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pp 4, 6, 11

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Silas Weir Mitchell

A Personal
Impression

BY

EDWARD JACKSON

A. M., M. D., Sc. D.

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S. WEIR MITCHELL.*

**EDWARD JACKSON, M.D.,
DENVER.**

A great mountain may be better known by sketches made from different points of view than by a complete topographical map. More instructive than a formal biography may be the impressions left by a great man on the minds of those who saw him from different viewpoints. Without having had his close friendship, or much intimate contact with S. Weir Mitchell, I have been an interested observer of his career for nearly forty years, with enough of personal association to gain some individual impression.

When S. Weir Mitchell graduated in medicine at the Jefferson Medical College in 1850, his father, John Kearsley Mitchell, was its Professor of Medicine. So that aside from his own strong personality there was reason why the young medical student should have been especially noticed by his classmates. One of these, Dr. Jacob Price, who settled in West Chester, Pennsylvania, was the family doctor in my family from before my birth to the end of his life fifty years later, and in my first years of practice I saw him almost daily. Through him I first knew Weir Mitchell, and his views of nervous disease and chronic invalidism, which Dr. Price had imbibed and applied in practice. Weir Mitchell has always been to me one of

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the distinct and interesting figures among the more eminent members of our profession.

From the fragments gathered concerning his early years in practice it is clear that he made strong friends and some equally strong enemies. He was self-confident, not retiring; earnest rather than modest. Some of the animosities he aroused were based on the feeling that the young doctor's advance was too rapid, resting rather on his aggressive manners, or his father's professional and social position, than his own scientific merits. In Dr. Price he had awakened respect and confidence, rather than any warm partisan feeling.

But those who failed to see the substantial reasons for Mitchell's professional rise must have been somewhat blinded to the facts, by prejudice or antagonistic interests. Before he had been ten years out of college he had published ten important papers setting forth original observations. Four of these had appeared in the American Journal of the Medical Sciences, one of the foremost medical journals then published in the English language; and four were communications made to the Philadelphia Academy of the Natural Sciences, where he took his place among biologists whose attainments were recognized throughout the world.

These earlier papers dealt with the formation of uric acid crystals, the blood crystals of the sturgeon, the pulse in expiration and inspiration, bibliographic notes on American memoirs on physiologic

subjects, the inhalation of cinchona salts, the effects of alcohol, glycerine, and other substances on the isolated hearts of the frog, turtle and sturgeon, experiments in conjunction with Dr. William A. Hammond on the South American arrow poisons and the ordeal poison of East Africa, and the production of cataract in frogs by administration of saccharine substances. On this subject of the production of cataract, other observers have since spent years of experimental work. Römer in one series of experiments used 30,000 animal lenses. Yet in the more than fifty years since Mitchell published his paper very few facts of equal definiteness and suggestiveness have been established. In 1860 appeared his study of the venom of the rattlesnake, published by the Smithsonian Institution; the first of a series of studies of snake venoms that made him known throughout the world, and became the basis of our practical knowledge of the subject.

During these earlier years Dr. Mitchell's ambition and energy were directed toward achievements in the department of physiology. He aspired to teach this branch in one of the great medical schools. "Institutes of Medicine" the chair was called then, both in the University of Pennsylvania and in the Jefferson Medical College, the former having copied the title, I believe, from the University of Edinburgh. But in 1863 Francis Gurney Smith succeeded Samuel Jackson in the professorship at the university, and in 1868 James Aitken Meigs followed Robley

Dunglison at Jefferson. Dr. Mitchell had failed to attain the coveted position.

