

Biographical memoir of Thomas Spencer, M.D., professor of the theory and practice of medicine, &c; : read before the Medical Society of the State of New-York, February 2d, 1858 / by Sylvester D. Willard.

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WILLARD (S.D.)

R. D. Dunlison
with reports of S. D. Willard

BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIR

OF

THOMAS SPENCER, M. D.,

PROFESSOR OF THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF MEDICINE, &c.

READ BEFORE THE

MEDICAL SOCIETY OF THE STATE OF NEW-YORK,

FEBRUARY 2d, 1858.

BY SYLVESTER D. WILLARD, M. D.

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MEMOIR.

“As weary worn-out winds expire,
Or night-dews fall gently to the ground,
So calm his exit.”

The year just closed has borne away two of the members of this Society, each of whom has received its highest honors.

I regret that the preparation of this biographical sketch of one of them, (under a resolution which requires here suitable notice of such events,) had not finally devolved upon some gentleman, whose intimate acquaintance and association would have enabled him to present a still more faithful outline of the life and character, of our deceased fellow-member.

Thomas Spencer was born in the town of Great Barrington, Berkshire county, Massachusetts, on the 22d October, 1793.

His father, Eliphalet Spencer, was a native of Connecticut. His occupation was that of a millwright. He was a man of more than ordinary intellectual strength and physical energy. Imbued with the spirit of patriotism, he served during the revolutionary war in the Connecticut regiment, and fought at the battle of Saratoga, and witnessed the surrender of Burgoyne.

He had four sons. The eldest, Eliphalet M., was a minister in the Presbyterian church, and died in Jamestown, New-York, in 1856.

Ichabod S. was the second. He was an active, energetic lawyer, and passed with rapid strides to eminence. He was adjutant under Brigadier General Collins, and served in the war of 1814. He died in Canastota, at the age of seventy-seven, on the 16th January, 1857.

The third son was Joshua A. Spencer, who studied law with his brother. He was a gentleman of literary attainments, and acquired great distinction in his profession as an eloquent advocate and profound jurist. In 1845 he was a member of the State Senate. He died in Utica at the age of seventy-seven, on the 28th April, 1857. These were all self-educated men.

Thomas was the youngest son. At the age of eleven years his father removed to Lenox, Madison county, New-York, a town containing only three frame houses,—Canastota, within its limits, being an Indian village of the Oneida tribe. Here Tom Spencer and the Indian boys, all of nearly the same color, joined in plays and sports on terms of undisputed equality.

At the age of nine, Tom had acquired the elements of arithmetic under the instruction of his brother Joshua. In 1806, he had the advantage of three months' schooling for the purpose of studying English grammar, and never forgot the mortification of being outstripped in the study, by one of the school girls somewhat older than himself.

His father, in the winter, organized a little evening school for the benefit of his own and his neighbors' children, and his eldest son, Eliphalet, aided him in instructing them. Pine splinters supplied the light by which these humble but important steps in the path of knowledge were taken, and their smoke curled aloft through the bark roof and between the crevices of a "log cabin," over clear heads and strong hearts. Before the 22d of October, which brought Tom to the age of fifteen, he had taught the common school in the neighborhood for three months, requiring each urchin to sit erect on hard benches, after the manner of tutoring in those times, and allowing each one the greatest liberty, and joining them in their sports after the hours of his obliged gravity had passed.

At the age of eighteen, he was instructed in the art of surveying by his brother, Gen. Ichabod Spencer, who was just then embarking in the profession of law, and who accordingly left this part of his business to his younger brother Tom. About the same time he commenced the study of medicine with Dr. Dix of

Delphi. By his business in surveying, and by school teaching, he was enabled to provide for himself the means of pursuing his professional studies. In the winter of 1814 and '15, he attended a course of medical lectures at the college of Physicians and Surgeons for the Western District, located at Fairfield, in this State, and in the ensuing spring he received a license to practise, from the Medical Society of the county of Herkimer.

