

Francis J. W.

REMINISCENCES

OF

SAMUEL LATHAM MITCHILL, M.D., LL.D.

BY

JOHN W. FRANCIS, M.D., ETC.

ENLARGED FROM

VALENTINE'S CITY MANUAL.

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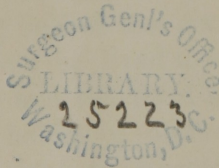
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THIS distinguished individual, so long and familiarly known to the citizens of the United States, and so highly appreciated by the enlightened of Europe, merits a record of his character and services in a work of the popular character of this *Manual*, and we accordingly give insertion, with some additions, to the latest notice of his actual life and his characteristics, as we find them set forth in a work recently published in this city, entitled "Old New York," by our fellow-townsmen Dr. FRANCIS.*

SAMUEL L. MITCHILL was born in North Hempstead (Plandome), Queen's county, Long Island, New York, on the 20th of August, 1764. In this village his father, Robert Mitchill, of English descent, was an industrious farmer, of the Society of Friends. He died in 1789, leaving behind him six sons and two daughters, most of whom he lived to see respectably settled in life. Samuel was the third son, who was remarkable for those habits of observation and reflection which were destined to elevate him to an enviable

* OLD NEW YORK; or, Reminiscences of the past Sixty Years. By John W. Francis, M. D., LL.D. New York, 1858.

distinction among his contemporaries; and, fortunately for mankind, his talents and laudable ambition met a discerning and liberal patron in his maternal uncle, Dr. Samuel Latham, a skilful and intelligent medical practitioner in his native village. Young Mitchill received his classical education under the direction of the learned and accomplished Dr. Leonard Cutting; the elementary principles of medicine under his uncle Latham; and completed his professional studies in New York with the erudite Dr. Samuel Bard, with whom he continued three years—a devoted pupil.

The condition of affairs in New York, owing to the occurrences of the revolutionary contest, and the occupancy of this city by the British, led young Mitchill to avail himself of the advantages held out by the University of Edinburgh, where he arrived in 1783, and at that time adorned by the talents of Cullen, Black, Duncan and Munro. Here he enjoyed the gratifying intercourse of many remarkable students, and among his fellow-companions were the late Sir James Mackintosh, the excellent Dr. Caspar Wistar, late of Philadelphia, Richard S. Kissam, the late popular surgeon of this metropolis, and Thomas Addis Emmet, still so well remembered as pre-eminent at the New York bar.

Upon his return to his native country, the young physician, richly laden with stores of professional and general information, devoted a portion of his leisure to acquire a knowledge of the laws and constitution of the Republic, under the direction of Robert Yates, at that time Chief Justice of the State of New York. His medical career, his professional labors, and his contributions towards the natural history and science of

his country, will be best comprehended by the materials furnished in the work we have already referred to.

The universal praise, says "Old New York," which Dr. Mitchill enjoyed in almost every part of the globe where science is cultivated, during a long life, is demonstrative that his merits were of a high order. A discourse might be delivered on the variety and extent of his services in the cause of learning and humanity. As I have given his Biography already in the National Portrait Gallery, I shall restrict myself at this time somewhat to matters closely associated with that valuable Institution, the New York Historical Society. Dr. Mitchill's character had many peculiarities: his knowledge was diversified and most extensive, if not always profound. Like most of our sex, he was married, but, as old Fuller would say, the only issues of his body were the products of his brain. He advanced the scientific reputation of New York by his early promulgation of the Lavoisierian system of Chemistry, when first appointed professor in Columbia College. His first scientific paper was an essay on Evaporation; his mineralogical survey of New York, in 1797, gave Volney many hints; his analysis of the Saratoga waters enhanced the importance of those mineral springs. About this time he published an Account of the state of learning in Columbia College. His ingenious theory of the doctrine of Septon and Septic acid gave origin to many papers, and impulse to Sir Humphrey Davy's vast discoveries; his doctrines on pestilence awakened inquiry from every class of observers throughout the Union; his expositions of a theory of the earth and solar system captivated minds of the highest qualities. His speculations on

the phosphorescence of the waters of the ocean, on the fecundity of fish, on the decortication of fruit trees, on the anatomy and physiology of the shark, swelled the mystery of his diversified knowledge. His correspondence with Priestley is an example of the delicious manner in which argument can be conducted in philosophical discussion; his elaborate account of the fishes of our fresh and salt waters adjacent to New York, (166 species, afterwards enlarged), invoked the plaudits of Cuvier. His reflections on Somnium (the case of Rachael Baker) evinced psychological views of original combination. His numerous papers on natural history enriched the annals of the Lyceum, of which he was long President. His researches on the ethnological characteristics of the red man of America betrayed the benevolence of his nature and his generous spirit; his fanciful article, Fredonia, intended for a new and more appropriate geographical designation for the United States, was at one period a topic which enlisted a voluminous correspondence, now printed in the proceedings of the New York Historical Society.

