

Spilman (C.H.)

BIOGRAPHIES

OF

PHILIP TRAPNALL, M.D.,

JNO. ALLEN McBRAYER, M.D.

AND

DR. JOHN BEMISS

READ BEFORE THE STATE MEDICAL ASSOCIATION, OF
KENTUCKY, APRIL 18, 1860.

Spilman

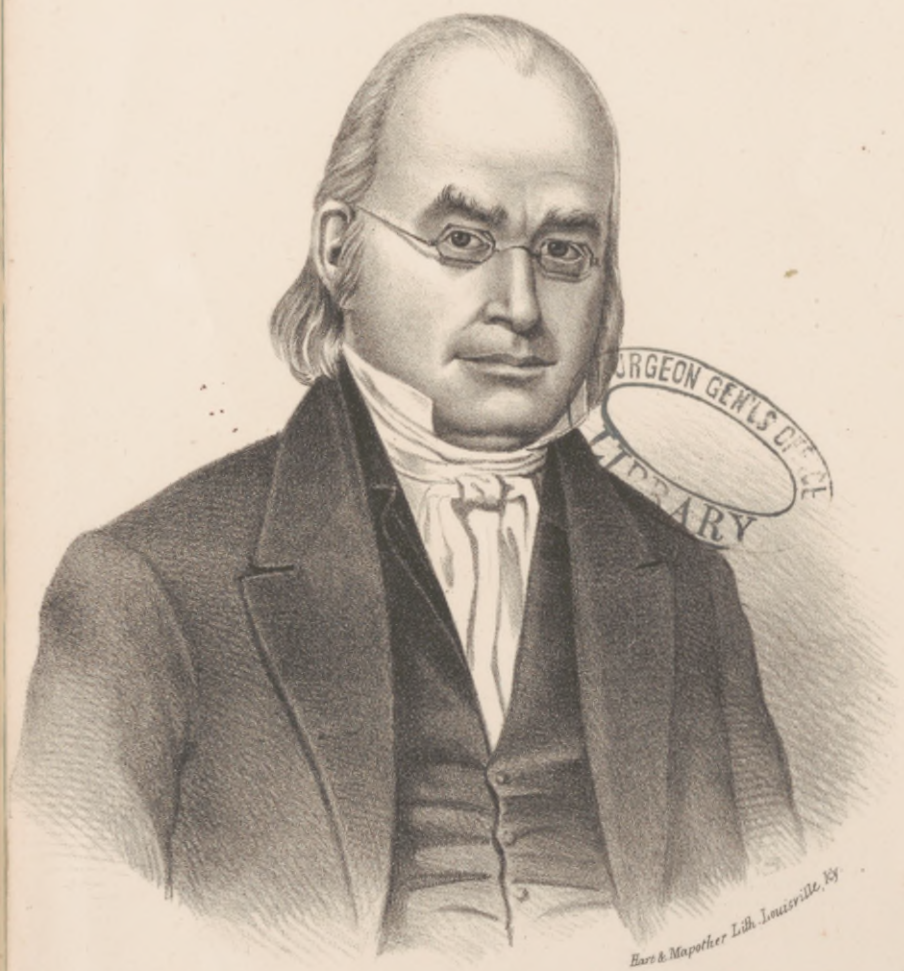
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yours truly

J. Bonaparte

1844



Wm. Wick
for
J. A. M. P. Taylor

REPORT
ON THE
MEDICAL BIOGRAPHY OF KENTUCKY.

SUBMITTED TO THE
STATE MEDICAL SOCIETY,
AT ITS MEETING IN BARDSTOWN, APRIL 18, 1860.

BY
C. H. SPILMAN, M.D.
HARRODSBURG, KY.

PREFATORY REMARKS.

Whether, to address ourselves to an inquiry in itself pleasing, to minister to the instruction and social elevation of others, or to evolve information substantially useful in the practical affairs of life, be our object; a more appropriate theme could not be selected than that of Biography.

“Man,” says one, “is perennially interesting to man.” And, in nothing is his inherent sociality more clearly evinced, than in that unspeakable delight he derives from the contemplation of human character, and the solution of the great problem of human existence.

“The proper study of mankind is man.” This ancient aphorism, consecrated by time, and vindicated by long experience, is as pregnant a truth to-day, as it was when penned by the philosopher who first conceived it. It commends itself alike to our inclination and our judgment. It challenges our approval, as the most ready avenue to a practical exemplification of another apothegm, nearly allied to it, “know thyself.”

That the Great Architect of our nature has, not only bound together the happiness and duty of his creatures, but indissolubly fastened their interests one to another, in the relation of a common brotherhood, is a truth which challenges alike our assent and our admiration.

