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Eulogy

ON

JAMES MACDONALD, M. D.

LATE PHYSICIAN TO THE BLOOMINGDALE ASYLUM FOR THE INSANE; TO
THE NEW-YORK HOSPITAL, AND VISITING PHYSICIAN TO THE
LUNATIC ASYLUM AT BLACKWELL'S ISLAND.

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

NEW-YORK MEDICAL AND SURGICAL SOCIETY,

BY

JOHN A. SWETT, M. D.

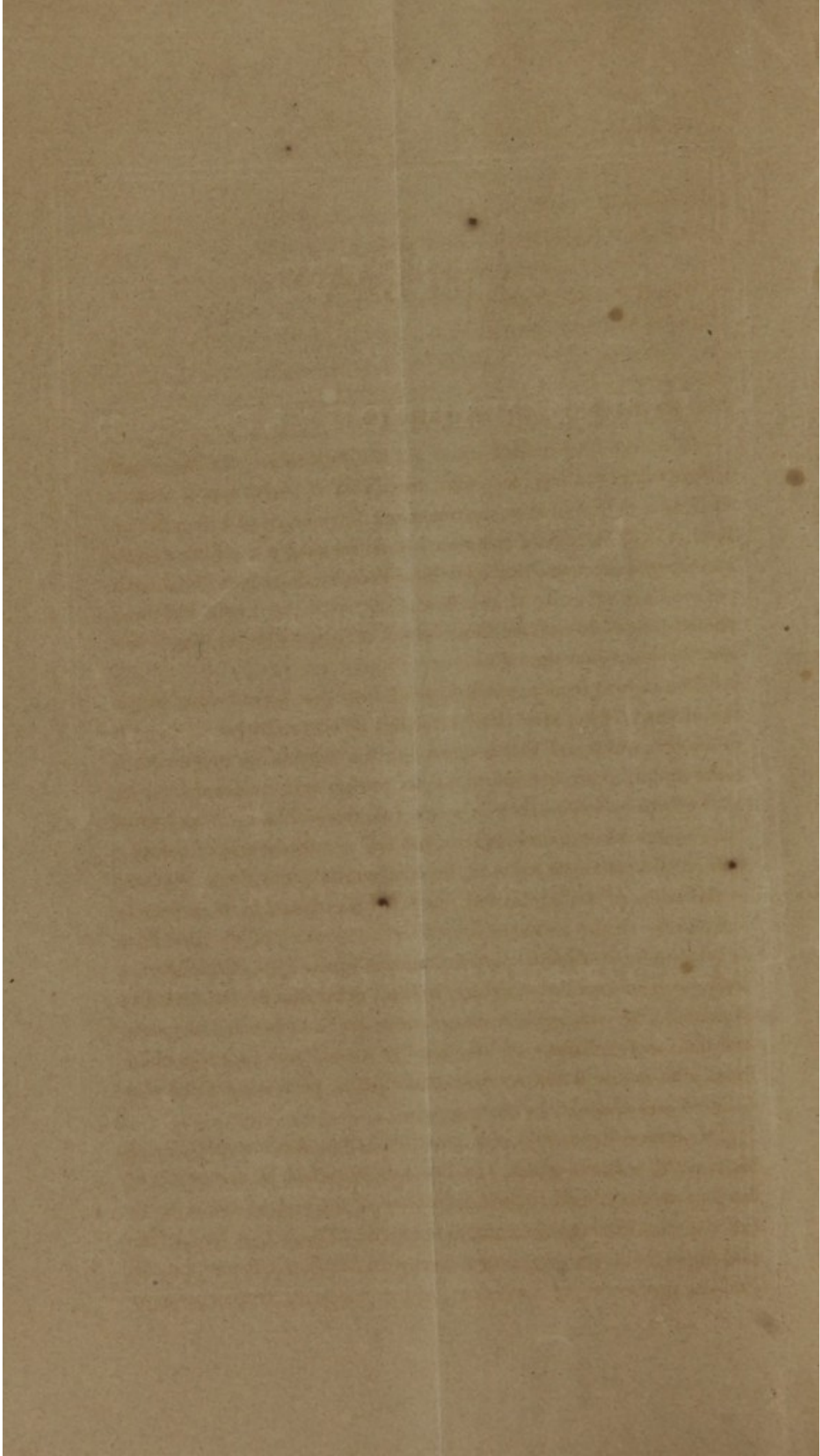
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NEW-YORK:

D. Fanshaw, Printer, 35 Ann-street, corner of Nassau.

1849.





EULOGY.

MR. PRESIDENT AND GENTLEMEN :

We have been called upon for the first time since the organization of our Society, to record the death of one of our associates. During a period of fourteen years we have enjoyed a singular immunity. While severe sickness has fallen upon some in our circle, and many doubts and anxieties have been awakened as to the issue, yet we have all escaped the final blow until the recent and unexpected loss of one of our most valued associates has at length broken the bond that united us.

