, Gentlemen, at that period of life when, to look back, is more pleasant than to speculate on the future ; you, on the contrary, redolent of

the present, look on the past only as a matter of amusing contrast and idle curiosity. Intimately associated as I have been with the progress of this College—sole survivor, with one exception, of the original Faculty—sole survivor of that Faculty of Columbia College, which, merged in it, may be justly considered as its immediate predecessor, and in some sort its origin, I shall not, I trust, be charged either with senile garrulity, or personal egotism, if I occupy a portion of your time this evening with a brief notice of the early history of the Institution of which you are proud to rank yourselves as among the Alumni and Students; of some of those who accompanied me in its formation and progress; of the scenes and persons, “*quæque ipse felicissime vidi et quorum pars magna fui* ;” of the School, with which after so long an interregnum, I again happily find myself associated.

There are facts connected with the subject, which I am vain enough to think that I alone can detail—facts, which, as matters of Medical History, ought not, I think, to remain unrecorded, and which will be new to many—nay, even to most of those who now hear me, many of whom have been my pupils, a few perhaps my contemporaries, and more to whom they are novelties, even as to the very names of the *dramatis personæ*. I cannot think, then, that either to those who review the past, contrast the present, or speculate on the future, they can be devoid of interest; and I will further venture to indulge the hope that the name of him who details them, whose voice cannot, in the course of natural events, very long continue to be heard, will not detract from their intrinsic interest in the breasts of his hearers.

The patriarch who relates the scenes of our revolutionary struggle, while paying a due tribute

to the glories of a Washington, a Putman, a Gates, and a Lee, to whose genius the victory of which he boasts may be due, can tell, after all, but little of the conflicts in which he participated, save the part which he immediately played, and the leader under whom he acted. But I have never heard this called egotism, and no such charge, I trust, will be brought against me, even though I use the *ego ipse* somewhat frequently during the following remarks.

I graduated in the year 1806, a student of the Medical Faculty of Columbia College, in this city, at that time the only Medical School, and which had then existed for many years. It was originally called King's College, but at the close of the war, received the name of Columbia College, and the organization of its Medical Faculty was completed in 1792. The Faculty at the time of my attendance, was constituted as follows: The President, and Professor of Anatomy and Surgery, was Dr. Wright Post; Dr. D. Hosack occupied the chair of Materia Medica and Botany; Dr. Hamersley, that of the Institutes and Practice; Dr. Stringham, that of Chemistry; and Dr. J. R. B. Rogers, that of Midwifery and the Diseases of Women and Children.

The reputation of the two former of these gentlemen is matter of Medical History, but of all of them I shall briefly relate my personal reminiscences.

Wright Post was at that time a man of about forty years of age, tall, handsome, and of fashionable exterior, wore long whiskers and his hair powdered and turned back and tied in a queue. Those who recollect his thin worn figure in his later years, wrapped in a furred surtout, could scarcely have recognised in him the elegant gentleman of my early

days. Dr. Post had at this time attained to the very highest rank in his profession, both as a physician and surgeon, and although equalled in the extent and renown of his surgical practice by his distinguished colleague in the New York Hospital, Dr. R. S. KISSAM, he stood, perhaps, alone in its lucrative practice and in the estimation and confidence of the higher walks of society. He was unrivalled as an anatomist, a most beautiful dissector, and one of the most luminous and perspicuous teachers I have ever listened to, either at home or abroad. His manners were grave and dignified; he seldom smiled, and never trifled with the serious and responsible duties in which he was engaged, and which no man ever more solemnly respected. His delivery was precise, slow and clear, qualities inestimable in a teacher, and peculiarly adapting his instructions to the advancement of the junior portion of the class. He was one of the first American pupils (preceding Dr. Physick) of the celebrated John Hunter, of London, from whose lips and those of Mr. Shelton, he imbibed those principles of practice which he afterwards so ably and usefully applied in the course of his brilliant career. As an operator he was careful, slow and elegant, and competent to any emergency contemplated by the then existing state of Surgical Science.

Two great achievements are upon record to attest his powers. He was the first in this country to tie, successfully, on the Hunterian principle, the femoral artery for popliteal aneurism. On the second memorable occasion, I had the honor to assist him; it was a case of ligature of the subclavian artery above the clavicle, without the *scaleni* muscles, for an aneurism of the brachial, involving the axilla. The

patient came to me from New Haven, in company with an intimate professional friend of mine, the late Dr. Gilbert; the aneurism was cracked and oozing, and supported by layers of adhesive plaster, by which its rupture was prevented, and life maintained until the time of the operation. The brother of the patient, a merchant of this city, whose family Dr. Post attended, naturally preferred that he should perform the operation, as I was then quite young. To this wish I cheerfully acceded, but lost thus the chance of gaining a surgical laurel for my brow—the operation never having been performed in this country before, and but once in Europe, and then unsuccessfully, by its first projector, Mr. Ramsden, of St. Bartholomew's Hospital, London. This is now, happily, a well recognised surgical procedure, which six times I have successfully performed. In this operation, the American needle for the ligature of deep-seated arteries was first used in this city, and it belonged to me.