If asked, why it is that man is so interesting to man, and the contemplation of his life, and character, and trials, and triumphs, affords so much delight; we answer, because we



also are indentured to live, and, in the practical solution of the same problem, exercising similar faculties, experiencing like emotions, enthused by the same aspirations, borne onward to the same destiny, feel that we live with every man's life; and, in each of the millions of men that live, find a mirror, in which we may discern much of our own future, which prophetically lies there.

Our interest, in almost every subject, is much more strongly biographic, than we are apt to imagine. It is this that clothes history with its interest, that lends a charm to the productions of art, an enchantment to the triumphs of genius, and the achievements of science. It has its foundation deep in the constitution of our nature, and rests upon the primary truth, that the whole race of mankind is one family, that all men are brethren, and God the maker of us all; that the same living cord vibrates through the whole race, calls the sympathy of mortal hearts into action, and gives to each a lively interest in the welfare of all that live. Hence the specimens of human art, the productions of human skill and ingenuity, and the achievements and triumphs of the human intellect, awaken in our mind a deep interest, if for no other reason, simply from the fact, that the actor in any such case is a type of ourselves. Disconnect, if you can, from these various productions we so much admire, the idea that they are the fruits of man's labor and skill, and how soon does the interest abate. In the art we can never forget the artist. In our admiration of the picture and the poem, the painter and singer are ever present. Supposing, for example, "the picture to be gradually formed on canvass by atmospheric influences, as lichen pictures are on rocks; it were confessedly beautiful, but nothing in comparison with that picture, which, on opening our eyes, we see everywhere painted in heaven and earth," and pass over with the most perfect indifference, because the painter was not a man.

From "the temple of immensity," built without hands, stretching out before us in the richest profusion of forms and colors, beautiful beyond the highest powers of description, illimitable far exceeding imagination's utmost stretch, we turn to admire the temple made with hands—the finely-constructed city, with its glittering spires, its lofty columns, its costly

domes, and its architectural beauty; and why? because in the former the biographic interest is wanting, the latter bears the impress of human skill and ingenuity.

Herein we have the most convincing proof of the keen relish which so generally prevails for biographical literature, and the exceeding value of this medium for the conveyance of useful knowledge.

In attempting, therefore, to discharge the duty you have assigned us, should we fail to interest you, we can not avail ourself of the plea, that the subject is dry and uninteresting, or that the mode of discussing it is an unacceptable one; but it will be owing to our incapacity to impart to it that fullness of detail, and vivacity of coloring, of which it is, in a high degree, susceptible.

We are not unaware of the fact either, that the position we occupy is a delicate one. We have assumed to draw the portraits of persons who have played their part upon the theater of life, unsolicited by their immediate friends and relatives; not, however, against their protestations. We are informed that when Dr. Johnson first heard of James Boswell's intention to write his biography, he announced that if he really believed that Boswell intended to write his life, he would prevent it by taking Boswell's. A much less decisive expression of disapproval on the part of any of the friends of those distinguished individuals whom we have selected as the subject of this report, would have deterred us from the undertaking. We have so far presumed upon their good nature, as to feel no dread of assassination. On the contrary, we take great pleasure, in this place, in acknowledging our indebtedness to them for the efficient aid they have afforded us in the collection of materials for these brief, and necessarily imperfect sketches. Should our effort prove even as complete a success as that of Boswell, our most sanguine anticipations will be more than realized.

In attempting a delineation of the character, the conduct, and the fortunes of those medical worthies, who have gone to rest from their labors, it will be our object so to blend profit with delight, as to render it mutually entertaining and instructive.

We need not remind you of the many disadvantages under

which we labor, and the mistakes and inaccuracies to which we are liable, in attempting, without record, or written document of any kind, or even an intimate personal acquaintance with the subjects of these sketches, to draw such likenesses as will be recognized and fondly cherished by their relatives and friends. The lapse of time is incessantly thickening the veil which is spread over past persons and events, and the lineaments cannot be easily distinguished or brought out, either by the eye of discernment or the hand of honesty.

It will be our endeavor to avoid the absurdity into which biographers have not unfrequently fallen, which seeks, by a fanciful delineation of character, studiously to conceal the faults, and display the virtues of the character under review. It is useless to disguise the fact, that much of our biographical literature is rendered valueless by its fictitious character, exhibiting too little regard for truth in its delineations.