He increased our knowledge of the vegetable materia medica of the United States, and he wrote largely on the subject to Barton of Philadelphia, Cutler of Massachusetts, and Ramsey of S. Carolina. He introduced into practice the *sessamum orientale*. He wrote amply to Percival of Manchester, and to other philosophers in Europe, on noxious agents. He cheered Fulton when he was dejected; encouraged Livingston in appropriation; awakened new zeal in Wilson, when the governor of the State had nigh paralyzed him by his frigid and unfeeling reception; and with John Pintard, Cadwallader D. Colden, and Thomas

Eddy, was a zealous promoter of that system of internal improvement which has stamped immortality on the name of Clinton. He co-operated with Jonathan Williams in furtherance of the Military Academy at West Point, and for a long series of years was an important Professor of Agriculture and Chemistry, in Columbia College, and of Natural History, Botany, and the Materia Medica, in the College of Physicians and Surgeons, in this city. His letters to Tilloch, of London, on the progress of his mind in the investigation of Septic acid, (oxygenated azote), is curious as a physiological document. Many of the leading papers from his pen are to be found in the London Philosophical Magazine, and in the New York Medical Repository, a journal of wide renown, which he established with Miller and Smith; yet he wrote in the American Medical and Philosophical Register; the New York Medical and Physical Journal; the American Mineralogical Journal; the Transactions of the Philosophical Society of Philadelphia; and supplied several other periodicals, both abroad and at home, with the results of his cogitations. He accompanied Fulton on his first voyage in a steamboat, in August, 1807; and, with Williamson and Hosack, he organized the Literary and Philosophical Society of New York, in 1814. He was associated with Griscom, Eddy, Colden, and Wood, in the establishment of the Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, and with Eddy and Hosack may be classed with the first in this city in respect to time, who held converse with the afflicted mute by means of signs. With Dr. Townsend and Sylvanus Miller, he disinterred a Mammoth, at the Walkill, in Orange county, in 1818, and constituted a

prominent member of a convention held at Philadelphia, in 1819, for preparing a National pharmacopœia.

He was one of the commissioners appointed by the general government for the construction of a new naval force, to be propelled by steam—the steamer “Fulton the First.” While he was a member of the United States Senate, he was unwearied in effecting the adoption of improved quarantine laws, and aided Bayley in the undertaking; and, among his other acts important to the public weal, was strenuous to lessen the duties on the importation of rags, in order to render the manufacture of paper cheaper, the better to aid the diffusion of knowledge by printing.

There was a rare union in Dr. Mitchill of a mind of vast and multifarious knowledge and of poetic imagery. Even in his “Epistles to his Lady Love,” the excellent lady who became his endeared wife, he gave utterance of his emotions in tuneful numbers, and likened his condition unto that of the dove, with trepidation, seeking safety in the ark. The specimens of his poetic talents given in the Messrs. Duyckinck’s “Cyclopædia of American Literature,” are a fair representation of his metrical genius. He was tinctured with the Rosa Matilda style, and adored Darwin. The epistle to that philosopher, by Dr. Smith, was blended with the intellectual elaborations of Dr. Mitchill, and demonstrates, like his versification of the piscatory eclogues of Sannazarius, how deeply devoted he was to the simple and the effective. De Witt Clinton, his admirer, caused him to add to the numbers of his special translations of the Neapolitan bard; and I am ready to admit that Mitchill equalled in harmony and in manner the once highly estimated pis-

catorial poetry of Moses Brown, who, in 1773, had published his "Angling Sports" in nine eclogues. Dr. Mitchill's translations of our Indian War Songs gave him increased celebrity; and I believe he was admitted, for this generous service, an associate of their tribes. The Mohawks had received him into their fraternity at the time when he was with the commission at the treaty of Fort Stanwix.

I was repeatedly curious enough to interrogate him as to the question what agency he had had in the modification of the New-England Primer, and whether, at his suggestion, the old poetry, "Whales in the sea God's voice obey," had been transformed into the equally sonorous lines "By Washington great deeds were done." In one of my morning visits to him, at his residence in White Street, about the time that Jeffrey, the celebrated Edinburgh critic, had called upon him, to take the dimensions of a universal philosopher, the learned Doctor was engaged in writing a series of minor poems for the nursery; for his nursery literature, like his knowledge of botanical writers, had scarcely any limitation. "You are acquainted," says he, "with the nursery rhymes commencing 'Four-and twenty blackbirds?' They abound with errors," added he, "and the infantile mind is led astray by the acquisition of such verses. I have thus altered them this morning: 'When the pie was open, the birds they were songless; was not that a pretty dish to set before the Congress?' I thus correct," added the Doctor, "the error that might be imbibed in infancy of the musical functions of cooked birds; and while I discard the King of Great Britain, with whom we have nothing to do, I give them some knowledge of our general

government, by specifying our Congress." These trifles show how intense was his Americanism. When he declared, in his ingenious effusion on "Freedom and Fredonia,"

"Not Plato in his Phædon,
Excels the Chief of Fredon,"

his democracy and his admiration of the philosopher Jefferson, then President, was complete.

