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BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIR

OF THE LATÉ

WILLIAM PEPPER, M.D.

BY

THOMAS S. KIRKBRIDE, M.D.

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PREPARED BY REQUEST OF THE COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS OF PHILADELPHIA.

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# BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIR

OF THE LATE

## WILLIAM PEPPER, M. D.

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WILLIAM PEPPER, M. D., was born in the city of Philadelphia, Pa., on the 21st day of January, 1810. At the early age of nine years he was sent to boarding-school at Holmesburg, near his native city, where he remained till he entered the academic department of Princeton College. He continued in this college an earnest and devoted student till the 8th of October, 1828, when he graduated with the highest honor. While at Princeton he was an active member of the Whig Society, and manifested many of the traits of character for which he was afterwards distinguished.

Soon after leaving college he became the private pupil of the late Thomas T. Hewson, M. D., a distinguished physician of Philadelphia, and for a long time one of the surgeons of the Pennsylvania Hospital, under whose able supervision he prosecuted the study of medicine with great industry and zeal. He entered the medical department of the University of Pennsylvania in the autumn of 1829, and graduated March 29th, 1832, having passed a most satisfactory examination. His inaugural thesis was on apoplexy.

The Asiatic cholera made its first appearance in Philadelphia in the summer of 1832, and this led to the establishment of temporary hospitals in various parts of the city. Dr. Pepper was one of the first to offer his professional services on this occasion, and spent most of the summer in the hospital at Bush Hill, where he rendered valuable service in the arduous duties appertaining to his position. In October of the same year he sailed for Europe. Soon after his arrival in Paris he entered with great earnestness on the prosecution of his studies in the hospitals of that metropolis of medical science. He remained in Paris thus engaged for nearly two years, devoting himself with remarkable industry to the investigation of disease, and, under the guidance of the ablest men in the profession, especially of Louis and Dupuytren, his progress was of the most gratifying description. It was during his visit to Paris that he had some pulmonary symptoms, brought on by the peculiar winter climate



of that city, and which for a time gave himself and his friends much uneasiness. The precise character of this indisposition has not been generally understood, but one of his intimate friends, now a distinguished surgeon of this city, who was with him, informs me that it was probably pleuritic in its character. Under the advice of Louis he left Paris, and spent the greater part of one winter in Italy and Southern Europe, and on his return, after this period of relaxation, his health seemed to be entirely re-established.

On his return from Europe, in the latter part of the year 1834, he took charge of one of the districts under the care of the Philadelphia Dispensary, a position which he held for three years. It was during this period that the writer first became intimately acquainted with the subject of this notice, although they had been fellow-students and fellow-graduates at the University. Occupying at that time the position of Resident Physician at the Pennsylvania Hospital, it was an arrangement mutually pleasant and profitable by which Dr. Pepper became my frequent companion in my visits through the wards of that excellent and time-honored institution. Fresh from the hospitals of Paris, familiar with most that was to be seen in that wide field for the investigation of morbid phenomena, he entered with the greatest zeal upon a most thorough analysis of disease as presented in our own city, and a careful comparison of his observations abroad with those made in our own institutions.

At that early day in his professional life, in this period of our united studies, I formed an estimate of Dr. Pepper's character, a conviction of his rare ability in diagnosis and his more than ordinary good sense in the application of remedies, which our long subsequent intimacy fully confirmed. So decided were my views on all these points, that although on terms of intimacy with the highest talent in the profession, Dr. Pepper became my own medical adviser, and continued in that relation to render on many occasions most important services to me and my family up to the period of his death. Without some such intimacy, Dr. Pepper's character and great ability could hardly be appreciated by any one. This opinion of Dr. Pepper's professional attainments was shared by many others who were interested in the hospital, and to this cause and the acquaintances he then made may be attributed his subsequent connection with that institution.

The manner in which Dr. Pepper performed the duties of physician to the Philadelphia Dispensary was an example for any one commencing the practice of his profession. No matter what was the social condition of his patients, or the adverse circumstances surrounding them, they never failed to receive the most careful attention. The character of every case was examined with the utmost care, and the treatment conducted with a degree of interest that no one could doubt. It may well be questioned whether of all his subsequent patients, even when he had attained his

highest professional position, any received more careful attention than did those who had the good fortune to come under his care through the Philadelphia Dispensary. The amount of labor which he performed at this time was very great, and from the exposure at all seasons and in every kind of weather, he contracted a pleurisy of so severe a character as to give his friends much uneasiness, and from the effects of which he was confined to his room for several months.

As early as 1832 Dr. Pepper became a member of the Philadelphia Medical Society. In February, 1837, he was elected a member of the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences, in the objects of which he always took great interest, and in 1839 he became a Fellow of the College of Physicians. In the same year he was chosen one of the physicians to the Wills' Hospital, a position which he held for about two years. In 1841 he was elected one of the physicians to the Pennsylvania Institution for the Instruction of the Blind, and continued for a considerable time to devote himself with his usual earnestness to the care of the inmates of that interesting charity.