What hope have we, other than fallacious one, of being profited ourselves, or of benefitting others, unless we copy faithfully from the inspired volume of truth. Reality, whether fair or homely, has an inspiration which gives it immeasurable worth. It is remarkable how some slight, perhaps homely incident, if real and well-presented, will fix itself in a susceptible memory, and lie ennobled there, "silvered over with the pale cast of thoughts," with the pathos which belongs only to the dead. For all the associations of the past are sacred to us. All that the grave incloses is holy. Even from those whose lives were tarnished with the grossest follies and faults, we see as from a faithful mirror, in varied shades, and most lively imagery, that severe conflict with this "heavy, unmanageable environment," "wherewith all hearts labor oppressed," and whereof we are but too deeply sensible, in our terrestrial state. By none is the victory complete, until this heavy environment is shuffled off. Our friends, whose lives we propose to study, have been withdrawn from the conflict, and the battle-field has become a silent, awe-inspiring "*Golgotha*." We are left to fight on, and we shall fight unprevailingly until we, too, are emancipated from these fetters. And when we shall have been withdrawn from the conflict, the faithful record will, perchance, note many of our weaknesses and follies. Truth is always injured, and its power for good impaired, by

the slightest connection with fiction. It is our purpose, therefore, without fear or favor, without partiality or prejudice, to represent men and things as they really are; that virtue may receive its just tribute of praise, and vice meet its deserved censure and condemnation. It is by contrast that we learn to estimate the moral quality of an action. Conceal from view the shady side of human life, and the sunny side loses much of its beauty and attractiveness. A proper view of vice, with all its disastrous tendencies, is calculated greatly to heighten our pleasure in the discovery, and to stimulate our ardor in the pursuit of the paths of virtue; and thus the very errors and vices, as well as the wisdom and virtues of others, will be rendered beneficial to us.

And now, gentlemen, we are about to review the lives of other men; but let us not forget that our own concerns us much more. Our fathers were; we are. They have fought the great battle of life; we are still in the conflict. The curtain has dropped and hid them from our view; our little scene is going on, and must likewise speedily close. Should we thus approach this subject, with an honest desire to learn lessons of instruction, whether from the weaknesses and follies, or the wisdom and virtues of Octuro, they will indeed prove to us, though dead, speaking and pleasing companions.

The period is fast approaching when Time itself shall be swallowed up; when Esculapius, and Hippocrates, and Boerhaave and *we* shall all be contemporaries; when the mystery of Providence shall be cleared up, and the ways of God, oftentimes so inscrutable, fully vindicated to men. In humble and confident expectation of that great event, let us endeavor to live with a constant reference to its solemn realities, "redeeming the time because the days are evil," that when we, too, are called "to throw off this mortal coil," the example we shall have set while living shall be worthy of imitation, and our memory embalmed among the great and good of earth.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF PHILIP TRAPNALL, M.D.

The family of Dr. Trapnall, in Maryland, descended from English ancestors, long established at Staffordshire, England. The male portion of the family have generally been, and still are, ministers of the Established Church.

Quite a number of the Vincent family, from which the Dr. was a lineal descendent, through his grandmother, were also distinguished ministers of the Established Church. William Vincent, Bishop of London, a distinguished critic and divine, Philip Vincent, Bishop of Durham, and Admiral Vincent, a distinguished naval commander, were second cousins of the doctor.

His grandfather emigrated to this country, from Staffordshire at a very early period, during our colonial existence.

Vincent Trapnall, his father, was a farmer in Baltimore county, Md., where the Dr. was born on the 4th of January, 1773. It may be said with truth, therefore, that he was nursed in the lap of the revolution, and received all his early impressions during that stormy period.

After having received all the mental training which parental care and a good neighborhood school could impart, he was sent to school, at the age of fourteen, at Annapolis, where he completed his preliminary education, which was of a very high order. He graduated in the medical department of the University of Pennsylvania in the spring of 1796, at the age of twenty-three. He practiced medicine at Hagerstown, with flattering success and great acceptance, the two succeeding years, as the cotemporary and intimate professional associate of Dr. Thomas Dorsey.

He now resolved to gratify a wish he had long indulged, that of emigrating West, which he effected in the fall of 1800, by locating in Harrodsburg, where he remained until his death, a period of fifty-four years. He had not been long an occupant of his new field of labor before he found himself in the midst of an overwhelming practice. His masculine vigor of intellect, and superior literary and professional attainments, at once placed him in the foremost rank of the profession. He acquired an exceeding wide range of practice, often going to Danville, Lancaster, Versailles, Lexington, and occasionally Louisville, on professional duty.

His cotemporaries, whom he often met in practice, were Dr. Eph. McDowell, of Danville, Dr. Louis Marshall, of Woodford, Drs. Pindall and Ridgeley, of Lexington, Dr. Benj. Mason, of Lancaster, etc.