The richest legacy which a good man can leave behind him is the memory of his life. To his family, no accumulation of the gifts of fortune can equal this bequest ; to his friends, no monument is more enduring or beautiful ; to his professional associates, no record of professional labor is more valuable. The recollections of our deceased friend and brother, are full of interest and of consolation to all who knew him. In his domestic relations, in society, and in the ranks of the profession, he filled the measure of usefulness and honor. In the prime of life, with the faculties of his mind fully developed by study and observation, rich in the gifts of the heart, a truly generous and noble nature, uniting great dignity and affability of manner, he was equally conspicuous and admired in the public and the social relations of life, equally trusted and appreciated by those who required his services, and by the profession which was honored and elevated by his example.

Dr. James Macdonald was descended from the Scottish Clan of Macdonald, a name which has become historical in the annals of the past century, both for the exhibition of the highest moral worth and the most distinguished public services. His father, Dr. Archibald Macdonald, emigrated to America in childhood, where he studied the profession of medicine. After practicing as a surgeon in



the British army, he finally settled at White Plains, in this State, where he continued the practice of his profession with distinguished success until his death, in the year 1813.

James Macdonald, at the time of the death of his father, was only thirteen years of age, but his education was carefully superintended by an excellent and devoted mother. It was intended that he should follow a mercantile pursuit; but his early predilections carried him, in opposition to the wishes of nearly all his friends, into the profession of medicine.

In the year 1821 he commenced the study of his profession in his native village, but afterwards entered the office of the late Dr. Hosack, of this city. He received the degree of Doctor of Medicine from the College of Physicians and Surgeons in New-York in the year 1825.

At this time the office of Resident Physician of the Bloomingdale Asylum was vacant, then a subordinate situation, usually occupied by a young member of the profession, acting under the direction of the visiting physician, who was a practitioner in the city, and who visited the Institution at stated intervals. Dr. Macdonald at once applied for the situation, and although just entering the ranks of the profession, without experience, and without many friends, his frankness and intelligence made so favorable an impression on the Governors of the Institution, that he received the appointment, although actively opposed by two rival candidates, supported by powerful friends.

This flattering success fixed the future direction of Dr. Macdonald's studies, to which his excellent qualities so eminently adapted him. He entered upon the study of mental diseases with great enthusiasm, and so great was the confidence reposed in him, that the medical responsibility of the Institution was soon almost wholly in his hands. He continued to discharge his responsible duties with the greatest fidelity and success until the year 1830, when he resigned and commenced the practice of his profession in this city.

His separation, however, from the Institution in which his professional career had commenced so honorably to himself, was but temporary. The following year the Governors of the Hospital proposed to send him abroad, for the purpose of visiting the asylums

for the insane in Europe, that such improvements might be introduced into the Institution at Bloomingdale as the visit might suggest, and with the intention of placing him at the head of that institution after his return.

He sailed for England in June, 1831, and remained abroad about sixteen months. During this period he visited the different asylums for the insane in England and on the Continent, devoting his time almost exclusively to the great objects of his voyage. On his return he entered at once upon his duties as physician to the Bloomingdale Institution, and assumed the whole medical responsibility connected with its management. Eminently qualified by natural gifts, with a considerable share of personal experience before leaving home on his mission, full of zeal and of tact in the acquisition of such knowledge as is really practical, it will easily be understood that Dr. Macdonald entered upon his new duties, not only qualified to discharge them with the greatest success, but that he was destined to a still higher honor, that of becoming an authority and a counsellor to his profession. And such was the natural consequence of his position and of his acquirements, he was soon regarded, not only as the excellent physician of a large public institution, but as the first authority on mental diseases within the reach of his medical brethren in this city. At this time, indeed, his engagements did not allow him the liberty of a consultation practice, but in later life his reputation established at Bloomingdale, was not forgotten.

In the year 1837, Dr. Macdonald, having fulfilled his engagements with the Governors of the Bloomingdale Asylum resigned his situation in that Institution, much to the regret of all connected with it. The Governors, in accepting his resignation, expressed to him "the gratification they felt at the great success which for many years had attended his treatment of the insane patients, and assured him that they held in just estimation the amiable and gentlemanly deportment which had always characterised him during their long intercourse."

Immediately after leaving the Bloomingdale Asylum Dr. Macdonald re-commenced the general practice of his profession in this city, and in May, the following year, was married to Miss Eliza H.

Miller, daughter of Sylvanus Miller, Esq.; the same year he was elected one of the Attending Physicians of the New-York Hospital.

Although now favorably situated for the general practice of his profession, yet the long direction of his mind to that department for which he was so eminently qualified, did not allow him to remain satisfied with a different sphere of action. A long cherished design of establishing, in connection with his brother, Mr. Allan Macdonald, a private institution for the insane, was carried into execution after an interval of about three years. For this purpose two houses, agreeably situated on Murray Hill, in the suburbs of the city, were selected, but the rapid spread of our population soon rendered this situation no longer available. Fortunately, an excellent opportunity for a change of residence soon presented itself. The elegant and spacious mansion of the late Chancellor Sandford, at Flushing, was purchased, and in May, 1846, the Institution was permanently located in this new situation.

