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GEORGE W. GUTHRIE

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A GENTLEMAN of the old school, a surgeon of distinction, a cultivated leader of his community, a staunch and devoted friend. In this mental picture, still so vivid, of Dr. George W. Guthrie, who died at Wilkes-Barre, June 1, 1915, these attributes seem to portray his character. Born in Guthrieville, Chester County, Pennsylvania, he was a descendant of Scotch Presbyterians who had emigrated and settled in Eastern Pennsylvania early in the eighteenth century. He began his career as a teacher in the Public Schools and, because of his practical experience and interest in educational problems, he became a director of the school board, in which capacity he served for forty years and impressed his leadership on the reorganization and direction of the Public School System. In his twenty-fifth year he first turned his attention to medicine, beginning his studies under the old preceptor system and graduating later from the University of Pennsylvania.

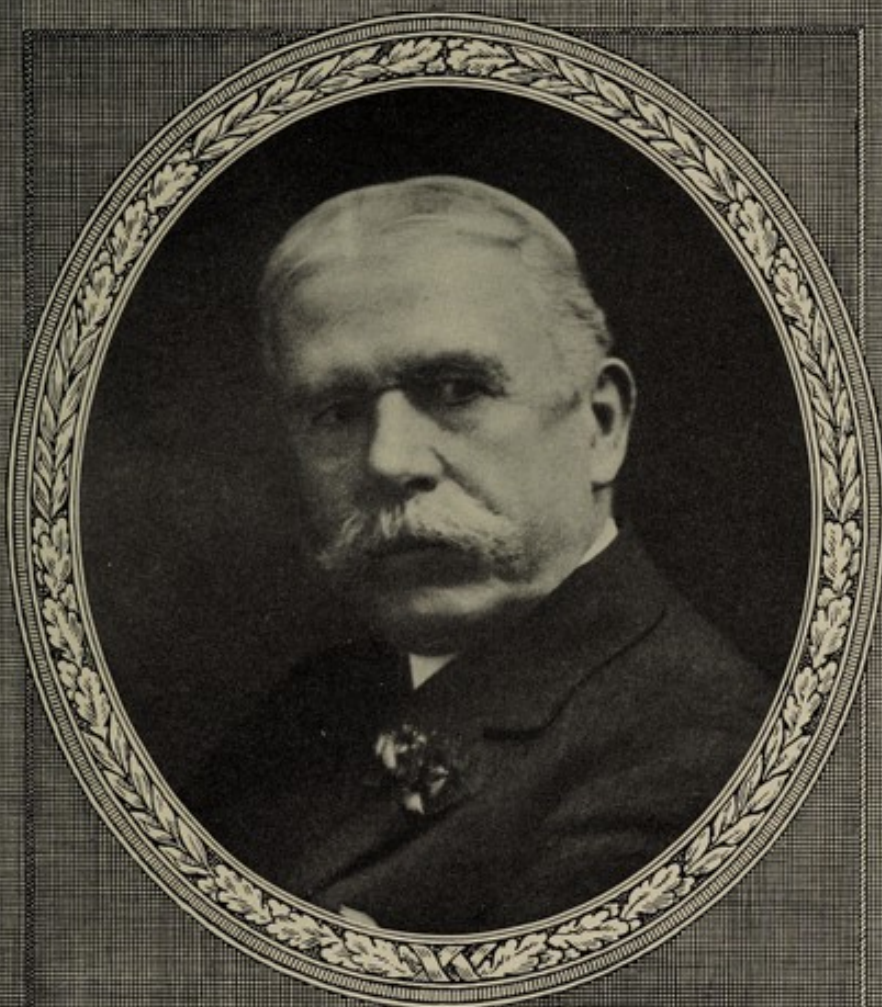
It is difficult adequately to sketch the career of the man, who, as I affectionately recall him, represented an ideal, a prototype of what seemed finest and best in the profession of medicine. It was not so much that he had attained distinction in practice, first as family physician and later as surgeon—this was recognized by the community who elected him to the staff of the Wilkes-Barre City Hospital and consulting surgeon on the staffs of hospitals in adjacent communities; it was recognized by exclusive organizations as when he was chosen a Fellow of the American Surgical Association. It was the associated attributes, attributes which round out a man no matter what his profession, which made George W. Guthrie admired, respected, and beloved. In the blood of his veins there ran a strict sense of all that was honorable in manhood. All that he said rang so true and all that he did was so untainted with selfish interests, that he soon became the confidant and friend and the leader, guide, philosopher and friend, if you choose, of his associates. He was, in fact, the dean of the medical fraternity throughout the Wyoming Valley and it was largely the reflection of his influence that in Wilkes-Barre there was during his day a very unusual group of splendid physicians and surgeons.