It is said by those intimately acquainted with his practice,

that he possessed remarkable insight into the nature and character of disease, was exceedingly accurate in his *diagnosis*, and rarely ever mistaken in the judgment he formed. So scrupulously cautious was he, that in obscure, complicated cases, he not unfrequently deferred his prescription until a second visit, and a more thorough exploration of the case. Such caution, although highly commendable, is not apt to meet a just appreciation from the non-medical public, who not unfrequently construe it into either indifference or ignorance.

Of anatomy and surgery Dr. Trapnall was fond, and he performed a great number of surgical operations; none, however, that I have been able to ascertain, of note.

I can not learn that he had a partiality for any particular department of the profession; and it is a little remarkable that a man of his peculiar turn of mind had no hobby. His energies seem to have been alike devoted to the interests of every department; and, although practicing in a period when hobby-riding was fashionable, he was remarkably conservative in his views, and cautious in practice. In a word, he may with much truth be styled a medical philosopher.

He accumulated a large and well-selected library, with the contents of which, by close application to study, he kept himself familiarly acquainted; which, however, he generously divided out among his young friends after he retired from active professional life.

I should have stated in its proper place, that, whatever may be thought of the principle, in an ethical point of view—although Dr. Trapnall often met his professional brethren in consultation, and seldom refused, where the patient or his friends desired it, yet the influence of his opinion stands against it as a general practice. He admitted that there might be circumstances under which advantage would accrue to the patient from such professional conference; yet, in a large majority of cases, the chances of recovery would be lessened rather than enhanced, by dividing responsibility, hazarding a variety of conflicting opinions, and disturbing the regular action of remedies.

Having established himself upon a farm, he retired from the active duties of his profession about the year 1818, twenty-two years from the time he entered upon them; a brief, but rather brilliant professional life.

The Dr. has, by some, been thought eccentric; and I am not fully prepared to acquit him of the charge. There was something remarkably striking in his person and manner. He was full six feet two inches high, and remarkably straight, had an air of dignity and independence, often construed into haughtiness, rendering him rather repulsive to strangers. It is said of Admiral Vincent, his kinsman, that he was so tall and commanding in his person, and possessed such an air of majesty, his very appearance excited a feeling of awe in his friends, and struck terror to his enemies.

A large physical stature, and magisterial air, seem to have been characteristics of the Vincent family; and the Dr. inherited his full share of it. He had a handsome person, an intelligent face, and a countenance rather forbidding to those who had not learned to read it.

He possessed remarkable firmness and decision of character, honesty and purity of life, was ardent in his attachments, loved his friends with a devotion bordering on idolatry, would make almost any sacrifice for their accommodation. Of this remarkable devotion to the interests of his friends there are still a number of living witnesses. But, toward his enemies, he was implacable; almost bitter. Were it allowable for us to moralize, or make any reflections, outside of the record, of a conjectural character, we would say that this was the weak point, or easily besetting sin of a man whose life was otherwise almost faultless; against which he has fought many hard battles, and not improbably fought unprevailingly, until finally disencumbered, and made free and pure. A little recital of his own experience would undoubtedly reveal a conflict of which he and the Great Searcher of hearts alone were cognizant, and, concerning which, our only interpreter is our own checkered experience, which is abundantly sufficient to melt and soften down the frost of criticism, and extinguish all acerbity of feeling.

Dr. Trapnall was a member of the Legislature, from the county of Mercer, in 1806-7-8-9; and a reference to the journals of that period will show his efficiency and prominence as a member of that body. In 1812 he was defeated for Congress by Samuel McKee, of Lancaster. In politics he was a warm partizan, even after he had retired from active life; an

uncompromising Whig, always prompt and early at the polls on election day, a duty which, as a good citizen, he felt in conscience bound to discharge.

He was a member of the Episcopal Church, and a very warm sectarian; a zealous stickler for the succession, and one of the ablest champions of Episcopacy in this country; was exceedingly well posted in the history and doctrines of his Church.

In 1828-9 he wrote many articles in defense of the doctrines of his Church, which were published, and replied to by Dr. Clelland. The discussion was a protracted one, and attracted much attention in the religious world. I was but a boy at the time, but have a distinct recollection of the opinion expressed by theologians, of that day, in regard to the ability and adroitness with which he conducted that discussion. It evinced profound scholarship, great depth of research; and furnished the most convincing proof, not only of great versatility of talent, but native vigor of intellect.

In 1806 the Dr. married Miss Nancy Casey, daughter of Peter Casey, at Fountain Blue, Mercer county, Ky., a lady of highly cultivated intellect, and great prudence, who was truly a help-meet to him, with whom he lived forty-five years, raising a large and highly respectable family.

In 1818 he retired from the active duties of the profession, and, establishing himself upon a beautiful farm adjoining Harrodsburg, devoted the remainder of his life to agricultural pursuits. In this position, more congenial to his taste and inclination, he entertained a large number of visitors, for which his fine conversational powers and open hospitality so eminently fitted him.