On the 9th of May, 1842, under circumstances highly flattering to him, he was elected one of the Visiting Physicians to the Pennsylvania Hospital, a post which he continued to occupy, with great advantage to the institution and honor to himself, till the 29th of December, 1858, when, owing to the pressure of other engagements and his state of health, he felt compelled to resign.

In April, 1851, Dr. Pepper became a member of the American Philosophical Society, and, on the resignation of the eminently distinguished Professor Wood, he was elected, on the 5th of June, 1860, Professor of the Theory and Practice of Medicine in the University of Pennsylvania. He occupied this chair and performed its duties with rare ability till the spring of 1866, when, having completed his fourth course of lectures, he was led, from increased feebleness of health, to tender his resignation.

In June, 1840, Dr. Pepper was married to Miss Sarah Platt, of Philadelphia, who, with their seven children, two of whom are members of the medical profession, survived him. He was peculiarly happy in his domestic relations, and no one could appreciate more highly than he did the blessings of such a home, after the exacting daily trials of a most successful professional life.

As already stated, Dr. Pepper was attached to the Pennsylvania Hospital as one of its attending physicians for a period of nearly seventeen years. The same conscientious performance of duty which characterized him in all his other relations was conspicuous in this. Although at times in greatly enfeebled health, he did not permit this to interfere with his daily visits to the wards, and during his entire term of service there, he never once failed to be at his post. This position, while it furnished a large field for medical observation and experience, brought him promi-



nently before the profession as a teacher of clinical medicine. As such, his lectures were remarkable for the searching manner in which he investigated his cases, the importance he attached to the observation of every symptom however seemingly trivial, the accuracy of his diagnosis, and the simplicity and success of his practice. These lectures were attended by large classes of students, and gave him a reputation as a clinical instructor second to none on this continent.

The qualifications of a successful clinical and a didactic lecturer are not always to be found in the same individual, and some of his friends were not without misgivings when Dr. Pepper accepted the chair of the Theory and Practice of Medicine in the University of Pennsylvania. These apprehensions were soon shown to be unfounded, and the performance of his new duties only added to his already distinguished reputation.

As a didactic lecturer, he was clear, concise, and yet complete. Thirty years of active practice had made him familiar with disease in its varied forms, and had led him to reject, as useless, that which was merely speculative in medicine, while it enabled him to speak "with authority" of all that was valuable in our science. Thoroughly familiar with medical literature, he had also studied disease in the great book of nature, at the bedside in private practice and in the wards of the hospitals. Thus, to him, nearly every disease treated of presented itself in the form of individual cases which had come under his notice or had been under his immediate care. From this great treasury of knowledge he continually drew in illustration of the subject matter of his lecture. Catching at the typical features of the disease, its pathological history and phenomena, its diagnosis, general and differential, were given with such clearness and force, that the student saw before him, as at the bed-side, all that was distinctive and important in the case, while the principles of treatment and its results followed with almost mathematical accuracy and precision.

As has been intimated, Dr. Pepper made no effort at oratorical display. The main object of his teaching was apparent—to give a thoroughly practical course—one, which, as far as was possible, would prepare his pupils for the intelligent treatment of disease. His enunciation was distinct, and his delivery rather a rapid than a slow one. No one could visit his lecture-room without noticing the marked attention of the class, nor be associated with the students without perceiving with what affectionate respect they regarded their preceptor.

Dr. Pepper occupied the chair of Practice, as has already been said, for a period of four years. Even when about to enter on its duties his health was feeble, and it was feared by many that it would not prove equal to the increased tax thus imposed on it. That by increasing his engagements already too numerous, and especially by compelling him to begin his visits at an earlier hour of the day, or to protract them to a later one,

it may have tended to break him down, may perhaps be admitted, but, by himself, the professorship was never regarded as a burden. He has frequently been known to remark that to lecture was a relaxation to him, and that he looked upon the hour thus occupied as the most pleasant of his daily duties.

It is a remarkable fact, and in keeping with what has already been noticed,<sup>2</sup> that during the whole four years of his professorship, a period the most exciting and important in our national history, notwithstanding the cares of a very large practice, and the infirmities of declining health, Dr. Pepper was never absent from a lecture, and never failed to meet his class punctually at the time appointed for its delivery.

Towards the close of the winter of 1863 Dr. Pepper's voice began to fail, and his increasingly impaired health became evident to himself and his friends. He was, indeed, one of the first to notice the change in his voice, and soon after determined to retire from the University. "I have a horror," said he to a friend, "of holding any place the duties of which I cannot properly perform—of being a drag to the College." Although assured that no one but himself could possibly regard him as such, he adhered to his resolution, and soon after tendered to the trustees his resignation of the chair he had so ably filled, and which was only accepted in the hope that a life so valuable to the profession and the community might thus be prolonged.