Ancient and modern languages were unlocked to him, and a wide range of physical science the pabulum of his intellectual repast. An essay on composts, a tractate on the deaf and dumb, verses to septon, or to the Indian tribes, might be eliminated from his mental alembic within the compass of a few hours. He was now engaged with the anatomy of the egg, and now deciphering a Babylonian brick; now involved in the nature of meteoric stones; now in the different species of brassica; now in the evaporation of fresh water; now in that of salt; now scrutinizing the geology of Niagara; now anatomizing the tortoise; now offering suggestions to Garnet, of New Jersey, the correspondent of Mark Akenside, on the angle of the windmill; and now concurring with Michaux on the beauty of the black walnut as ornamental for parlor furniture; now, with his conchological friend, Akerly, in the investigation of bivalves; and now with the learned Jewish Rabbi, Gershom Seixas, in exegetical disquisitions on Kennicott's Hebrew Bible. Now he might be waited upon by the indigent philosopher, Christopher Colles, to countenance his measures for the introduction of the Bronx river into the city; and now a committee of soap-boilers might seek after him, to defend the innoxious influence of their vocation in a crowded popula-

tion. For his services in this cause of the chandlers, Chancellor Livingston assured him, doubtless facetiously, by letter, that he deserved a monument of hard soap ; while Mitchill, in return, complimented Livingston, for his introduction of the merino sheep, as chief of the Argonauts. In the morning he might be found composing songs for the nursery ; at noon dietetically experimenting and writing on fishes, or unfolding to admiration a new theory on terrene formations ; and at evening addressing his fair readers on the healthy influence of the alkalies and the depurating virtues of white-washing.

At his country retreat, at Plandome, he might find full employment in translating, for his mental diversion, Lancisi, on the fens and marshes of Rome, or in rendering into English poetry the piscatory eclogues of Sannazarius. One day, in workmanlike dress, he might have been engaged, with his friend, Elihu H. Smith, on the natural history of the American elk, or perplexed as to the alimentary nature of tadpoles, on which, according to Noah Webster, the people of Vermont almost fattened, during a season of scarcity ; another, attired in the costume of a native of the Feejee Islands, (for presents were sent him from all quarters of the globe,) he was better accoutred for illustration, and for the reception, at his house, of a meeting of his philosophical acquaintances ; while again, in the scholastic robes of a LL. D., he would grace the exercises of a College commencement.

I have but imperfectly glanced at the literary and scientific writings of Dr. Mitchill ; they are too numerous to notice at length, on this occasion. To his biographers must be assigned that duty, and I have little

doubt that his late friend, Dr. Akerly, performed the service. His detailed narrative of the earthquakes, which occurred on the 16th day of December, 1811, and which agitated the parts of North America that lie between the Atlantic Ocean and Louisiana, and of subsequent occurrences of a like nature, is a record of physical phenomena well worthy the notice of our Storm King, Mr. Merriam, and others, but which seem to have escaped the attention even of our distinguished philosopher, Dr. Maury, the famed author of the Physical Geography of the Sea. This elaborate paper of Dr. Mitchill is to be found in the Transactions of the New York Literary and Philosophical Society, 4to, vol. i., pp. 281-310.

Of Dr. Mitchill's collegiate labors in the several branches of knowledge, which he taught for almost forty years, I shall assume the privilege of saying a few words. His appearance before his class was that of an earnest instructor, ready to impart the stores of his accumulated wisdom for the benefit of his pupils, while his oral disquisitions were perpetually enlivened with novel and ingenious observations. Chemistry, which first engaged his capacious mind, was rendered the more captivating by his endeavors to improve the nomenclature of the French savans, and to render the science subservient to the useful purposes of agriculture, art, and hygiene. In treating of the materia medica, he delighted to dwell on the riches of our native products for the art of healing, and he sustained an enormous correspondence throughout the land, in order to add to his own practical observations the experience of the competent, the better to prefer the claims of our indigenous products.