For a fuller illustration of his peculiar characteristics, I can not do better than to refer you to "Camden," a novel written many years since by John A. McClung, in which the Dr. figures conspicuously under the title of Gen. Lethridge.

On the 31st day of January, 1853, in the eighty-fourth year of his age, he died, as he had lived, in humble trust, and unshaken confidence in Him who is "the resurrection and the life."

Thus lived and died, one whose friends were numerous and devoted; whose history, however, is too prominent, and whose

character too marked and decided, never to have met opposition, or encountered malice; which, however, were disarmed of their power to hurt, by his acknowledged honesty of purpose, and purity of life.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE LATE JOHN ALLEN M'BRAYER, M.D.

It was not my fortune to have become personally acquainted with the subject of this brief sketch, until a short time previous to his death, and then our acquaintance was very slight. I have spent the last ten years of my life, however, upon the theater of his former professional career, in intimate association and constant intercourse with his friends, who have kindly afforded me every facility for collecting and collating facts relative to it.

The family of Dr. McBrayer descended from Scotch-Irish ancestors, and it is not known by the writer of this sketch, at what time they emigrated to this country. They have been a long time resident in Anderson county, Ky., occupying a prominent position in society.

John A. was born on the 3rd of October, 1817. Activity of mind, and a high sense of moral obligation, characterized his boyhood. At an early period he seemed to regard time as a precious boon which he had no right to misimprove, and which it was his pleasure to appropriate to some useful purpose. His preliminary education was chiefly acquired in private schools. A young man of his eagerness and aptitude stood in no need of the incentives of a college, either to stimulate his ardor or assist his understanding. The extent and accuracy of his information, and the beauty and elegance of his style, evinced the scholar, by whatever steps, or through what means soever he may have attained it.

Our young friend was cut down in the morning of life; yet that brief existence is full of interest, contains much instruction; and, whether as a memento, to be fondly cherished, or a noble example, to be imitated by his surviving friends, should not be permitted to go down into oblivion.

It is difficult to contemplate such a life without a mingled feeling of delight and regret. He lived just long enough to foreshadow a career of usefulness and fame, which would have shed luster alike on his own name and the profession of which he was a worthy member.

Even in boyhood, the activity of his mind, in its eager search after knowledge, was marked. He seemed singularly impressed with the immeasurable distance between right and wrong, evinced a scrupulous regard for truth, and when reached, embraced it with singleness of heart, and held it fast with inflexible purpose.

A temperament of unusual ardor fired his intellect. A spirit, impatient of repose, stirred his inmost soul. Impelled by a desire to compress into so small a compass, the interests and duties of a whole life, as if animated with a presentiment of the brevity of his probationary state, and the momentous interests suspended upon it, intensity, activity and impetuosity characterized his every movement.

John A. McBrayer entered upon the study of his profession under the supervisory instruction of Dr. Dedman, of Lawrenceburg, a gentleman of eminence and deserved reputation in the profession, where he enjoyed every facility for acquiring a thorough knowledge of the elementary principles of the science. After having completed a full course of reading and pharmaceutical training under the instruction of his preceptor, being limited in his means, he established himself, as a practitioner of medicine, in Mt. Eden, Ky., where he practised with success and great acceptance for two years, still, however, prosecuting his studies with vigor, spending his winters in attendance upon the lectures in Louisville.

In the spring of 1842 he received the degree of M.D. from the Medical Institute of Louisville, immediately after which he located in Harrodsburg with a view of making that his future home. At that time it could not be said that there was an opening for a physician in Harrodsburg. The prospect was by no means flattering. The profession was crowded. The business was monopolized by old-established physicians, with whom the public seemed satisfied. Indeed, from the unsuccessful attempts which had been made by a number of preceding adventurers in the same field, it seemed that the business in that department was stereotyped.

It was under these, somewhat discouraging circumstances, that Dr. McBrayer made his *debut* in Harrodsburg, as a candidate for the exercise of the "healing art." His success was complete. In a few months he had acquired a very heavy

practice, and was able to dispute the palm with the oldest physicians of the place. That industry, activity and energy which had marked his pathway from early boyhood, he carried into the walks of professional life, and he did an incredible amount of practice.

While he had a strong hold on the confidence of the affluent and more influential, the poor and humble always found, in him, a heart to sympathize, and a hand to extend relief. Unlike too many, in this degenerate age, he was unselfish in his labors, and rendered gratuitous services with as much seeming cheerfulness and promptitude as those that were more profitable. Few men have ever lived, who, in so short a period, left upon the face of society an impress so striking and attractive.