He at once engaged in the practice of medicine and surgery in the town of Lenox, and very shortly his business extended into the towns and counties surrounding. He was elected to the several offices of the Medical Society of the county of Madison, and was also chosen its delegate to the State Medical Society.

In 1820 he attended a second course of lectures at the Medical College in Fairfield, and having received the degree of Doctor of Medicine, he resumed his labors in the village of Canastota. He early attained a high degree of reputation as both physician and surgeon, and performed a great amount of labor with an ardent zeal and untiring perseverance.

In 1824, Dr. Spencer was elected to the Assembly of the Legislature of this State, and attended its three sessions during that year, it being the last year that the Presidential Electors were chosen by that body. He was a leading member of the House, and took an active part in its debates.

In 1832, he was elected President of this Society, and was re-elected the succeeding year. The cholera having prevailed for the first time on the western continent during that year, and having elicited intense interest not only in the profession, but with the public also, he made it the subject of his address at the next annual meeting of this body.

It is an article of one hundred and twenty-five octavo pages; the history of the disease, symptoms, appearances on dissection, analysis of the blood, pathology, its non-contagious character, &c, are discussed with great ability, exhibiting throughout a familiarity with all its phases, such as can be gained only by an experienced and minutely careful observer.

The work is comprehensive; the experience of distinguished physicians is exhibited; comparisons of the disease, as it appeared in the several sections of the State, instituted, and his treatment illustrated by monographs of cases.

It is perhaps its rigid minuteness that gives to it great practical importance. It evinces that the writer had before his mind clear and definite views of his subject.

In the winter of 1832-3, Dr. Spencer attended a course of lectures at the University of Pennsylvania, going occasionally to the lectures of the Jefferson Medical College, then in its infancy. His article on cholera was written in Philadelphia in ten days, just preparatory to its delivery in this city. It was respectfully reviewed and noticed in the Cincinnati, Philadelphia and other medical journals of the day. In a letter written to Dr. Spencer by Dr. H. H. Childs, Professor of the Theory and Practice of Medicine in the Berkshire Medical College, so recently as August, 1852, he says: "Your publication on cholera in 1833, gave me much light, and contained more that was true and valuable in practice than any of the numerous articles of that period."

The subject of his next annual address is Dysentery. This paper is unpretending in style, but is strictly practicable in its nature.

He says in the treatment of this disease, "My own observation has not furnished me with the evidence of the great utility awarded by medical writers to the use of calomel as a cathartic in the early stage of dysentery, as it prevails in this climate." This opinion is more generally sustained at the present day than it was twenty years ago.

It was during the session of this Society in 1834, that the Hon. John C. Spencer, late Secretary of War, (not a relative of the subject of this sketch) then a trustee of Geneva College, made proposal to Drs. Spencer and Morgan to found a Medical College under the University powers of Geneva College. This was accomplished, and the first course of lectures was delivered in the spring of 1835, to twenty-two students, Dr. Spencer filling the professorial chair of Theory and Practice of Medicine. Drs.

Edward Cutbush, John G. Morgan, Willard Parker and Charles B. Coventry, occupying the other professorships.

This professorship he continued to occupy for fifteen years, and he bent his whole energy to build up, give character to, and sustain the Institution. Through his agency large endowments were obtained for the literary as also for the medical department, and a fine building erected, and ample appliances provided for the latter. To him more than to any person is due the credit of the early, successful, and flourishing condition of this Institution. He removed to Geneva in order that he might be more convenient to the college, and where for many years he engaged in active professional duties, and enjoyed a high degree of reputation as a teacher and practitioner.

Dr. Spencer made a brief journey to Europe. He reached Havre on the first day of January, 1836, and proceeded at once to Paris. Although early old in mental toil and physical labors, in his feelings, "nature had kept him still a child;" and the elasticity of his youth was renewed upon his introduction to the old world. Through the influence of a kind friend, he found a home with that distinguished Christian philanthropist, the Rev. Frederick Monod, from whom, and from his brother, a physician of eminence, the Doctor received many grateful attentions. He began at once the labors of the winter with great zeal. Unacquainted, however, with the language, he felt severely the hindrance thus occasioned to the opportunities which the French capital affords to the man of science. With characteristic industry he devoted himself to its acquisition, and was soon enabled to read and understand it, but not to speak it fluently. He availed with eagerness the opportunities for visiting the hospitals and museums, and of enlarging the field of his observation in every direction. Especially he made it a point to hear the eminent lecturers of the day. First among these was ORFILA, who combined the attractions of a world-wide reputation, with a fine elocution and a noble presence, and whose amphitheatre was daily crowded with an ardent and eager audience of young men from many nations.