As a physician of that renowned institution, the New York Hospital, he never omitted, when the opportunity presented, to employ the results of his investigations for clinical appliances. The simplicity of his prescriptions often provoked a smile on the part of his students, while he was acknowledged a sound physician at the bedside. His anecdotal remarks on theories and systems at once declared that he was fully apprized of previous therapeutical means, from the deductions of Hippocrates and Pliny, Boerhaave and Hoffman, to the fanciful speculations of Brown and Darwin. He was filled with the precepts of the Salernian code. But his great forte was natural history. Here his expositions of that vast science, in its several ramifications, gave the best proofs of his capacious stores of bookish wisdom and personal knowledge. He may fairly be pronounced the pioneer investigator of geological science among us, preceding McClure by several years. He was early led to give his countenance to the solidity of the Wernerian theory, but had occasion to announce his belief, from subsequent investigations in after life, that the Huttonian system was not wholly without facts deduced from certain phenomena in this country. His first course of lectures on natural history, including geology, mineralogy, zoology, ichthyology, and botany, was delivered, *in extenso*, in the College of Physicians and Surgeons, in 1811, before a gratified audience, who recognized in the professor a teacher of rare attainments and of singular tact in unfolding complex knowledge with analytic power. Few left the lectures without the conviction that an able expositor had enlisted their attention. He in fact was a great teacher in that faculty which included Hosack,

Post, Macneven, and Mott. There was a wholesome natural theology, blended somewhat after the manner of Paley, with his prelections, and an abundance of patriotism, associated with every rich specimen of native mineral wealth. It would have proved difficult for him to have found adequate language to express his gratification at the present day, of our California treasures. His manner throughout, as an instructor, was calculated to attract the attention of the students by his intelligible language and pleasing elucidations. His confidence in his expositions was not always permanent—new facts often led to new opinions—but the uncertainties of geological doctrines, not yet removed, gave him sometimes more freedom of expression than rigid induction might justify; and when he affirmed as his belief that the American continent was the Old World, and that the Garden of Eden might have originally been located in Onondaga Hollow, he imposed a tax on credulity too onerous to bear. Jefferson, indeed, considered the red men of America of more remote antiquity than those of Asia; and the Abbé Clavigero thought that the first American people descended from different families after the confusion of tongues. In contemplating his investigations on fishes, Mitchill thought he had enlarged the boundaries of science, and his exclamation, “show me a scale, and I will point out the fish!” was not thought too hyperbolic for his scholars. But even in the warmth of such utterance, he did not outvie the assertion of John Bell, the great surgeon of Edinburgh, who, in a conversation with him on American natural history, affirmed that, with a mammoth bone, he could form a new theory of the earth.

For more than a score of years it was my lot to be associated in collegiate labors with this renowned man, and I may be pardoned if my remarks are of some length on the professorial career of this American philosopher.

Pages might be appropriated to a record of his various occupations with men of all ranks and of every profession. His popular address; his unpretending demeanor; his cordial feelings to advance the interests of all classes, blended with his well-known and acknowledged merits, constituted him an oracle among his fellow-citizens. He held converse with the way-faring man; could amuse an old soldier by the recital of martial deeds, and excite the admiration of a Radcliffian professor of philosophy. Almost every projector of a new device sought his judgment and asked his decision. This was in an especial manner the case with artists and mechanical men. Some new American pigment; some modification of a gridiron; some newly-devised rudder, was sure to summons the Doctor's artistic or practical powers; and scarcely an indigenious author sprung up, who was willing to overlook him, without first securing his approbation to his yet unfledged thoughts. Anomalous products in creation; monstrous formations in animality; hybrid plants; literary curiosities of remote nations; Indian hieroglyphics and illustrations of Indian mounds—all were subjected to his critical knowledge for opinion. His personal acquaintance with authors, travellers, and particularly naturalists, was almost unbounded, and among those of this last designation, Bartram, of Pennsylvania, and Volney, the French savant, were the themes of his warmest admiration. Our earlier poets,

Freneau and Barlow, Humphreys and Alsop, were among those who held him in estimation for his sprightly conversation on all topics; but his own gratification was most ample when Correa de Serra or Muhlenberg dealt out the treasures of their natural science. Mitchill was imaginative and poetical, but preferred the Georgics to the *Æneid*. He deservedly classed Rush with the highest medical writers of his native land. He knew no North—no South; the Union, with him, was one family. His cabinet boasted of few golden coin; but his collection of unclassified specimens, of divers sorts, was imposing, and his herbarium worthy of consultation. The whole after his demise were presented to the New York Lyceum. The proudest day of his life was that in which, at the Canal celebration, in October, 1825, he, with Clinton, Colden, Eddy, and others, united in “indissoluble marriage” the waters of our inland lakes with the ocean.