Dr. McBrayer, as a practitioner, was bold, to a degree, which, in those of less judgment, would have been perilous and unsafe. But regulated and guided by such clear insight, nice discernment and close discrimination as he possessed, his efficiency and usefulness as a practitioner were much enhanced by it.

His career was too short ever to have distinguished himself as a surgeon. He did not reach that period of life, when surgical talent is usually developed. He gave promise, however, of fine aptitude for surgery; and had his life been spared, he would undoubtedly have become distinguished in that department. As an earnest of his future success and usefulness as a surgeon, we are presented with a case of wounded intestines on which he operated, an abstract of which was published in the May No. of the *Western Journal of Medicine and Surgery*, of 1844. The case gave evidence of such originality, thorough anatomical knowledge, and soundness of judgment, as to call forth a very high eulogy from Dr. Gross.

Dr. McBrayer was also in the habit of operating for strabismus. I am informed by the physicians in the vicinity of Mt. Eden, where he commenced his professional career, that even so early as that, his operation for remedying this defect was remarkably successful: one not only confessedly delicate, but, at that time, novel, in that section of the country.

Such was the laborious character of his practice, and his constant exposedness to the vicissitudes of weather, that in

the winter of 1845 he began to exhibit signs of declining health. He prosecuted his professional labors, however, with unremitting energy during the summer of 1846, oftentimes when pain and debility would have counseled rest. In the fall of that year, admonished of his danger by a conviction that his lungs were the seat of organic disease, in the shape of tubercular deposit, he determined to spend the following winter in the West India Islands. In pursuance of this resolution, he left in November of this year for Cuba, where he spent the winter with the single object of regaining his health. He returned in April of the following year, without any appreciable improvement. He practiced during the summer of 1847, still painfully conscious of his perilous condition. In November of this year he left for Mexico, where he resolved to spend the winter. While there, he was appointed assistant surgeon of the United States army, then in active service there. In this position he acquitted himself with great fidelity and energy, until March 1848, when he returned home.

It now became painfully evident that his disease was of an incurable character, and it had made such inroads upon his physical energies as to render an abandonment of the active duties of his profession a necessity.

It seems that Dr. McBrayer, in the midst of all his other engagements, was in the habit of keeping a regular journal of his life. His Cuban and Mexican journals, two large manuscript volumes, containing a minute, uninterrupted description of his travels and observations, have been kindly placed in my hands, by his brother Sandford, a merchant and distinguished financier of Harrodsburg. They are truly a literary curiosity. Their descriptions—besides containing a great fund of information relative to the geography, natural resources, productions of art, and manners and customs of those countries—for richness of style, fullness of detail, and vivacity of coloring, I have rarely ever seen excelled.

We have here a striking exemplification of that laudable rule of action, which the Dr. had prescribed for himself, as his motto through life: never to idle away a moment of time. Although out for the single purpose of regaining his health, he had not a moment to lose; it is all scrupulously appropriated to collecting and digesting knowledge, which would

avail him in the practical affairs of life. And it is doubtful whether, in the vigor of health, the same time could have been more profitably employed.

After the Dr.'s return from Mexico, his cough greatly increased, and his physical strength was so far exhausted, that he was unable, except at intervals, to attend to practice. But even then, when his strength would admit of it, he visited those who had been so much comforted by his presence, and benefitted by his advice, in days gone by.

In politics, Dr. McBrayer belonged to the Democratic school, of the old Jeffersonian stamp, with much of the conservative element in his constitution, and consequently was neither an active partizan, nor noisy politician.

In religion, he was a Presbyterian, having connected himself with that Church in 1840, just ten years previous to his death. He always maintained a good profession, was unaffectedly sincere and pious, zealously devoted to the doctrines of his Church, yet without bigotry, ardently attached to its interests and ritual, but unselfish and generous in his bearing.

Dr. McBrayer was, throughout his life, in the highest sense a philanthropist. If aught of disaffection towards any one ever disturbed his bosom, he was rarely ever known to give expression to it.

He seemed, as he neared his end, which he reached on the 23rd of March, 1850, to live in a higher, holier region, and to realize, in pleasing anticipation, the unsullied joys of the "spirit land."

It is difficult to contemplate such a life, so peacefully closed, without indulging the spontaneous invocation of one of old: "Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his."

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF DR. JOHN BEMISS, LATE OF NELSON COUNTY, KENTUCKY.

IN the subject of this memoir, we have a remarkable example of one who was the maker of his own fortune.

If early destitution could extinguish the fire of genius, and stifle the germ of intellect, our friend would have been overwhelmed with discouragements at threshold of life.

The family of Dr. Bemiss, who descended from Welsh

ancestors, emigrated to this country at a very early period, and settled at Worthington, Massachusetts.