It is said that Emerson's pet ambition was to be a college professor of philosophy, and to elaborate a system of philosophy. It is hard to suppose that either Emerson or Mitchell would have developed to the same greatness, or would have done equally valuable service to mankind, if he had achieved the college position that he coveted. When, a quarter of a century later, Mitchell became a trustee in the University of Pennsylvania, his friends applied to him the words that the witch in "Macbeth" addressed to Banquo: "Thou shalt get kings though thou be none," and from that time no other influence has been equal to his in the choosing of professors in that great medical school. Of this others can speak better than I: Reichert, whom I knew in college, and who became professor of physiology seven years after he graduated; Osler, brought from Montreal; de Schweinitz, who left the university for a few years, to be called back again; and others. But the parallel with Banquo did not strictly hold. A dozen years after that, when the Philadelphia Polyclinic was struggling to establish itself on a sound basis as a school of clinical medicine, Mitchell accepted a professorship in it, and with his teaching opened to our students the great clinical opportunities of the Infirmary of Nervous Diseases.

With the outbreak of the Civil War Dr. Mitchell entered upon a new field of ac-

tivity. He had already been associated with Dr. Wm. A. Hammond in joint investigations of the South American arrow poisons. Hammond became surgeon general of the United States Army, and Mitchell found in the Turner's Lane Hospital in Philadelphia the opportunity he was prepared to utilize in the study of injuries of the nerves. His work, partly in conjunction with two other able young men, W. W. Keen and G. R. Morehouse, soon brought him distinction in an important practical field. Neurology as we know it today had not then been differentiated from the general practice of medicine. He soon became the consultant of many physicians regarding nervous diseases, which were beginning to attract attention as particularly common and important among the class of Americans who are best able to pay a consultant's fee and to carry his reputation abroad.

There came into his practice a large number of nervous and hysterical women, a class of patients that become the despair of the family physician and the source of cynicism in the specialist. In this class of cases Dr. Mitchell scored an unusually good proportion of successes. Of course such successes are relative. Only rarely, in the recent cases, can success be complete. But to break the vicious circle and turn the patient from morbid introspection and emotion toward self-control and self-help, is a notable achievement. The importance of rest and nutrition he understood, and emphasized in a way that made the "rest-cure" synonymous with

the "Weir Mitchell treatment." But recognizing the causes that had brought about this kind of invalidism, he illustrated perhaps his own observation: that "the greater men in my art were, even in days of extreme theories, more sensible in their daily practice than in their dogmatic statements."

He believed "a nervous woman should be made to comprehend at the outset that the physician means to have his way unhampered by the subtle distinctions with which bedridden women are apt to trouble those who most desire to help them." The first step in setting free the forces of health from the morbid inhibition that binds them is to break the chains with a violence that shall leave no doubt but that something has been broken. My father used to tell of a man relieved of the illusion that he had a bottle on his nose by a sharp punch on that organ by his physician's fist. I doubt not many a patient of Weir Mitchell was started on the road to recovery by a violent gust of anger.

A characteristic case was one that had worried a friend of mine, then a young man, into calling consultation. The wife of an officer suffered severe "nervous attacks" when he was ordered away from home. On this occasion Weir Mitchell stalked into the room where the apparently unconscious woman lay, and turned and asked in his loud, harsh voice, "Doctor, what did you say was the lady's name?" "Mrs. Wiley, Dr. Mitchell." "Oh, I see; Wiley by name and wily by nature." It was her last attack. Doubt-

less this need, to present in a positive personality by strong, rough, even boorish disregard of feelings, the hard facts of life, as a first step toward getting control of a difficult situation, accounted for the absence of that feeling of personal attachment which most popular doctors inspire in some or many of their women patients. I have heard a number of Dr. Mitchell's neurasthenic patients talk of him, some by the hour. The general verdict was that he had done them good, but they thought he might have done it in a nicer, more gentlemanly way.

In 1867 Dr. Mitchell joined with certain surgeons in establishing the Philadelphia Orthopedic Hospital and Infirmary for Nervous Diseases. It was often called for short the Orthopedic Hospital. But from the beginning Dr. Mitchell was its dominating force, and it is now sometimes referred to simply as the Infirmary for Nervous Diseases. Here he did his public work and teaching. Here were largely trained the young men that he gathered around him: Sinkler, who died before him; Mills, Derecum, Morris Lewis, J. Madison Taylor, his son, John K. Mitchell, and many others. It was a striking feature of his career that he almost altogether worked with younger men, and the affectionate and respectful way in which they called him "The Old Man" was a revelation of the free and healthy character of their relation to him.