Although he gave himself almost wholly to his studies while in Paris, he made some valuable acquaintances, and among these the aged Mons. Michaud, author of "Sylva Americana." He entered but little into social life, but was once entertained at a dinner of his professional brethren. Leaving Paris in the spring, he passed the month of May in London, visiting objects of general interest, but never losing sight of things of professional moment.

In Edinburgh he enjoyed the hospitality of Dr. Mackintosh, and of that distinguished physician and philosopher, Dr. Abercrombie, at both of whose homes he was welcomed. He undoubtedly derived an additional pleasure from the society of Dr. Mackintosh on account of his great interest in the subject of cholera, and from a correspondence of their views in relation to its theory and treatment. In Edinburgh he formed several important professional acquaintances, and received polite attention from Professor Jamieson, of the University.

He made a delightful summer tour through the Highlands of Scotland, and his mind grasped the grand and the beautiful in the features of the country, and revived and appreciated the stories and romance with which it abounds.

He visited the hospitals of Glasgow and Dublin, and sailing from Liverpool, reached New York about the last of July.*

During the course of 1844 and 1845, at the Geneva College, Dr. Spencer delivered several lectures on Animal Heat, and they were subsequently published. The book received favorable notice by many of medical students in this country and Europe. The London and Edinburgh Medical Review, one of the leading medical journals of the age, quoted more than half the book under the head of reviews. The St. Louis Journal thus notices the "Vital Chemistry or Animal Heat," as published by Dr. Spencer. "Guided by the brilliant lights of chemistry, thousands are now treading the labyrinth (of the chemistry of life) which the Doctor has passed. And his false steps, if he has made any, will be recorded in the history of their discoveries."

* I am indebted to Mr. Edmund Dwight of New York city, Dr. Spencer's travelling companion, for an account of this tour abroad; and to Dr. John Staats, of Geneva, an attached friend of Doctor Spencer, for the perusal of letters, &c.

In 1847 Dr. Spencer was appointed Surgeon of the Tenth Regiment of New York and New Jersey Volunteers, commanded by the gallant Colonel Temple of Albany, and served for nearly one year and a half on the northern line of the army, which was in command of Generals Taylor and Wool.

At Matamoras he organized a field hospital, and brought everything in connexion with it, its appliances and appurtenances to a great degree of perfection. In a matter so under his own control, he doubtless felt a just pride, and he was gratified in hearing the Quarter Master General, who had been in the service about forty years, (Henry Whiting,) say to General Taylor, Col. Temple and their officers, that he had never seen a field hospital with anything like the comforts for the sick, as in that appertaining to the tenth regiment.

Soon after his return from Mexico, Dr. Spencer settled at Syracuse, but removed shortly to Milwaukie, in order to be near the Rush Medical College, Chicago, where he received the appointment of Professor of Theory and Practice of Medicine. After delivering a single course of lectures there, during the winter of 1849 and '50, he was induced, on account of ill health, to resign the position, and return to Syracuse. The Board of Trustees, however, elected him Emeritus Professor.

At Syracuse he once more entered upon the duties of his profession, and soon was occupied with a large range of consultation practice; often going to Geneva, Canastota, and to towns intervening, and adjoining his former residences.

At the meeting of this society in 1853, he read a paper on "The Atomic Theory of Life and Vital Heat," as published, occupying about seventy pages. The object of this paper, is to illustrate "why vegetable life may slumber for three thousand years, amidst the winding sheets of the Egyptian mummy, or be buried as seeds since the flood, a hundred feet beneath the earth's surface, and yet sprout into seedling, being by the same law of vital heat which imparts warmth to man."