His father, at the commencement of the Revolutionary war, enlisted in the army, and rendered efficient service in our struggle for independence. At the expiration of his term of service, he returned home, broken down in health, and greatly reduced in his circumstances.

John, the subject of this sketch, who was the third of four sons, was born on the 16th day of February, 1773.

In consequence of his father's continued ill health and limited means, he was, at a very early age, thrown upon his own resources.

Even in boyhood, he was imbued with a singular love of letters, and conceived a fixed determination to master them. Having no means for acquiring the first rudiments, he eagerly sought, and embraced the first opportunity, for employment in manual labor, with a single view to that object. With that indomitable energy, which was his distinguishing characteristic through life, he rose superior to every obstacle which stood in the way to his coveted acquirements. Every nerve of a vigorous and well-endowed constitution was strained to the uttermost to achieve his ends. Every leisure hour of this period was scrupulously employed in the study of such books as were within his reach.

The ruling passion of his life, which is rarely ever known to gain the ascendancy until a much later period, seemed even now to possess the mastery, for he denied himself all participation in the usual sports and amusements of boyhood, lest they might consume time he had determined to appropriate to more valuable purposes. It was, probably, in this manner he acquired that contempt for all conventional pastimes and amusements, or games of chance, which never forsook him in after life.

It appears from some old manuscripts, to which we have had access by the kindness of his son, Dr. S. M. Bemiss, of Louisville, that the intervening four years from 1789 to 1793 were alternately occupied in some department of business, and attendance upon school. During this period he was under the tuition of Eliphalet Nott, who had charge of the Plainfield Academy, probably the best common school at that time in New England.

At this date, 1793, he seems to have been pretty well advanced in letters, for we find him in charge of a school at Pomfret, Connecticut. In what proportion his time is now divided, between teaching and studying, is not clear. His diploma, or certificate of graduation in Plainfield Academy, bears date the 30th March, 1795.

He now spent two years studying Latin and the higher branches of English literature, under the tuition of an educated gentleman, who had become interested for him by his steady, persevering efforts at self-advancement.

In 1797 he entered the office of Dr. Zachariah Standish, as a student of medicine, under whose supervisory instruction he made astonishingly rapid progress in acquiring the elementary principles of the science.

His certificate of the term of his professional studies, and permission to practice medicine and surgery, bears date June 3rd, 1801.

After three months' practice as an assistant of his preceptor, in the autumn of 1801 he emigrated to Kentucky, and located in Bloomfield, Nelson county, then called Middleburg.

In 1797 he had married Miss Elizabeth Bloomer, said to have been a lady of highly cultivated intellect, polished manners, and amiable disposition. On his first visit to Kentucky, he had left her with her friends in New York, where she remained for twelve months, at which time he went back, and brought her with him on his return.

The severe habits of early study to which the Dr. had subjected himself, together with the keen powers of observation, had so enlarged his capacity for the acquisition and retention of knowledge, that he had completely mastered all the standard works of his day.

He had amassed such a vast fund of information, and had such perfect command of the resources of the profession, that he at once took a very prominent stand, and acquired, in an incredibly short period of time, a reputation rarely attained by a country practitioner.

Boldness, self-reliance, implicit confidence in the curative power of his remedies, remarkable therapeutical acumen, and a profound sympathy with his patients, mark the outlines of his professional character. He was emphatically a man for

the occasion. The fertility of his resources was almost boundless. And while exhibiting the most unwavering confidence in the saving power of his remedies, and plying them with unwearied assiduity and skill, he had the happy faculty of imbuing his patients with the same unshaken confidence.

It is useless to say that Dr. Bemiss was a very safe and successful practitioner. He had witnessed so many recoveries, against the reasonable expectation of friends, attributable, as he believed, to his vigilance, perseverance, and constancy, that hope never deserted him; nor did he relax his efforts until the taper of life had expired.

When in the height of his practice, his advice was sought in difficult cases in all the surrounding counties; and even after he had retired from the active duties of the profession, he was retained, throughout a very wide scope of country, as consulting physician, to which calls he always yielded a hearty response. His thorough knowledge of the history and literature of the profession, his familiar acquaintance with the standard authors of the day, his ready comprehension, clear insight, accurate diagnosis, and lucid exposition of a case, attached great weight to his opinions with his professional brethren.

He was courteous and fair in his professional intercourse, candid and uncompromising in his views of practice, kind and generous towards the junior members of the profession, scrupulously observant of the rules of ethics, jealous of the honor of the profession, and uncompromising in his opposition to all professional outlawry. The hordes of empirics and nostrum-mongers who flooded the country in his day, found no mercy or foothold near him. His boldness and bitter railery were weapons they much dreaded.