Dr. Post was equally eminent as a physician; his mind was well stored with clinical facts, a peculiar characteristic of the truly great practitioner. He was a calm observer and eminently practical; and for strict punctuality, and courtesy towards his juniors and a scrupulous regard for truth, was never exceeded. After a career of forty years as a Professor of Anatomy, he retired into private professional life, in which he continued active, with occasional intervals of ill health, until his death, in the sixty-fourth year of his age. He died universally esteemed, deeply regretted, and his name belongs to posterity.

I shall next pay a passing tribute to the memory of his distinguished colleague, cotemporary and medical

rival—would that I could say his friend—Dr. David Hosack. A pupil of the celebrated Bard, in this city, and abroad the favorite of Cullen, Chisholm, Blane and Gregory, no man, in his day, was more eminent for his varied learning, his luminous writings, always plausible, if not profound—and the very high standing he held, both at home and abroad, in his profession, and in the estimation of the public.

Dr. Hosack read his lectures, and no man was ever more emphatic, *impressive and instructive. His tall and bulky form, his piercing black eye, his sonorous voice, and the dignity of his bearing, stamped him at once as a remarkable man, and fully qualified him for the pre-eminence to which, as a lecturer and physician, he proudly aspired, and to which he fully attained. No one better maintained the dignity of his calling, nor preserved more completely the decorum of the lecture room, nor sustained the attention of the student. Punctual to a moment, he was most impatient of interruption after his lecture had commenced, and no one ventured to enter his room five minutes after the appointed hour, without receiving a severe and well-merited rebuke. Fixing his fierce eye sternly on the tardy student, he would invite him down lower and lower towards the desk, and then, after an awful pause, advise him to “get his buckwheat cakes a little earlier in the morning.”

For any enterprise calculated to advance the interests of the profession, or the public welfare, he was always ready; his skill as an orator and his tact for presiding, on all public occasions, was unsurpassed, and at the bedside, his intimate acquaintance with disease, his accurate diagnosis, his wonderfully quick perception and his ready resource

stamped him a practitioner of the highest class. In the decline of his life, he retired from the active duties of his profession to his beautiful country seat at Hyde Park, which he adorned with exquisite taste, and enjoyed in his retirement his favorite pursuit of horticulture, which, with the science of botany, was his greatest hobby; and while in the full possession of health, strength and intellect, neglectful of the warnings to which he had so energetically directed others, fell a victim to apoplexy, leaving behind him a reputation second to none of the luminaries of our country.

The name of Dr. Edward Miller, Professor of Practice, stands among the highest in the list of American contributors to Medical Science. His writings are voluminous. On the subject of Yellow Fever he is an eminent authority. He strongly supported the theory of Non-contagion, in direct opposition to the views of his distinguished colleague, Dr. Hosack. A report upon the health of the city, transmitted by him to the then Governor of the State, in which he developed at length his views on this and other epidemic and endemic diseases, their causes, &c. ranks as one of the ablest contributions ever made to the history of these important subjects. His *Essay on Cholera Infantum* evinces great practical and pathological sagacity; and the numerous productions of his pen, in the form of reviews and monographs, to be seen in the *New York Medical Repository*, of which, with Mitchill and Smith, he was a co-editor, are durable monuments of his talents, his industry and his fame.

He was of middle stature, very handsome, wore powder, and was singularly neat in his attire; a bachelor, and his manners were peculiarly mild and

bland, and to all he was exceedingly affable. He was, in short, a perfect gentleman, and a man of singularly pure morals. As a physician he was of high repute. His practice, if not the largest in the city, was at least unsurpassed by that of any one of his contemporaries in respectability and lucrative-ness; and his advice in counsel was anxiously sought for by those of his brethren, especially, who, at a time when Medical theory was discussed with a zeal that created a truly partizan spirit, espoused the cause which he so ably and successfully maintained. His connection with the Faculty of Columbia College was brief, and he refused to participate in the coalition of the schools. He died of some acute affection of the chest, at the age of about sixty years, leaving an enviable and enduring reputation.

