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Biographical sketch of Dr. Austin Flint.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

OF

DR. AUSTIN FLINT.

BY

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AUSTIN FLINT, born October 12, 1812; died March 13, 1886.

This life of nearly seventy-four years is the life of a physician of the greatest eminence: Practitioner, Hospital Physician, Clinical Observer, Author, Professor, Medical Philosopher. From the time he began to labor, each year showed something gained, not to him alone, but to the world; and it is with the public aspects of his career rather than with the circumstances of his private life, however attractive, that this sketch is intended to deal.

Yet to the student of inherited qualities there is much of interest in the mere details of ordinary biographical description concerning Dr. Flint. Born of New England parents, his lineage was strictly that of the profession in which he became so distinguished. He was the fourth in succession of a medical ancestry; his grandfather was a highly esteemed Surgeon in the Army of the Revolution. A follower of Darwin and of Galton might, indeed, ask, whether his love of the study of natural phenomena, his patience, his keenness

of observation, his love of truth, were not transmitted traits, intensified in each generation. His sturdy character and strong frame also were heirlooms, and with the good collegiate training he received at Amherst and at Harvard, fitted him well for his future career.

Dr. Flint graduated in medicine at Harvard, in 1833, and at once began to practise in Boston. But he did not stay there long, most of his early professional life being spent in Buffalo, where, as editor of the *Buffalo Medical Journal*, which he started, and subsequently as one of the founders of the Buffalo Medical College, he began, by the ability of his writings and teachings, to attract general attention. His spreading reputation caused him to be called to the Chair of Theory and Practice of Medicine in the University of Louisville, and we find him there associated with Dr. Gross. This was the beginning of that warm friendship between these two eminent men, which lasted through their lives. Each has feelingly recorded his appreciation of the other. "We were more than friends," says Flint, in his Memoir of Dr. Gross; "esteem and affection are terms which, although superlatively qualified, express inadequately my attachment to him. I loved him." In his *Autobiography*, Gross speaks of Flint as the American Lænnec, of his lofty character, concluding a notice of his friend with the hope "that it will be a long time before this noble man's life will be rounded off by a full stop."

Dr. Flint remained four years in Louisville. In 1856 we find him back in Buffalo, again connected with the Buffalo Medical College, and busy both as writer and as practitioner. In the winter of 1858, however, and for several winters subsequent, he filled the Chair of Clinical Medicine in the New Orleans School, and became practically familiar with some of the peculiarities of southern diseases. In 1859 he left Buffalo, and henceforth made the city of New York his home. From this time on, his success was very striking. As Professor first in the Long Island College Hospital,

as Professor and one of the main founders of the Bellevue Medical College, as Physician to Bellevue Hospital, as trusted consultant, as one to whom patients came from all parts, Dr. Flint was a very conspicuous figure. His reputation became more and more national, and finally a source of pride to every physician in the land. As he did not allow himself to become immersed in the cares of family practice, he had sufficient leisure to write out his observations, and his active pen was not only recording the fruit of his studies, but all the time sending forth valuable essays and monographs. Of the extraordinary care and industry with which he collected the facts that were to serve as the basis of his work, we may judge by a statement made by his son, the distinguished Professor of Physiology, that Dr. Flint had begun his records of cases in 1833, and had filled sixteen thousand nine hundred and twenty-two folio pages with them; a statement more eloquent in its bare mention than the most elaborate panegyric on his marvellous industry and untiring energy.

Thus laboring, thus famous, thus respected, making friends everywhere by his kindliness, and courtesy, and manly bearing, age crept slowly and gently on him, scarcely whitening his hair, nor seaming his intellectual face, nor bowing his tall, handsome form, nor depriving him of the least power of thought or of action, until he was called to rest by a death such as he had wished for, rapid, not lingering or painful.

During his long and busy life Dr. Flint filled many posts of honor. He was President of the New York Academy of Medicine in 1872; in 1883 to 1884, President of the American Medical Association; and the unanimous voice of the country singled him out as the fittest person to be the President of the International Medical Congress, which was to meet in Washington. He was chosen, but did not live to do more than to begin some of the work of organization. He was a member of many learned societies, both here and in Europe, where his reputation was also great. He was a Corre-

sponding Member of the Academy of Medical Science in Palermo; an Honorary Member of the Medical Society of London, of the British Medical Association; and we find his name on the short roll of the Foreign Honorary Members of the Clinical Society of London. Our College of Physicians made him a Fellow in 1868.

It can certainly not be alleged that his own profession did not recognize his distinguished services. The same cannot be said of our institutions of learning. It is a blot on their sagacity to detect and their desire to encourage true merit, that this writer, original investigator, thinker, known to every member of a liberal profession in every part of the civilized world, should have received no honorary recognition from a single college or university in his own country, with the honorable exception of Yale, which made him a Doctor of Laws in June, 1881.