By many, Dr. Mitchill was considered of a passive nature, and indifferent to the sports of wits and humorists; but few men felt more severely the force of ridicule. He rarely retorted on his enemies, yet among the doctors often quoted in illustration “Garth’s Dispensary,” and suffered the stings of satire long and deeply. A peculiar combination of circumstances afforded me a striking opportunity in confirmation of this view of his character. He had met the medical faculty of the College for the examination of students; while thus engaged with the Board of Professors, a copy of one of the famous poems of Croaker & Co. was brought in by some stranger, and delivered to the Doctor. It was the well-remembered lines to “Phlogo-

bombos." The writer had ascertained the whereabouts of Dr. Mitchill, and had sent in the paper, wet from the press, at that responsible moment. The Doctor, glancing at it, looked all colors, and might have been hardly more wrought upon had an arrow pierced his intercostals. Nor was this effect of brief duration. His feelings suffered annoyance for a long period. The amiable and winning Joseph Rodman Drake had been recently created a physician, and notwithstanding his benevolent impulses, had awakened his muse to this literary exercise—to himself, doubtless, a pleasurable excitement, but which proved to the venerable Doctor, the immediate subject of Dr. Drake's genius, a wound long corrosive. At this very period of his life Drake was wasting by pulmonary irritation; his sensitive appearance, his attenuated frame, and pallor, betokened a brief existence. A few evenings after the publication of the satire, he presided over a select medical association, of which he was a member. It was the last time I saw him. Halleck has done undying justice to his memory; and the American critic, Tuckerman, has pronounced the "Culprit Fay" a genuine poem, as "it takes us completely away from the dull level of ordinary associations." The child of impulse, Drake occasionally demonstrated the doctrine that an excess of the saccharine sometimes degenerates into the acid.

It is manifest that Dr. Mitchill from early life aimed to secure a name in letters and science, and that his multifarious pursuits ever kept him alive as a close observer: that he accomplished much is also demonstrative. His industry was unintermitting. He mingled with all classes. Though a medical man by profession, it may be inferred that, saving as a physician to some

of our charities, he early abandoned private practice. His utilitarian principles led him incessantly into the field of physical inquiry ; and when we contemplate the ample scope of his knowledge in physical investigation, not yet even approached by any other philosopher in our annals of science, we need not wonder that every day opened to Mitchill new subjects of study. There was something of our exalted Franklin in Mitchill. I have repeatedly witnessed his perplexities in new researches. The indigenous wheat which his intimate friend, De Witt Clinton had described ; the Fezzan Ram of Davis ; our native Fire-fly ; the Trilobites of Trenton Falls ; all provoked new inquiry on his part, and De Kay and Torrey often summoned by new specimens his geological and botanical resources. He was the delight of a meeting of naturalists ; the seed he sowed gave origin and growth to a mighty crop of those disciples of natural science. He was, emphatically, our great living ichthyologist. The fishermen and fishmongers were perpetually bringing him new specimens ; they adopted his name for our excellent fish, the streaked bass, and designated it generically as the *perca Mitchilli*. When he had circumnavigated Long Island, the Lighthouse at Sands' Point was called the Mitchill, and the topographers announced the highest elevation of the Never-sink Hills as Mount Mitchill. His courtesy among all ranks, and the adulation he almost hourly received, rendered him a social friend among them, and an interpreter to all their queries. To an interrogatory put to him, what season would prove most advantageous in their business to catch black-fish, he replied with the promptitude of an Italian improvisatore—

When chestnut leaf is large as thumb-nail,
 Then bite black-fish without fail ;
 But when chestnut leaf is as broad as a span
 Then catch black-fish—if you can.

These lines, he said, were but stray feathers from his poetical pinions.

The records of State legislation and of Congress must be consulted to comprehend the extent and nature of his services as a public representative of the people. He manfully stood by Fulton in all his trials, when navigation by steam was the prolific subject of almost daily ridicule by our Solons at Albany ; and when the purchase of the Elgin Botanic Garden, by the constituted authorities, was argued at the Capitol, he rose in his place, and won the attention of the members, by a speech of several hours' length, in which he gave a history of gardens, and the necessity for them, from the primitive one of our first parents down to the last institution of that nature, established by Roscoe, at Liverpool. It is probable that no legislative body ever received more instruction in novel information, than the eminent philosopher poured out on this occasion, and even the enlightened Regents of the University may have imbibed wisdom from his exposition. With his botanical Latinity occasionally interspersed, he probably appeared more learned than ever. Van Horne, a Western member of the House, was dumfounded at the Linnæan phraseology, and declared such knowledge to be too deep for human powers to fathom. Clinton, only an hour or so before the learned Doctor's speech, had intimated to him the topic of his address, as best fitted to impress the Legislature with the value of the purchase, and Mitchill, in a barber's shop, digested the substance of his effective discourse. It was

a common remark among our citizens—"Tap the Doctor at any time, and he will flow."