I met Dr. Mitchell most frequently in the Library of the College of Physicians. In the lean years of waiting, that followed

my removal to Philadelphia, I was fortunate in securing early admission to the college, and there spent many profitable hours. He was one of the most frequent visitors. Most afternoons that he did not go to the hospital, or often on his way there, he came in. More or less he was on business of the college, for he was the active leader in that organization for more than a quarter of a century; often he came to seek and consult some book, but sometimes to linger a little and chat as though he felt it the pleasantest place he knew to bestow his scanty idle moments.

I remember my surprise when one day he told me he had just sent to the college the last books of his medical library, except the few he was then especially consulting or reading. When I knew that library better, the value of its complete organization and arrangement, the convenience of working where any desired book was easily at hand, I understood better the wisdom of his course. From the College of Physicians he drew much of the solid satisfaction of his mature professional life; and he gave to it greatly. His library was but a start in giving. His contributions of money, and those that he secured from patients and friends, whose interest in the institution was but a feeble reflection of his own, carried it far toward the financial prosperity it now enjoys. There is the Harvey collection, with the tracing of the inscription he took from the grave of Harvey, the incunabula, the portrait he secured of Oliver Wendell Holmes, and presented with verses that

set forth in simple honesty his thought and feeling for the man with whom he will be most frequently compared, and many other material gifts. He was a Fellow of the college for fifty-seven years, and held important office in it most of that time. Not only in the magnificent main hall of its new building, named for him, in the Directory for Nurses, the S. Weir Mitchell lectures, or the entertainment fund, but in every part and custom of the college, can the informed observer find traces of Weir Mitchell.

As time went on he gained the united confidence of the older Fellows of the college. Probably the last note of dislike and jealousy toward him was heard in connection with the centennial of the college twenty-six years ago. The younger Fellows were always with him, for he was ever wisely looking forward, and had no fear of progress. In 1890 some of us wished to start in Philadelphia an ophthalmological society (now three active ophthalmologic organizations meet there each month). But we found that the older men, Norris, Harlan and Thomson, would have no part in it, unless it could be arranged under the auspices of the college. A formal section would not be considered by the governing powers. It would too violently shock established traditions. So we humbly asked that once a month the use of the smaller meeting room might be granted to Fellows interested in ophthalmology. Yet such a radical innovation as that would never have been permitted had

we not secured the support of D. Hayes Agnew, then the president of the college, and of S. Weir Mitchell, who advocated it from the floor. We got the permission for three years. At the end of that time the college adopted a by-law providing for the formal organization of sections, and immediately four sections were organized.

Mitchell's professional day was a strenuous one, even when he approached three score years and ten. I met him at his office one day near the close of his hours. He told me that his secretary had counted thirty-eight people waiting for him that morning. They filled his large reception room, and the little room that opened from it, and were sitting on the stairs all the way to the second story. He said, "All morning I have had to say to myself, 'Don't hurry, don't hurry'." Most of the people had to be sent away to come again next day. But the habit of thoroughness was so ingrained that it withstood the pressure.

At the close of the office hours his carriage was at the door and we drove to the hospital. There his assistants had prepared the cases they wished him to see, and a half dozen of the younger men were in attendance at his clinic. After an hour spent in examination of case histories, cases, and laboratory reports on them with informal discussions of these patients, he made the rounds of the hospital. After this he sat down to a very simple luncheon, regularly prepared for him there. After that he left, to see a few

patients in homes or private boarding houses, and to meet business engagements.

A recent note on his death says that to spend an evening at his house was to get away immediately from routine and the commonplace. I remember one such evening, when, by appointment, I brought a friend, a young clergyman recently from Canada and himself a talented amateur in literature. Dr. Mitchell had recently discovered Charles Leonard Moore, a Philadelphia poet of rare fancy and delicate expression, and was particularly interested in his sonnets entitled "Day Dreams." He proceeded to reveal the poetry and to some extent the poet to us, reading from a copy, with the author's emendations; and pointing out with great enthusiasm the beauties he had found. Other things came up, the nature of the ability, which my friend had largely, to take in the substance of a page at a glance, the charms of the Canadian forest, and the great plains of the Northwest. The conversation was animated, pointed, suggestive, and the listener had a full share in the enjoyment.