I trust it may not be regarded as violating the sanctity of private correspondence, if I extract from a letter to me in answer to one in which some congratulatory remarks were made about the degree which Yale had conferred on him, these sentiments so characteristic of the man. "I value the honor much, but no scientific or literary mark of distinction would weigh with me for anything, if I could not at the same time feel assured of the support and appreciation of my own profession, of those who are workers with me in the same cause."

Dr. Flint received many tokens of the esteem in which he was held other than those of literary or scientific character. At the banquet at the Mansion House, given by the Lord Mayor to the members of the International Congress, when it met in London, at which nearly three hundred persons from all nations sat down, he was one of a few selected to reply to the toast "Our Foreign Guests." One of the largest and most elegant dinners ever given in Philadelphia, was that of its physicians to Dr. Flint. The then President of our College, Dr. Stillé, presided, and the warmth of

expression and general good-will evinced toward the one whom all wanted to honor, left no doubt of how fully he was appreciated.

The two most fruitful connections of Dr. Flint with public institutions were with the Bellevue Hospital Medical College as Professor, and with the Bellevue Hospital as Physician. Through the one he influenced thousands of students, stood before them the model of all that is best in our profession, taught them with striking clearness and ability. His voice was full and well modulated, and he was very generally regarded as an admirable, most instructive teacher. To the great teacher, of which only a few appear in every generation, teachers who with all solid acquirements have just enough, or let enough show, of the temperament of the orator, to warm, inspire, and impress, while they convey information, teachers who have a genius for their vocation, he did not belong; but for real instruction, conveyed in a concise and direct manner, with the mark of truth stamped on it by high character, it would have been difficult to find a superior. His lectures, too, like his writings, showed this peculiarity. He cared little for maintaining consistency of views, abandoning doctrines without hesitation, as with the advance of science he became convinced of their inadequacy or incorrectness. In this respect, he resembled John Hunter, who, in reply to one who told him that he had taught the opposite in previous years, gave the answer, "never mind what I taught before, I believe this now to be the truth."

As physician to the Bellevue Hospital, he did a vast amount of clinical work. He recorded, he analyzed, he investigated, he enriched medical literature by his connection with the institution. He took also great interest in the general management of the hospital, and was kind and attentive to its inmates. A tablet of brass set on a panel of oak, erected in his memory at the hospital, by the Commissioners of Public Charity and Correction, gratefully records that "As Physician to Bellevue Hospital for twenty-five years, he con-

tributed largely to its reputation by his character, acquirements, labors, and wise counsels."

Dr. Flint was a voluminous writer. Essays, reviews, monographs, and books flowed from his busy pen. Of his essays, which were chiefly on clinical subjects, the best known ones were contributions to the *American Journal of the Medical Sciences*. The last article which he published himself was one on "Mitral Cardiac Murmurs," in the January number of 1886, in this Journal.

Among his most noteworthy publications, which appeared separately, were the Prize Essay on "Variations of Pitch in Percussion and Respiratory Sounds and their Application to Physical Diagnosis," 1852; "Clinical Report on Chronic Pleurisy," Buffalo, 1853, one of the best analyses of the subject that have to this day been made; and "Clinical Report on Dysentery," 1853. These three, with his "Clinical Reports on Continued Fever," were published in French in an octavo volume, Paris, 1854. His fondness for diseases of the chest was illustrated by the monographs he wrote on the subject; notably his *Practical Treatise on the Physical Exploration of the Chest*, 2d edition, 1866, condensed from the first edition of 1856, and, in my judgment, not improved in some parts by the too rigid condensation; *Compendium of Percussion and Auscultation*, 4th edition, 1869; *Practical Treatise on Diseases of the Heart*, 2d edition, 1870; on *Phthisis*, 1875, a treatise which will always retain its value on account of the close study of cases of the arrested disease; a *Manual of Auscultation*, 3d edition, 1883. Dr. Flint also wrote *Essays on Conservative Medicine*, 1874; a work on *Clinical Medicine*, 1879, and contributed the articles on "Pulmonary Phthisis," and on "Neuroses of the Heart," to the *System of Practical Medicine* by American authors. Since his death, a very interesting little volume on the *Medicine of the Future* has appeared. It was intended to be the Address in Medicine at the British Medical Association in 1886, and was found completed

among his papers. In the insight it affords into his most cherished thoughts, it has almost the interest of an autobiography.