Dr. Mitchill was eminently a practical man; Nature was the altar at which he worshipped. His ambition developed itself among all the incongruities of his busy life; he could neither forget nor bear to be forgotten. He felt more comfortable when presiding over a gooseberry society than when occupying a seat as a sitting member of an archæological association. While a student at Edinburgh, he was decorated with the insignia of fellowship of the order of the Roman Eagle, by the celebrated Brown, the founder of the Brunonian system of medicine, and honors without number steadily flowed in upon him from his own and remotest nations. His diplomas and scientific distinctions might have demanded a cart team for their conveyance. He said they were burdens ever imposed on the shoulders of the learned. It is questionable whether he ever suffered a morbid hour, or lost, by unoccupied faculties, any serious portion of his time. He deemed it imperative that each day should be marked by some service in the cause of science or humanity. Public attention must be aroused by some fresh suggestion, in theory or in practice; for, according to him, the echo of notoriety must perpetually reverberate around the heads of public men. Otherwise, added the Doctor, if this condescension be not made, the lines of the poet will assuredly most fittingly apply

"I've been so long remembered, I'm forgot."

The quality of his scientific productions cannot here be pointed out. Yet how elaborate are his speculations in the promulgation and defence of his theory of septon; what an inspiration is his doctrine of the

omnipresence of hydrogen—a doctrine afterward better comprehended by the brilliant achievements of Sir Humphrey Davy. How natural his story of the pen-nated grouse of Long Island was appreciated by Wilson; how fanciful was his notion of the identity of the poison of the rattlesnake with the causes of yellow fever. And most assuredly his science and his ingenuity abated not in public estimation from his forensic display in the still well-remembered case of “a whale is not a fish.” He could argue constitutional law when Kent and Spencer were in the ascendant. He had great resources at command for illustration, and great independence in reasoning.

Though the love of fame was with him a ruling passion, he neither sought nor desired the ostentatious displays of luxurious and fashionable life. He was indifferent to the appropriations of extravagant expenditure; but the simplicity of his habits was best comprehended by all who best knew him.

I never encountered one of more wonderful memory. When quite a young man he would return from church service, and write out the sermon nearly verbatim. There was little display in his habits or manners; his means of enjoyment corresponded with his desires, and his Franklinean principles enabled him to continue superior to want. He often observed that he had seen many, who, in aiming to live in lofty edifices, had built themselves out of house and home. The great Dr. Black saw beauty in a crucible. The little violet, or an Indian skull, gave Mitchill more delight than the fashionable baubles of the day. By choice, his legs were in general his carriage, and this was in conformity to his notions of health and his early botanical life.

His pedestrian tours often embraced many miles. He might, on these occasions, stray alone, or be accompanied by Masson or Michaux, or Le Conte, or Pursh. He thus studied Nature in lawns and in forests, at brooks and at rivers, in her original attire, and plucked knowledge at its source. He was wont to revisit the scenery of the spot where the Apostle of Quakerism, George Fox, more than a century before, had given utterance to his inspirations, and under the famous oaks at Flushing, hold communion with creation, with a volume of Cowley or of Pope, his most esteemed poet. At other times, tenaciously impressed with early associations, he would enter the memorable building, hard by, erected in 1661 by the primitive John Bowne, the Quaker victim of the persecuting spirit of the Dutch Governor of the colony, Peter Stuyvesant, but who was subsequently honorably liberated by the authorities of Holland, and here, with some of his once juvenile friends, discuss the blessings of religious toleration. Thus constituted, no place was uninhabited to him. His instructor was every where. He was a gratifying specimen of those excellent practices which so peculiarly designated the Knickerbockers of the "olden times;" fidelity in fiscal concerns, and a scrupulous observance of the *meum* and *tuum*. Exact in pecuniary matters, yet willing to advance his competency, he never forgot the old currency of his youth, that a pound demanded the payment of twenty shillings.