The atomic theory is demonstrated under the propositions, 1st: That the alternate formation and cumbustions of atoms of wood

build up, hold up, heat up, and vitalize creation. And 2d : That common salt, water, iron and coal, contain the six primary elements whose chemico-vital interchanges produce the formation and transformation of wood and water for the generation and regulation of all vital heat, vegetable and animal.

The Philadelphia Medical and Surgical Journal says : " We have always been dissatisfied with the explanations of respiration, and the production of animal heat, promulgated by Liebig, and felt that something more was necessary to clear away the obscurity which hangs over these great processes. Dr. Spencer has taken up the subject where Liebig left off."

It is an elaborate and prolix writing, on an abstruse subject, the investigation of which was attended by laborious experiments, careful analysis, and patient study. Ambitious hopes were based upon the success which should attend the promulgation of this new theory, but they were never fully realized, and many scientific men still regard its value as equivocal:

Dr. Spencer relinquished his business in Syracuse to accept a professorship in the Philadelphia College of Medicine, about 1852, and accordingly removed to that city, where he continued to reside until the period of his death, which took place on the 30th of May, 1857, he being in his sixty-fifth year.

His disease was pneumonia. His illness continued for twelve days, fatal symptoms having developed themselves on the eighth day. The conviction that he must die was succeeded by perfect calmness and fortitude. He gave directions relative to his business and sent messages to his friends with undisturbed deliberation, and when his two attending physicians assured him of the hopelessness of his case, with his customary self-reliance he dictated several prescriptions for himself.

He was a member of the Presbyterian church in Geneva, and afterwards in Philadelphia. His attendance upon the services of the sanctuary on the Sabbath was faithful, and also upon the weekly lecture and meetings for prayer, where he occasionally took part in the exercises. On his death-bed he had " no rap-

tures," but "a confirmed faith in the Christian religion and an abiding trust in God." Such were his own words.

Dr. Spencer was methodical in the division of his time, and the first and last hours of each day were habitually consecrated to devotional exercises. He was possessed of an affectionate faith, with childlike meekness and simplicity.

I am assured that the genuineness of his piety was undoubted, even by those who differed widely from him in opinions on secular matters.

Dr. Spencer was about six feet in height, with a strong frame, a bronzed complexion, a high forehead, and keen black eyes. He had a habitual disregard for his personal appearance. The mantle he wore in Paris was the same thread-worn cloak that had served him by day and night in his laborious practice in Canastota, and his clumsy india-rubber shoes, the special horror of Parisians, were in admirable keeping with his whole garb, which told the story of a plain, hard-working, practical man; yet in whatever company he might be, his fine forehead and brilliant eye everywhere commanded the deference which men seldom fail to render to *declared intellect*.

In his manners he was at times so stern as to appear repulsive, and hence he occasionally produced unfavorable impressions; yet beneath this stern exterior beat a heart full of keen sensibilities and generous impulses, and though often reserved and unsocial, he was easily approached.

Dr. Spencer was an honorary member of the Kentucky Medical Society, and also of the Philadelphia Medical Society.

The following estimate of Dr. Spencer's character, unbiassed by any feelings of professional rivalry on the one hand, or any zeal that might over estimate, on the other, is from the pen of a distinguished citizen of Geneva.

"The prime elements of his character, and which struck all who knew him, were his eager, restless, indomitable energy, which never tired, and his determined will or purpose. It was always

the same, ever pressing, unswerving energetic will; and with his large experience of men and things, and his strong mental faculties in other respects, they made him a powerful man. An end proposed and his attention excited and fastened on it, it was never forgotten or lost sight of, and was pursued as long as the hope for its attainment existed, and indeed, after hope would have been abandoned by others.

“His treatment of disease was decided and energetic; a course determined upon and it was not readily changed. His examination of a patient was rapid, and his remedy when selected was steadily persisted in.