Much useless speculation has been indulged in regard to the secret of that strong-hold the Dr. had on the confidence of the public as a physician. Some have attributed it to one trait of his character, and some to another. This, however, is all idle. It was the sum of his whole physical and mental being, the totality of the man; an indomitable spirit, animating and wielding a sturdy, elastic frame, which gave him his force of character, and great usefulness and efficiency upon the theater of life.

One more remark in connection with the medical character of Dr. Bemiss, and we dismiss this branch of the subject. We allude to the remarkable influence he exerted over the minds of his patients. There is an air of cheerfulness and confidence, of buoyancy and elevation of spirits, which never fails to meet a response in the bosom of the patient, and enters much more largely, than is usually supposed, into the remedial power the physician is enabled to exert. This rare, but exceedingly valuable, quality, the Dr. possessed in an eminent degree. We take the liberty of remarking here, that if there be any one defect in our present system of medical education more glaring than another, it consists in a neglect to inculcate such an aptitude, and inforce its importance to a successful exercise of the "healing art."

Many of our diseases are confessedly of mental origin, or, at least, largely of mental complication; and in their remedial management, much, very much, depends upon the state of the mind. This, the attending physician, whether conscious of it or not, sways almost at will. This power he exerted over the minds of his patients, Dr. Bemiss was scrupulously careful not to abuse. In regard to a clear insight into the mental constitution, and such moral appliances as are calculated to create and maintain a healthful state of mental excitement, he was peculiarly happy. "You may give me your medicine," said a former patient of his to another physician, "and it may do well enough, but old Dr. Bemiss' smile, as he used to come into my sick room, would now do me more good than all the prescriptions you can make." Few ever attained so high a degree of perfection in moral therapeutics, an acquisition to which we can never aspire with too much ardor and enthusiasm.

Dr. Bemiss was an ardent and excitable politician, and took an active part in the New Court and Old Court controversy. He was an uncompromising advocate of the Old Court policy, and wrote a number of able articles on the subject, which were published in the Spirit of '76, at Frankfort. He had no sycophancy about him; never dissembled; was very decided and open in his attachments and antipathies; not unfrequently made enemies by his openness and candor.

His style of writing is vigorous, clear, concise—not much

embellished with flowers. His natural turn was too pointed, and matter of fact, to allow space for either redundancy or decoration. Even in the midst of an overwhelming practice, he wrote a great deal. A number of his addresses on the subject of Masonry, of which order he was a prominent member, are still extant. They glow with that fervor, that spirit of expansive benevolence, which animated his whole life, and breathe of nothing but what is wise, good, and philanthropic.

He was always a close student; retained his love of literature to the last; studied Greek when over sixty years of age, besides keeping himself well posted in all the current literature of the day, except novels, for which he had a supreme contempt.

Dr. Bemiss' religious turn of mind developed in early youth, which grew with his growth, strengthened with his strength, and matured in his manhood, culminated in a desire to assume the office of minister of the Gospel, in which position he thought his facilities for doing good would be enhanced, a consummation which had been his ruling passion through life.

Although he had, in the year 1817, retired from the active duties of the profession, and resigned his practice to the charge of his son-in-law, Dr. S. B. Merrifield, his ardent, ever-active temperament did not allow him to take that repose, which he had probably promised himself previous to his retirement, and he turned his attention to the study of Theology. He was accordingly ordained as a minister of the Presbyterian Church about the year 1830. The duties of this office he continued to fulfill with zeal, fidelity, and great acceptance until his death, which occurred, of apoplexy, on the 29th day of March, 1851, in the seventy-eighth year of his age.

Thus ended a life, full of incident, which we can not contemplate without the deepest interest. The basis of his character seems to have been an intense fellow-feeling with other men, which prompted him, spontaneously, to adopt the interests, sympathize with the affections, and catch the emotions of all with whom he associated. His moral constitution presented such a combination of deep emotions, and restless vivacity, that he was alike ready to "weep with those who weep, and rejoice with those that rejoice." The great object of his life,

to which his reading, study, and reflection were altogether subservient, was, to explore the springs of human action, and trace their influence on the character and happiness of mankind. In this he was singularly successful, for the alchemy of his fertile intellect, extracted some delight from every subject with which he came in contact. Few ever touched life at so many points. "He surveyed human life, as the eye of an artist ranges over a landscape, receiving innumerable intimations, which escaped a less practiced observer. In every faculty he recognized a sacred trust; in every material object, an indication of the Divine wisdom and goodness; in every human being, an heir of immortality; in every enjoyment, a proof of the Divine benignity; in every affliction, an act of parental discipline."

How must the retrospect of such a life have smoothed and illumed his path-way, even through the dark valley, and enabled him to triumph while forced to surrender to the last enemy.

"Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright, for the end of that man is peace."