With all his official honors and scientific testimonials, foreign and native, he was ever accessible to everybody—the counsellor of the young, the dictionary of the learned. Even the captious John Randolph called him the congressional library. To the interrogatory,

why he did not, after so many years of labor, revisit abroad the scenes of his earlier days for recreation, his reply was brief: "I know Great Britain, from the Grampian hills to the chalky cliffs of Dover; there is no need of my going to Europe: Europe now comes to me." But I must desist. The inhabitants of this metropolis will long bear him in grateful recollection, and the Historical Society cherish his memory for the distinction he shed over that institution; for his unassuming manners, his kind nature, and the aid he was ever ready to give to all who needed his counsel. For their Collections he furnished an eulogium on the great jurist, Thomas Addis Emmet; on Dr. Rush; also on Dr. Samuel Bard. His "Discourse on the Botanical Writers of North and South America" is printed in their Transactions. Other discourses might be mentioned, abounding in curious facts and historical interest. For public occasions he was ever ready for any emergency. He addressed the Black Friars and glorified St. Tammany, whose genealogy he elaborated with antiquarian research. The Krout Club and the Turtle Club he enlightened by his gastronomic knowledge and natural science; while the naturalists of Long Island, at Prince's Garden, were stimulated to renewed efforts by his laudatory strains in behalf of botany and the Knight of the Polar Star, the world renowned Linnæus. Dr. Mitchill has not unjustly been pronounced the Nestor of American science. He died in New York on September 7th, 1831. His funeral was a great demonstration for a private citizen. I was of the multitude that attended, and lingered at the grave until all, save the sexton, had withdrawn. Not being recognized by that official, I inquired whom he had

just buried. "A great character," he answered, "one who knew all things on earth, and in the waters of the great deep."

It might prove too hasty a generalization to conclude that the high qualities of Dr. Mitchill's mind thus specified, would be acknowledged by all. He had his detractors, and his peculiarities were such as not to be comprehended by every one. The masses were his friends and admirers, and a contemplative student, with knowledge of men and things, could analytically class him among remarkable individuals. It has already been observed that he was long a professor in Columbia College. Three of the Presidents of that institution, who may be justly thought to have become well acquainted with him, either while he was a member of the faculty or subsequently, have given us their opinions concerning him. The classical scholar and grave bishop, Dr. Benjamin Moore, pronounced him a chaos of knowledge; but it demanded an intellect better stored with philosophical research to arrive at a just estimate of the scientific claims of Dr. Mitchill. The harmony of the Gospels, however edifyingly fitted for the pulpit, was hardly the best criterion by which to test the scientific acquisitions of a distinguished savant. President Duer has frankly recorded of the Doctor, that he was more of a natural philosopher than a physician; he states that, upon the arrival from Europe of the Doctor, he was the lion of the day, not only in the medical and literary, but in the fashionable circles; that his various learning was more valuable to others than to himself; that he was used by others as a living encyclopædia; that, upon the whole, he was more a professor than a practitioner, shone more as an

Epicurean or a Peripatetic than as an experimental or moral philosopher, and is remembered more for the goodness of his heart than the strength of his head. Those who are dissatisfied with this portrait will bear in memory, that it is drawn by one who, though rich in the graces of elegant literature, had done little in the natural sciences, and was, moreover, somewhat a severe censor on such characters as Fulton, and Colden, and Clinton. A more generous estimate of Dr. Mitchill seems to have influenced the opinion of the president King, of Columbia College; he personally knew the Doctor long and well; with a kinder impulse he pronounced him a man renowned for much and various learning, and of rare simplicity of character, a genius, prompt in execution and original in combination, a successful promoter of physical science.

None who knew Dr. Mitchill ever doubted of his herculean memory; those most familiar with him were often delighted with the original train of thought which would rapidly spring up from the subject matter before him, and the actual science he unfolded in the classification of new subjects and new materials. I am ready to leave the integrity of his mind, and the benefits derived from his labors, to the estimate which may be formed of them by the enlightened and whole-souled philosopher of the age, the learned and accomplished Agassiz.

It may be somewhat difficult to harmonize these conflicting opinions of contemporaries, enlightened and intelligent as they unquestionably were. But Dr. Mitchill long stood alone as the recognized devotee to physical studies in our population of that day, and sustained a foreign reputation little understood at

home, either as to its causes or extent. Indifferent as he was to the aids which often contribute to the increase of renown, his self-sustained reliance cast aside the displays of personal importance, and in the plenitude of his acquisitions, his simple manners, his beaming countenance, his cordial approach, and his frank utterance, proved effective substitutes for any deficiencies. What else was left to the beholder, but wonder and admiration to witness this unsophisticated disciple of Nature, in the public walks of the city, giving counsel for humanity's sake to an infirm beggar as to the easiest method by which he might carry his burden, while perhaps he himself might be returning homeward with his pockets freighted with a flattering correspondence from the most eminent savans of Europe. The man had a heart as well as a head.