A month or two later he removed to his beautiful residence at Chestnut Hill, where it was fondly hoped in the pure air and complete rest of the country, and with the watchful care of his devoted family, he might find that health which had been denied him in the city.

In addition to the slight cough with which he had been affected for some years, Dr. Pepper at this time suffered greatly from attacks of dyspnœa, brought on by the slightest exertion, and occurring with great violence at night. At best but a poor sleeper, these nightly attacks of oppression distressed him greatly and very much increased his debility. But as the summer advanced, they became less and less frequent, and his health so much improved that in October he determined to return to the city, and though not intending to engage in the active duties of the profession, he yet looked forward to an office and consultation practice. Such, however, was not to be the case. An attack of acute bronchitis brought on by exposure during a carriage drive, suddenly increased his oppression, and afterwards became complicated by the occurrence of hæmoptysis. Under the skilful care of his sons, both highly intelligent medical men, this was somewhat relieved, but on Saturday the 15th of October he was again attacked with hemorrhage, at this time of an alarming character. A few hours later he expressed to an intimate personal and professional friend, whom he had sent for, and who had been much with him during his illness, his conviction that his disease must soon prove fatal. With



that wonderful accuracy of diagnosis which had always characterized him, he next directed attention to the state of his lungs, describing in detail the pathological conditions which he believed existed there, and which subsequent investigation proved to be correct in the minutest particular—the more remarkable, as no previous physical examination of his chest had been made, for although it had been suggested, he always seemed disinclined to have it done, and, as the event proved, his own sensations had been quite sufficient to reveal to him the real character of the ill-health from which he had been suffering. For this last attack the usual remedies were resorted to, and he became quiet and comparatively comfortable. In the afternoon another attack of hemorrhage occurred, after which he sank back exhausted, and remained in this state for about an hour, his breathing becoming less and less frequent, until he quietly passed away from earth, so quietly and so peacefully that his son, in whose arms he reclined, could not tell at what moment he ceased to live.

Thus at the early age of 55, Dr. Pepper died, just in the maturity of his mental powers and of his capacity for usefulness, at the very period when the arduous labors of a lifetime would have shown their best results, when the richest fruits of long study and ripe experience were about to be gathered, giving still higher honor to him, and greater benefits to the community. It was with him, as it has been and will be again, with so many others that we have to mourn, that the pale messenger makes his call and takes from among men those that can be most illy spared, and at the very time when their value is best understood and their loss most sure to be sincerely deplored.

He was interred in one of the most beautiful of all the charming spots to be found in the Laurel Hill Cemetery. Far above the waters of the Schuylkill, the views, up and down that romantic river, are of surpassing beauty. The ground all around his final resting place was familiar to him when enjoying the sports of boyhood, and not less in the happiest days of early manhood, having been for a long time the elegant and universally admired country seat of his family. His remains were followed to the grave by his late colleagues of the University, many of his professional brethren, and not a few of his grateful patients and admiring fellow-citizens who felt it a privilege to pay this last mark of respect to one who had so nobly and so usefully filled his place in life.

Over the massive block of enduring granite which covers what was mortal of Dr. Pepper, rises the symbol of the faith in which he lived and died. A Christian, in practice as well as profession, he always preferred the works which illustrate such a faith, to the strongest declarations of belief, and he had little respect for the highest claims of religious experience where the visible fruits were wanting.

Wherever Dr. Pepper held public positions, so faithful was he in the



performance of duty that his resignations were always received with sincere expressions of regret. The resolutions of respect and sympathy so generally adopted, at the time of his death, by the various societies and bodies with which he was connected, were only other evidences of how generally those who knew him most intimately had learned to appreciate his rare professional ability and his many noble traits of character.

Dr. Pepper had a delicate frame and was of a nervous temperament. He was about five feet seven inches high, and his weight rarely exceeded one hundred and thirty pounds. He was quick and active in his movements, had great industry, and applied himself with earnestness to whatever he undertook. During his life he had several attacks of illness, which, for the time, gave himself and his friends great uneasiness, but from which he always seemed to recover perfectly. Occasionally, when not well, he suffered very much from sleeplessness—for, even at ordinary times, as already remarked, he was a poor sleeper, and frequently spoke of this difficulty as one of the most trying of his constitutional peculiarities. At one time, probably owing to gastric derangement, he was for a long period very much annoyed by double vision, and to such an extent that walking in the streets was exceedingly troublesome, on account of the confused appearance of objects thus induced. No trifling indisposition, however, could keep him from the performance of his professional duties. It was only when he was suffering from severe illness that he was missed from the regular scenes of labor. He felt it a duty to practice his profession as long as he was able. If his great experience had enabled him to be of use to his afflicted fellow beings, he felt that he had no right to cease to do all he could, with justice to himself and his family, for their relief. It was this feeling, joined to the conviction that he would be much happier by such a course, that led him to decide—instead of abandoning his profession altogether, as his means would fully have justified him in doing—to render what professional service he could to his patients, had his health permitted him to return to the city.