Since this period, gentlemen, we have enjoyed the annual pleasure of a visit to the institution, at one of the regular meetings of the Society. Year after year we have watched the progress of those improvements which have at length rendered Sandford Hall probably the finest private asylum in the country, and, perhaps equal to any in the world. In addition to the natural advantages of the situation, the original erection of the building could hardly have been better adapted to the purposes to which it was afterwards to be applied. What the hand of chance first so well erected, the hand of skill and of good taste soon admirably adapted. Beauty, neatness, comfort, threw their enchanting influences over the spot and left nothing to be desired.

In this Institution, so admirably adapted to its object, Dr. Macdonald now seemed permanently established. No one could doubt its success, and a long career of usefulness seemed promised to the auspicious enterprise. But such was not the decree of Providence.

The symptoms of an ordinary bronchitis had attended Dr. Macdonald during the month of April last, but his general health was not affected, and his spirits were excellent. On the morning of the first of May he was suddenly attacked by a chill, which was soon

followed by symptoms of pleuritis. No alarm was felt for his situation until the third day, when he was visited by Dr. Buck, and on the succeeding day by Dr. Johnston. On the fourth day, his physicians thought him free from danger, but on the following day, the symptoms again assumed an unfavorable aspect. Dr. Macdonald himself expressed the opinion, with gentle firmness, to his wife, that he should not recover. He said that, but for her sake and that of his children, he would choose death rather than life,—that he was resigned to either event, having long endeavored to keep the idea of his death constantly in view. He enjoined upon his wife a religious education for his children, and begged her to cherish in their hearts the thought of their father. On the following day mental hallucinations, which had been occasionally present in slight degree, became more decided, and he, who had so often combated them in others, now felt their influence. Death was evidently near at hand. Extreme restlessness ensued, with a constant desire to get up, and then immediately to return to bed. Death indeed occurred while making an effort to rise, and, as was said “to return home.”

A post-mortem examination revealed the existence of a double pneumonia with pleuritis.

On Tuesday, the 8th of May, the funeral took place. Considering the very unfavorable state of the weather, the attendance was large, both from the city and the neighborhood. The sad interest felt in the event by the inhabitants of Flushing was exhibited by the closing of the stores, and by the sorrow depicted on every countenance. The domestics in Dr. Macdonald's employment piously decked the coffin with flowers, and, with tears, insisted on bearing the body to the grave. Many of our most eminent physicians and most distinguished men surrounded the grave as the last rites of sepulture were performed, and many more were at least present in thought and feeling who could not enjoy the melancholy satisfaction of assisting at the last sad offices of friendship and respect.

As a member of this Society, Dr. Macdonald was unsurpassed in his interest for its welfare and prosperity. During his membership he communicated several valuable papers on mental diseases, and

often interested us by the detail of important cases. He was evidently looked upon by us all as our authority in his special department of the profession. In January, 1843, he was elected our President, and all will remember the urbanity with which he presided at our meetings. After his removal from the city, he still continued to exhibit his interest in our meetings, by an attendance more regular than could have been expected from one who lived so far from us. On many an evening his cheerful voice would greet us, and every year his open hospitality received us. Our visit to Flushing was always looked forward to by us as a holiday, and, amid the flowers and fruits of the summer season, our professional cases and duties seemed to occupy a secondary place.

In establishing a private asylum for the insane Dr. Macdonald did not forget the unfortunate poor, but still extended to them the benefit of his experience and advice. As early as the year 1834, when the Corporation of this city were about erecting a public asylum for the insane at Blackwell's Island, he furnished plans for the buildings, and prepared, for their use, an essay on the construction and management of hospitals for the insane. In the year 1847 he was appointed one of the visiting physicians of the Asylum at Blackwell's Island, and labored diligently to improve its condition. It was, especially, by his exertions that a library of about 1,200 volumes was collected for the use of the Institution.

It was the happy union of many excellent qualities that constituted the great charm of Dr. Macdonald's character. His intellectual powers were solid, rather than brilliant, but fully capable of sustaining him in the difficult investigations connected with his peculiar branch of study. His mind was practical and more decided to what was useful than to what was new and striking. He was alive, however, to all the great medical improvements of the day. His opinion was always respected, but his advice still more valued; for every one who knew him felt that the highest object of his ambition was to do good and to improve the condition of those committed to his charge. His moral qualities have seldom been surpassed. Pure and high minded in all the relations of life, devoted to his duties, frank and cordial in his professional intercourse, unpretending in his opinions, always ready to communicate

what he knew, and to listen with respect to the sentiments of others, he walked among us without an enemy. Professional jealousies did not reach him,—his success was regarded as a public benefit, and adding new honor to the profession he adorned. Cut off in the prime of life, and when just entering upon a new field of exertion for the benefit of his fellow men, with a young family growing up about him, and needing his care; surrounded by friends who honored him—with so much to live for—we could hardly realise his abrupt departure from life. But his example is left to us, and a feeling of pride mingles with our sorrow as, we remember his honorable career.