“He apparently looked upon a patient, not as a suffering fellow being, but as an exhibition of some new form of disease, or a new instance of a well known one. He did not evince sympathy in his manners. There was nothing of the nurse about him. His entrance into the sick room was abrupt, his questions and examinations rapid, and his departure sudden.” However much he might have revolved a case and its aspects in his mind, in the latter part of his professional life he did not seemingly bestow much thought upon his cases. “The trouble with Dr. Spencer,” said a lady, “is to get him to think your illness is *a case*. Once get him to think it is *a case*, and he is infallible.” “In other words, arouse his attention, present him an obstacle to overcome, let him see that there is a difficulty to be met and conquered, excite his will and his energy, and you have a man able to cope with whatever may stand in his way.” This may apply to him after he had passed the meridian of his life, and was troubled by many cares. Doubtless his great reputation was achieved by bending his mind upon his patients alone.

He had a marked capacity for arriving at a clear diagnosis, and in obscure cases he sometimes resorted to novel methods to aid his decisions; these he occasionally narrated with great humor. He one day visited a patient who had been for many months chiefly confined to his bed. His physicians had pronounced his disease dyspepsia. Said the doctor, “my first prescription was a drive with me in my buggy, to which the patient demurred—said ‘he had not driven for months, and the weather

(which was then cold November) was altogether too severe for him to venture out of doors.' He yielded, however, and was driven over a rough road for half or three-quarters of a mile."

"How did your patient bear it?" asked a friend. "Very well, after he got over his fright, and found that it was not going to kill him." "But why did you resort to such a remedy?" "I had two reasons for it," said the doctor; "I wished to give the man a little of what he did not seem to have had for a long time, and that was *pure air*; and I thought the rough road would develop inflammation in the stomach if it existed."

Dr. Spencer was a man of genius and strong intellect; he had the faculty of concentrating his thoughts upon a single subject, and of holding them to a point, abstracted from every other, for a great length of time. With this mental disposition, he investigated, and analyzed, and sought for a reason in everything that claimed his consideration. He had also that indefatigable industry which is a "bar to force with groaning labor the stubborn lock of learning." Through his whole life he was a devoted student, and was in the habit of making copious notes of his cases and bedside observations. These were frequently written in hours that should have been devoted to rest.

As a physician he was discriminating and candid; as a teacher he was unostentatious and patient, his instructions were simple and practical; as a writer he was usually clear and vigorous, and he filled his several professorships with efficiency.

Dr. Spencer possessed great self-reliance, and could move alone in any enterprise that he desired to execute, as confidently as if supported by a host of friends. This trait of his character was clearly exhibited in his last hours by the coolness with which he prescribed for himself, after his case was regarded as beyond recovery.

In a notice so extended, it might be thought an omission to neglect an allusion to a subject that engrossed a large amount of his attention and time for several years. I refer to the controversy between Dr. Spencer and Geneva College, in relation to

the Medical department to corporate powers. This controversy culminated into a prolonged litigation, in which he spent a vast amount of labor in the preparation of papers and pamphlets. Engrossed in this subject, he doubtless in a great degree neglected the business of his profession. It was prosecuted on his part with such a determined spirit, that he incurred the imputation of mental alienation. Had he conceded some points, he would have unquestionably saved much of his popularity, and averted the cause of misfortunes and sorrows which followed. He yielded a point readily when convinced by reason, but unless so convinced he held it with an unflinching tenacity.

Dr. Spencer left two sons. The elder, T. Rush, is a physician, residing in Wisconsin. The younger, Champlin, is an accomplished lawyer in Chicago.

Where perseverance and industry are united, as in the character of Dr. Spencer, and the whole energy is bent in a single direction, a man must achieve much in the period of an ordinary life.

See in yonder "log cabin" a father in long winter evenings instructing his little boy by the smoky light of pine splinters! Behold the eminent physician presiding over a Society like this, or elucidating the principles of medical science to an eager class!

The contrast in these pictures is thrilling with a beautiful and an instructive lesson. It is a fit subject for the pencil of an artist.

Let the examples of such men—the fathers of our profession as they pass away—be ever cherished, to inspire the timid and to encourage the faltering.