Dr. Pepper had a remarkable faculty in inspiring the confidence of his patients. Exceedingly careful in his preliminary examinations, when he did express an opinion, it seemed very generally to carry absolute conviction of its soundness to those to whom it was addressed. The general accuracy of his diagnosis, the extreme rarity, certainly, of grave errors of this description fully justified this confidence. In the later years of his life his consultation practice was exceedingly large, and his professional brethren, who so often sought the benefit of his great skill, I am sure will bear me out in saying that his ability in the investigation of obscure disease was of no ordinary kind, and the subsequent complete verification of his opinions in such doubtful cases very often excited surprise, as it could not fail to inspire increased confidence. Gentle and rather retiring in his manners, Dr. Pepper was not profuse in his use of words in his intercourse

with his patients, but he rarely failed to insure a conviction of his interest and sympathy, and to secure their faith in his prescriptions, as well as their lasting personal regard. Although an exceedingly pleasant and genial companion among his friends, he was very domestic in his habits, and always looked upon his own home as the great and unfailing treasury of happiness.

Dr. Pepper was a laborious student in whatever he undertook to investigate, and his familiarity with medical literature was accurate and extensive, but he was so indisposed to make a display of his acquisitions, that his learning was much more varied and profound than ordinary acquaintances might have supposed. His writings were not voluminous. He always thought that the great object in medical writing should be to add to the accumulated knowledge of the profession, and from the time that he felt qualified to do his share in this great work, he was so fully occupied with his daily and steadily increasing professional duties, that it would have been difficult for him to have prepared any very extended original work, even had he felt so disposed. He was, however, a frequent contributor to the medical journals, and as might have been anticipated, these articles were distinguished by brevity, clearness of expression, and an eminently practical character. Among these, will be found Clinical Reports of Cases noted in the Pennsylvania Hospital, in the *American Journal of the Medical Sciences*, vol. vi. October, 1843; on Chronic Hydrocephalus, in the *American Journal of Medical Sciences*, vol. xx. Oct. 1850; on Scrofulous Inflammation of the Lungs and Pulmonary Condensation, *American Journal of Medical Sciences*, vol. xxxii. 1852; on Hepatic Abscess, *American Journal of Medical Sciences*, vol. xxi.; on Tubercle of the Brain, with Remarks, *Medical Examiner*, vol. xii. new series; on the Treatment of Intermittent Fever by Quinoidine, *Medical Examiner*, vol. x. new series; Poisonous Effects produced by Pork, *Medical Examiner*, vol. i. first series; Coup de Soleil, and Pseudo-membranous Croup, in the *Transactions of the College of Physicians*, vol. iii. 1850; Bebeerin and Cinchonia in Intermittent Fever, in the *American Journal of the Medical Sciences*, vol. xxiv. 1862; on the Use of the Spirometer in Diseases of the Lungs, in *American Journal of Medical Sciences*, vol. xxv. 1862; a Grain of Coffee in the Air-passages Fatal after being retained three years and a half, *American Journal of Medical Sciences*, vol. xx. Oct. 1850; Cases of Diseased Gall-bladder, *American Journal of the Medical Sciences*, vol. xxxiii. Jan. 1857, besides which he published several other cases in the Proceedings of the Pathological Society, and also reviews of different publications in the *American Journal of the Medical Sciences*.

It is difficult for one who, during more than thirty years, had the privilege of intimate personal friendship and the advantages of the most confidential professional intercourse, to attempt to do justice to the private virtues and public character of a man like Dr. Pepper, without

feeling how much must be omitted in a memoir like this, that would tend to illustrate still more strongly the goodness and purity of his life, and the reality of the sense of irreparable loss felt by many who have been accustomed to lean on him as a trusted counsellor and friend in the saddest periods of sickness and sorrow. And yet without knowing all the grounds for feelings like these, no one can thoroughly appreciate all his excellent traits of character, as a Christian man, a good citizen, an able physician, a devoted husband and father, a true friend—nor understand what tended to raise him highest in the estimation of those who knew him best, as one of the justly honored and deservedly successful in the ranks of our noble profession, and who, in passing from amongst us, has left a void which to many can never be filled, feelings of sorrow that can find no fitting expression, and that sense of private grief, that, with all its sacredness, ever shrinks from public exposure.



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