He recognized, as few do, his obligations to organized medicine and carried much more than his share of the responsibilities of upholding the standards and

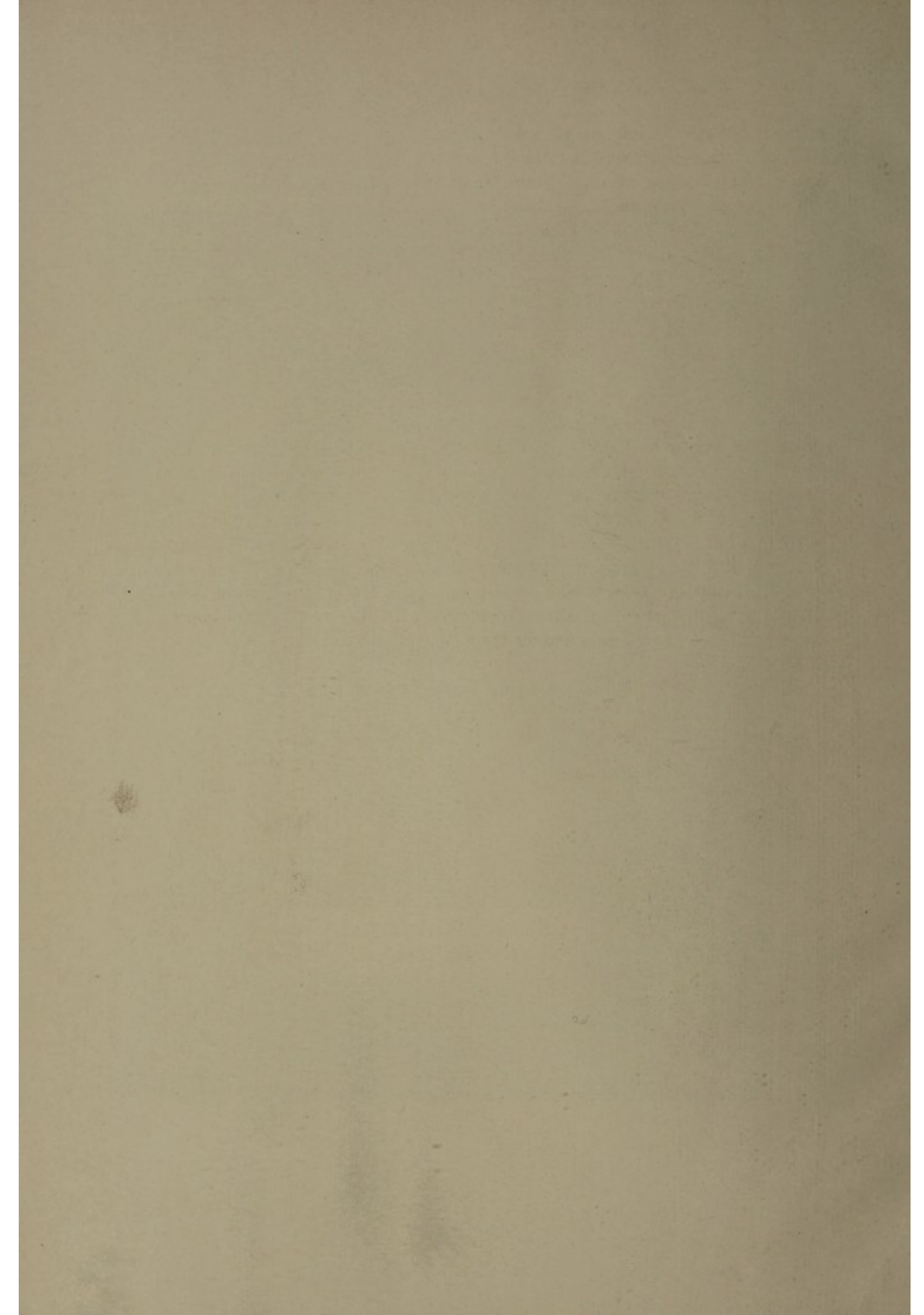
ideals of medical practice and scientific pursuits. Holding high office in city, county, and national societies, he served on committees and commissions too numerous to mention. He played an important part as a member of the House of Delegates during the years that the American Medical Association was in process of becoming the effective organization it now is; finally declining re-appointment in 1913 to become a member of its Judicial Council.