Of Dr. Mitchell's successes in fiction and poetry there is little time to speak. His writings have a peculiar interest for me, and they must have for most of our profession, because he sees things always from the physician's point of view. Physiology, psychology, and even medicine of the most practical kind, appear in all his stories. Let me illustrate with his last work. The life at "Westways" is an illustration of hygiene for young people;

the studies to give steadiness and purpose, the freedom and incitements of out-doors, the swimming-pool, the skating. It sets forth a more attractive propaganda of healthy living than can any formal treatise. Dr. McGregor, seeing things from his doctor's standpoint, becomes the oracle of the book. We may wonder a little, when he sends Ann Penhallow away for three months to Cape May, that the application of the rest cure to a "nervous" woman should be so well understood in the fifties, before Weir Mitchell had worked it out. But the author well knew that wise doctors have been in all generations; and principles may be applied before they have been formulated. In the account of the Civil War we come with startling distinctness upon Mitchell's work on injuries to the nerves; and his account of the slow degenerative changes in the mind of James Penhallow, after a fracture of the inner table of the skull at Gettysburg, is a masterpiece. But for me the climax of interest is found in his picture of the great surgeon, who overcomes the prejudice of the patient and his wife against operation. No one who knew D. Hayes Agnew can fail to recognize the original, even without the allusion to General Hancock, treated by him after the battle of Gettysburg.

"Characteristics," and "Dr. North and His Friends" are more frankly medical. But the plot in "Far in the Forest" is strictly psychological. "The Adventures of François" contains some fine studies in mental disease. In "The Red City" is

found what is, with the single exception to be mentioned, the best account of the great epidemic of yellow fever in 1793; albeit, there is a trace of the mosquito theory of a century later, when Stephen Girard advises the Vicomte de Courval to smoke freely as he watches his sick friend.

Weir Mitchell gathered his full sheath of honors, L. L. D. from Harvard, Edinburgh, Princeton and Toronto; M. D. Honoris Causa from the University of Bologna, and member of many of the learned societies of Europe. He was well suited to live in the public eye, and he enjoyed it. I recall him as the dominant figure on three important occasions. When, in 1887, the College of Physicians celebrated the hundredth anniversary of its institution he was its president and delivered the commemorative address. Tall, but bent forward, with strong, distinct voice, slow, emphatic diction, and solemn earnestness of manner, he rose to a climax in his story of the yellow fever in 1793, and the stern adherence to principle of the Fellows who faced pestilence and panic, labor without return, and impending death, for duty.

Then at Washington as president of the Second Congress of American Physicians and Surgeons in 1891 I heard him trace the "Early History of Instrumental Precision in Medicine," touching with rare sympathy the high lights of great achievements, and the black shadows of neglect with which they were met by their day and generation. Again, at the Fifth Congress, in 1900, after the address of the

president, Dr. Bowditch, he read his poem on "The Physician." That meeting, like most of the great gatherings of the year, had something to say in commemoration of the century just closing with the struggle in Cuba and the Philippines; and, particularly in Washington, much of the pride and pomp of war. From the back of the great opera house I heard distinctly every word of the poem, and witnessed the intense and growing stillness of the listeners until he closed, thus:

"Swift pass the days. Our century slowly dies,—

Quick beats her pulse and filmy are her eyes.

Her flowing robes are red with countless wars,

Her tender breasts are sad with many scars;

Yet in her dying eyes prophetic glows
Some sweet prediction of a world's repose.

Lo, at her side the coming sister stands,
And bends to hear, and folds those wasted hands.

'What shall I bring which thou hast failed
to find?

What nobler hope have I to give mankind?'

Hark! From the lips where life had
seemed to cease

Comes the low murmur: 'Thou shalt give
them Peace' "

318 Majestic Building.