But the work by which he is most widely known and has most influenced his generation, is his *Treatise on the Principles and Practice of Medicine*, first issued in 1866, and now in the sixth edition. It is impossible to speak too highly of its merits. His knowledge differed from that of other men in being more exact, more precise, more personal; and this is reflected in his book, in its exactness, its precision, and in the tone of personal experience which pervades it. The work is the text-book of a large number of our colleges, and has shaped the thought and practice of thousands of American physicians. Nor is it in this country alone that its conspicuous excellence is acknowledged. "America may well be proud," says the London *Lancet*, in its issue of March 12th of this year, "of having produced a man whose indefatigable industry and gifts of genius have done so much to advance medicine; and all English-reading students must be grateful for the work he has left behind him. It has few equals in point of literary excellence or scientific learning, and no one can fail to study its pages without being struck by the lucidity and accuracy that characterize them."

Dr. Flint's style shows to greater advantage in this treatise than anywhere else. It is concise, it is lucid, it is compressed, yet not monotonous or ungraceful. It must be owned that the diction of his earlier works was not attractive. Macaulay points out, with reference to Bacon, that his style was constantly becoming richer and softer, and more varied in expression in his later writings than in his earlier; the fancy was growing with the judgment, and not, as is almost invariably the case, ripening first, and withering with the development of the sterner faculties. It was the same in the history of the mind of Dr. Flint. With the maturity and ripest state of these faculties, he gained greater variety, fulness, and attractiveness of expression. We do not expect in scientific writing any-

thing but plain and clear language. Any efforts of the fancy, indeed, are out of place. But the diction need not be barren; a rich and finished style is always an additional source of impressiveness, and a great aid to memory.

One of the most marked characteristics of Dr. Flint's mind was its openness to new thoughts and impressions. We see this strikingly illustrated in the manner in which he accepted and advocated the bacterial theory of disease. It has been said that no man over sixty willingly adopts new facts and views. Such was certainly not the case with Dr. Flint. He believed us to be entering upon a revolution in medicine through bacterial etiology. Neither the general applicability and importance nor the limitation of the theory are here being discussed. He may have greatly overrated its utility; but the proof, which the warm adoption of it affords, of the receptivity of his mind is indisputable.

Dr. Flint was more than a mere recorder of facts. He showed himself all through his life capable of taking the broad views of a medical philosopher. We see this trait in his studies on the "Natural History of Disease;" in his essay on "Conservative Medicine, and kindred topics," and in many of his casual addresses. Whether we agree with these views or not, there is no question of the influence they have had on the profession. They are with Dr. Flint the expression of a natural bent of mind, strengthened, perhaps, by intimate contact in his youth with that thoughtful physician, Dr. James Jackson, whose private pupil he was.

Dr. Flint, as is well known, was a strong advocate of the binaural stethoscope, and did more than any one to introduce its use. He was, in truth, a great believer in the advantage of instruments to aid us in detecting abnormal action within the body. "Much is to be expected from this source in the future," he says, in his *Medicine of the Future*. "It seems to me certain that the principle

of the telephone will, by and by, be applied to intrathoracic respiratory and heart sounds, so that they will be transmitted to the ear with more distinctness than they now are by the binaural stethoscope. The healthy and morbid sounds will then be so easily observed as to render the physical diagnosis of pulmonary affections in all cases a very simple problem." He goes further; he predicts that, with improvements in instruments, we may some day be able to study normal and abnormal conditions of the circulation in all the natural organs of the body "by the sounds they make" in the processes of secretion and excretion of nutrition and of morbid growths.

At the time of Dr. Flint's death, he was the acknowledged leader of American medicine. His celebrated friend, Professor Dalton, in a warm tribute to his memory, has most truthfully said, "It was the universal verdict, from which I have never heard a dissenting voice, that among all the eminent men of the profession in this wide country, his was the name that would be inevitably selected as the first." We may go further, with, perhaps, the single exception of Rush, there is no man, who, in his many sided capacity of teacher, author, and investigator, has had thus far as much influence on the medicine of this country as Austin Flint. No great discovery is linked to his name, as to that of Morton or to that of Sims. But in his impress on the profession here, he stands preëminent. What will be the judgment on his scientific labors in the future we cannot tell. The man whom everybody respected and liked, the upright, courteous gentleman who was with us as a leader actively at work but yesterday, is not one to have meted out to him a verdict which posterity will surely accept. Yet no matter what the lapse of years, while openness of mind, energy directed to the best objects, perfect trust in the development of a great branch of science, the purest motives, the most steadfast industry, sympathy with all research and keenness in undertaking it, are recognized as great traits, so

long must this famed physician remain as a brilliant example of them. He is of those who do not need a monument. Impensa monumenti supervacua est: memoria nostra durabit, si vitâ meruimus, says the younger Pliny. Austin Flint's memory certainly will; his life had deserved it.