All the while he was giving of his time to his large and exacting practice, to his community obligations, and to the demands of the medical organizations with which he was allied.

He was essentially a student of medicine, and was well informed in current literature to which he was no mean contributor. In reviewing his writings one can see that not only was he abreast of the times but foresaw with a clear vision the tendencies of progressive thought. His writings were examples of good diction and there was a charm in his style, especially in his general addresses to physicians and nurses which were replete with wholesome advice. His *By-Paths of the Doctor's Life*, a charming paper written in 1904, might today be read with profit and to the betterment of many a physician's life. In 1880, at a time when Listerism was engaging the attention of surgeons throughout this country and Europe, he presented his "Essay on Antiseptic Surgery" to the Luzerne County Medical Society. It was a carefully prepared, instructive paper with expressions of opinions from the leading surgeons of the country. At this time some surgeons still doubted the "germ theory of disease," others questioned the efficacy of antiseptic treatment, placing greatest reliance upon absolute cleanliness. Guthrie preached to his fellow practitioners that, in operations of unusual gravity as in opening the peritoneal cavity and the joints, the surgeon who does not follow the exact Listerian method does not give his patient the benefit of the best resources of his profession. As long ago as 1899, many years before the employment of the trained anæsthetist, he recognized as unconscionable the habit of surgeons entrusting the administration of anæsthetics to junior members of the staff. "The custom of placing the anæsthetic in the hands of the youngest man in the operating room—often the merest tyro—is most irrational"; and "Next to the man who holds the knife is that of the one who holds the inhaler." How prophetic these commentaries! At that period he decried the practice of tinkering operations on women with neurasthentic disposition, such a sequence as nephrorrhaphy, Alexander's operation, hysteropexy, double oophorectomy in one and the same patient. He lived and practised at an interesting period in the evolution of surgery, he saw the passing of the nineteenth century and the first fifteen years of the twentieth. As the sun of the nineteenth century had almost set he wrote: "How the pulse thrills when we consider what belongs to the last hundred years. The dreams of ancient and mediæval poesy have been more than realized! Chariots and horses of fire! We have harnessed the lightning and hitched it to tens



GEORGE W. GUTHRIE
1845-1915



of thousands of chariots! Arthur's sword Excalibur! What is that to the sterilized scalpel of the surgeon! And Aladdin and his wonderful lamp are far outdone by the wizard Edison with his electric lamps and by Roentgen and his rays."

There was Guthrie the surgeon, Guthrie the leader of his medical community, Guthrie the lover of good books and poetry. He not only appreciated the broadening effect of familiarity with good literature, history, and romance, but he loved poetry. Proud of his Scotch ancestry, he revelled in the romantic history of Scotland and her great men, but, of all, Robert Burns and his poetry held first place in his heart. His conversation and friendly greetings and his more formal after-dinner speeches were given an added charm by the freedom with which he quoted at random from his favorite authors. How few there are today who could match him, none who could excel.

William James once wrote: "I am done with great things and big things, for great institutions; and I am for those tiny molecular moral forces that work from individual to individual, creeping in through the crannies of the world like so many soft rootlets or like the capillary oozing of water, but which, give them time, will *rend the hardest* monument of man's pride."¹

Thus do I conceive the influence of Guthrie's life. There were in his community no great institutions or large movements, but the tiny ripples of his influence spread, through his contacts with physicians of state and nation, over the length and breadth of the land. Thus the force of his character left its imprint for the good of his profession and for the making of a better world.

¹ William James. *The New Quest* by Rufus Jones, page 92.