Dr. James S. Stringham, though perhaps to most of you scarcely known by name, was, nevertheless, an amiable and worthy gentleman of great accomplishments. Born in New York, he graduated in Edinburgh, and was a pupil of the celebrated Black, of that city, and for the time at which he taught, a chemist of the highest order. He was a very pleasing and perspicuous lecturer, and the first teacher and professor of Medical Jurisprudence in this country. A premature death, in 1817, of disease of the heart, at St. Croix, blasted the promise given by his early years.

The Professor of Practice, Dr. Hamersley, a graduate of Edinburgh, was a man of talent, a logical and eloquent expounder of the theories of the day, but irascible in temper, eccentric in his habits and manner of teaching, and, like many other learned theorists, an indifferent practitioner: *requiescat in pace!* I well remember that on one bitter winter's

morning, in the midst of a terrible snow storm, I alone, of all the class, had awaited for half an hour, the arrival of the usually very punctual Prof. Hamersley, As I was going away in despair of his coming, I met him at the gates, battling with the storm, his arms extended before him, according to custom, and his hands clothed with enormous furred gloves. "How is the Thermometer to day," said he—his customary salutation, for the state of the atmosphere, as a cause of disease, was a great hobby of his—and then, learning that I was the only one of the class who had braved the inclemency of the weather to hear him; "Come back," said he, "and I will give *you* the lecture, as a reward for your perseverance and punctuality." This, however, I stoutly refused to allow him to do, assuring him that I could not consent selfishly to appropriate to *myself* alone, the valuable doctrines which were so well calculated to benefit the profession generally. He, I believe, was not a little disappointed, and I not a little pleased at my escape. He was an honest man.

The Obstetrical Department of the faculty of Columbia College was confided to Dr. J. R. B. Rodgers, the father of the present eminent surgeon, Dr. J. Kearny Rodgers, so many years my colleague in the New York Hospital, and now one of the Trustees of this College. In person Dr. R. was small, graceful, had a face of extreme interest, and was of very accomplished manners. He was a graduate of Edinburgh, a practitioner of eminence and peculiarly skilled in his own department. Dr. Rodgers was also a physician to the Hospital, and better clinical teachings than his have I never heard anywhere. The facts there observed by him were carefully recorded, and made from time to time the subject of

distinct clinical lectures with able comments, at his own house in Cortlandt street, where the obstetrical lectures were always delivered to a class varying from fifteen to twenty students, of whom, belonging to this city, I believe that the highly respected Drs. Manley, Jno. Neilson, and your worthy Vice President, Dr. Thomas Cock, with myself, alone remain to tell of by-gone days.

The lectures in those days were delivered in the old edifice of the College, where it now stands—then a body without wings, and which has since been remodeled. It consisted of three apartments—one for the Chemistry lectures, which the Senior class of the College attended, and well arranged for the period; one for the Theory and Practice, of very moderate size; a small Anatomical Theatre, and some smaller apartments for the Museum and dissecting rooms. *Matériel* for dissection was scarce, and could only be obtained by individual enterprise, and in many such, now happily by the existing state of things, rendered unnecessary to *your* advancement in knowlege, have I been engaged. I well remember on one occasion driving, in disguise, a cart containing eleven subjects, from the old Potter's field burying ground, sitting on the subjects, and proud enough of my trophies; but we were not always so fortunate, being on many occasions discovered and pursued, and obliged to leave our spoils behind us, with only our hard labor for our pains. One little incident of the times, also, occurs to me. A German, who had been hung, was given to the College for dissection, and with the colored porter, I went in a carriage in the evening, to get the body. My other associate was a Doc-

tor Buchanan, a Scotchman, and Professor of Obstetrics in the College, residing in the city.

On calling at his rooms to take him up, I found him arranging his pistols, and complaining of feeling very agueish, and with difficulty persuaded him to proceed. The night was cold, and on arriving on the ground, the Doctor's ague increased so rapidly and his valor oozed, like Bob Acres', in the Rivals, so freely from the tips of his fingers, that he decided to return home, begging strongly for the use of the carriage, which I peremptorily refused him. With great difficulty we exhumed the body, but then my colored associate also deserted me, declaring he could not touch the subject, on account of his having been hung. I had, therefore, to lug the body, attired in its white robes, by my own strength, to the carriage—for I had great strength in those days—and partly by force and partly by menaces, compelled the man to assist me in getting the body into the carriage—and what was still more difficult, to get in along with it, so thoroughly was he terrified. On arriving at the College, I found my valourous associate slowly recovering from his ague fit, by the aid of a strong glass of brandy toddy, and deeply lamenting his inability to assist me on the occasion.