In the prime of his manhood Dr. Mitchill was about five feet ten inches in height, of a comely, rather slender and erect form; in after life he grew more muscular and corpulent, and lost somewhat of that activity which characterized his earlier days. He possessed an intelligent expression of countenance, an aquiline nose, a gray eye, and full features. His dress at the period he entered into public life was after the fashion of the day, the costume of the times of the Napoleonic consulate; blue coat, buff-colored vest, smalls, and shoes with buckles. He was less attentive to style of dress in his maturer years, and abandoned powder and his cue. From a hemorrhagic tendency of his chest at the age of seventeen years, he adopted exercise on horseback, and was fortunate enough to avert the progress of pulmonary evils. His personality, however, varied in advanced life with the cogitations of his graver

years, and he might at times be seen without hat or overcoat, exposed to the vicissitudes of inclement weather. His robustness preserved his full features, and to the last not a wrinkle ever marked his face, nor did lapse of years modify his thirst for knowledge, or his cordial and prompt and sprightly utterance; thus setting at nought the declaration of the poet:

“Old age doth give by too long space,
Our souls as many wrinkles as our face.”

The imperfections of this brief memorial of Dr. Mitchill, might be rendered less conspicuous were we to avail ourselves of some few extracts from his philosophical lucubrations, particularly on geology. A sentence or two from his discourse on the death of Jefferson, a theme perhaps more popular, must suffice. He is speaking of the Declaration of Independence, that manifesto of freedom for all nations and all time.

“For sententious brevity, strong expression, and orderly disposition of the topics, the reading of it always brings to my mind that incomparable performance, the Litany of the Christian Church. In this, miserable sinners invoke the Father of Heaven; in that, suffering subjects submit facts to a candid world. In the latter, the One in Three is entreated to spare from all evil and mischief those who have been redeemed; in the former, a worldly prince, for a continuance of cruelties, is denounced as a tyrant, and unfit to be the ruler of a free people. In the Litany, the Church supplicates blessings and comforts, from a being willing to grant them; in the Declaration, the nation puts at defiance the power that neither pities nor forgives.”

How far the Quaker discipline which Mitchill received in his earlier youth had influence on his religious belief, is left to conjecture. The principles of

that peculiar denomination must have taught him the value of sound morals and upright conduct, and through life he illustrated the excellence of sound ethics. His inquiring mind, so wide in its grasp for knowledge, could scarcely be gratified to the entire exclusion of studies deemed sacred. Passing through that remarkable period of the early constitutional organization of the States, when the scepticism of France had diffused itself among all classes of the Christian world; when the Jacobin element in this city was so strong that the goddess of Liberty received the homage of a divinity from every order of society; and when from even reverend lips proceeded the significant sentence, "Better for the American Republic to elect an infidel President than a Christian Federalist," we find even in such commotion no cause to reproach Mitchill with the utterance of doubtful doctrines, or that he betrayed the uncertainties of infidelity. In his later life, deeper feelings of Christian hope were strengthened by the intense prosecution of his favorite inquiries into the nature and designs of Providence, thus bringing together the great argument of revealed truth illustrated by the harmony of creation. He doubtless often felt the full force of the memorable words of the celebrated Bishop Horne, "When man was first formed, creation was his book, and God his preceptor." His hymnology was extensive, and his calm spirit was awakened by the martial strains of Toplady, and at his last illness, of a pneumonic character, which was but of a few days' duration, his quickened spirit was sustained by Christian promises. It is pleasurable to record this benevolent man in the ranks of apostolic faith, and if, peradventure, he was held in contemplation on the

megalonyx longer than with the *Horæ Paulinæ*, his latitudinarian thoughts on some points of polemical controversy are to be overlooked in his devotion to the great study of the works of God.

It may further enhance our estimate of these pure studies in which Dr. Mitchill's attention was so largely absorbed, when we consider that they were the operations of a mind free from all sordid considerations, cultivated at a period when natural science was just dawning on the land; when Cuvier's name had scarcely reached us, when geology had not enlisted a solitary philosopher in her cause, and that pursuits of this sort absorbed fiscal means which were never realized by corresponding returns. He, however, was rewarded, and obtained that which money could never bring. "I have believed to the utmost of my belief," were among the last words of the dying philosopher.

There must have reigned within his bosom the benignant principles of primitive Barclay. Like his illustrious predecessor in literature and medical science, Dr. Garth, he seems to have practised Christianity without knowing he was a Christian.

He now lies in Greenwood Cemetery, where a beautiful monument is erected over his remains by his still surviving widow. His portrait, by Jarvis, is a faithful likeness.

INSCRIPTION ON THE MONUMENT.

SAMUEL L. MITCHILL,

DIED

7TH SEPTEMBER, 1831, AGED 67 YEARS.

“ Whether there be knowledge it shall vanish away. For we know in part.”

1st Cor., 13th Chapt., 8th and 9th verses.

OBVERSE.

Medicus, Physicus, Civis, Senator,
Quantus fuerit dicant alii
Indolem ejus humanum
Vitæ simplicitatem, fidem incorruptam
Desideriumque nostrum
Fas sit commemorasse.