At this time I was Demonstrator of Anatomy to Dr. Post, a fact which may account for some of my zeal in these resurrection adventures. I made gratuitously, all the dissections for the course of Anatomy and Surgery, on which latter subject, by the way, I should observe, that only twelve lectures were delivered on practical matters, and the operations not performed before the class. A strong contrast, Gentlemen, to the thorough manner in which sur-

gery is taught at the present day. As to the Museum, it was contained in two rooms, one small, for wet, and one large, for dry preparations, and was well supplied. Most of the specimens Dr. Post brought with him from Europe, and the rest were furnished by the zeal of the students and Alumni. There are even now in your Museum, a part of which is the same, specimens of my own industry in the way of minute dissection, a pursuit to which I was very partial and strongly recommend you to follow—a preparation of the nervous system in a small subject and some of the arteries and veins.

Immediately on graduating, I set out for London, in company with the late distinguished Dr. John Watts, of this city, at one time President of this Institution, with the intention of profiting by the instructions of the eminent men who at that time held the most prominent rank in the surgical profession in that great Metropolis; among whom may be named the two Clines, Sir Astley Cooper, John Abernethy, the two Blizards, and Sir Everard Home, not one of whom, I grieve to say, survives. Soon after my arrival, I entered myself as a pupil to the celebrated Sir A. Cooper, then Surgeon to Guy's Hospital, from whom I received marked private attentions and kindnesses never to be forgotten, and to whose precepts and example I owe the fondness for surgery, which, increasing with my years, has given me my present position, and which I will relinquish only with my life. Although I have ceased to practice it from necessity, I still feel for the noble art of Surgery all the love, and in its pursuit, I experience all the pleasure and interest of my earlier days.

After two years, I repaired to Edinburgh, then the great seat of Medical learning in Europe, and there re-joining Dr. Watts, who had gone thither for his degree, and in company with Dr. Gibson, of Philadelphia, now the eminent professor in the University of Pennsylvania, and perhaps others, whom I have forgotten, listened to the great lessons of Gregory, Home, Duncan, Hope, Murray, Playfair, Jamieson and the justly venerated John Thompson, the author of the best monograph yet published on Inflammation.

Furnished with a letter of protection from Dr. Jenner, whom I knew, and who assured me that it would be sufficient for my purpose, I made a fruitless attempt to be smuggled in a fishing boat to Holland, intending to walk thence to the Hague, with my pack on my back. War was then raging most fiercely between France and Great Britain, and the precautions taken by Napoleon to prevent the entrance of foreigners into France were so rigid, that my friends restrained me almost by force from my purpose, and fortunately for me, as I thereby, probably, escaped a long captivity at Verdun.

Permit me to digress for a moment. Five and thirty years elapsed before I saw again my respected friend, Sir A. Cooper. I called upon him immediately on arriving in London, but he was not at home. I purposely left no card, but called again on the following morning. I found him at home, and awaited my turn with several in an ante-room, before being ushered into his study—rather a shabby one. As I entered I walked up to him, and said, holding out my hand, “do you recollect me?” He looked at me very intently. “Do not tell me,” said he, and in a moment afterwards added, “Dr. Mott.”

The scene that followed I shall leave you to imagine. Sir A. Cooper, indeed, stood before me, but alas! how changed. He was, when I last saw him, magnificently handsome, his hair powdered, and his beard very black. Now he was infirm from gout, his hair and beard gray and dishevelled, and careless in his attire. He was now about sixty-eight years of age, and still much engaged in practice. I received much kind attention from him, and even saw him again on my second visit to England. The last time I ever saw him, he called upon me at my lodgings, and presented me with a new forceps which he had invented, for extracting calculi from the urethra, which I still retain as a memento of one who is closely associated with my earliest and most pleasant recollections. He was a polished gentleman, and his surgical reputation is engraven in indelible characters on the pages of Medical History.

On my return to New York, in the following spring, occurred, Gentlemen, an event in my life, to which I refer with much pleasure, and for alluding to which, I must ask your good-natured pardon. With the consent of the Faculty, I obtained permission from the trustees of Columbia College to deliver, in the anatomical room of the Medical School, a course of lectures and demonstrations on Operative Surgery. The course, though a *beginning* for me, was a thorough one, and the *matériel* was obtained by my own exertions. Nothing of the kind had ever before been attempted in this city: and I may, therefore, Gentlemen, justly claim to have been the first person to deliver private lectures on any medical subject, and the first to demonstrate to a class the steps of Surgical operations, as then taught and practised by the highest professional authorities.