

Yandell (L.P.)

NOTES

ON THE

LIFE AND WRITINGS

OF

DR. BENJAMIN RUSH.

By LUNSFORD P. YANDELL, M. D.

REPRINTED FROM THE AMERICAN PRACTITIONER FOR JULY, 1876.

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Dr. Benjamin Rush, at the close of the last century, was not only the most noted medical man in the new world, but was absolutely without a rival to dispute his title to supremacy. He was at once the first writer, the first teacher, and the foremost practitioner of his time in America. During the generation to which he belonged he was more read and oftener quoted, not only than any other American physician, but than all our other medical authors put together. The fame of his writings and teachings, it may be said without exaggeration, filled the land, and his name was upon the lips of the people as well as of physicians. His name, by common consent, has been placed among the worthies of the profession, as one which the world will not willingly let die; but it may well be asked, who now reads his works? There they repose on the shelves of our libraries, gathering cobwebs and dust, beside the works of Sydenham and Cullen, hardly more

* Read before the Louisville Academy of Medicine.

disturbed by readers than the volumes of Boërhaave, Galen, or Hippocrates.

The works of Rush deserve a better fate than this. With text-books, mere manuals, systems of medicine, mutability is the law; they are necessarily short-lived. In a science constantly advancing, like medicine, the system of one age is insufficient for the next, and must yield to others embracing a fuller history of the subject; but the "Inquiries" of our great philosopher abound in original observations, in accounts of epidemics witnessed by himself, in suggestive facts, and bold, ingenious conjectures, which have a lasting interest. I propose to spend an hour, this evening, in a review of some of these, in the hope that I may thereby excite in some of you a curiosity to know more about the labors of this illustrious physician.

Dr. Rush was elected Professor of Chemistry in the Pennsylvania College, now University of Pennsylvania, in August, 1769, when only twenty-three years old, and a little more than a year after taking the degree of M. D. at the University of Edinburgh. And hardly had he entered upon his duties as teacher before he commenced his career as author, for the following year he published a number of "Sermons," as he styled them, written for young men on the subject of temperance and health. But while yet a student he recorded in his diary observations on the yellow fever which desolated Philadelphia in 1762, and these memoranda afford almost the only notices preserved of that epidemic. He loved to write, and urged upon his pupils the great advantage of making notes of all they read or saw, repeating to them often the maxim, *legere sine calamo est somnere*. Though engaged nearly nine years in the study of his profession, we have his own declaration that he never wasted a day in idle or frivolous amusements.

In 1774 he began to prepare those papers which gave him rank at once among the philosophers of his day, and which now are correctly looked upon as the beginning of our medical literature. The first was read as an anniversary oration

before the American Philosophical Society, of which Jefferson and Franklin were members. Its subject is the Natural History of Medicine among the Indians of North America. It is a truly remarkable paper, in which every class of readers will find matter to interest and instruct. Its style is fresh, easy, and singularly pleasing. We meet with opinions in which we may not concur, but the graceful flow of his language must captivate all, as in the following passage: "Some of you may remember the time, and our fathers have told those of us who do not, when the diseases of Pennsylvania were as few and as simple as those of the Indians. The food of the inhabitants was then simple; their only drink was water; their appetites were restrained by labor; religion excluded the influence of sickening passions; private hospitality supplied the want of a public hospital; nature was their only nurse, temperance their principal physician."

In 1780 he wrote an account of a bilious remitting fever as it appeared in Philadelphia that year, and which has since often been described under the term "dengue or break-bone fever." In some cases it was ushered in with coma; in many it was introduced by delirium, and in not a few it was fatal. I may mention, as showing how this disease varies in character, at different periods and places, that I saw it in Memphis, in the autumn of 1860, when out of many thousand persons attacked by it, I believe only a single one died. A distinguishing symptom first noticed by Dr. Rush, which I experienced in my own case and remarked in every instance, was extreme dejection of spirits during the convalescing stage. A young lady, with great feeling, said to Dr. Rush that she thought the complaint "ought to be called break-heart rather than break-bone fever." By giving a gentle vomit of tartar emetic in the forming stage, he says he frequently produced an immediate cure; and in every instance the patient found relief from the pains in the head and limbs by emetics and gentle purgatives. He continues: "I constantly recommended to my patients to lie in bed. Persons who struggled against the fever by sitting up, or who attempted to shake it

off by labor or exercise, either sunk under it or had a slow recovery." Sometimes dysenteric symptoms accompanied the fever, when he used opium with good effect; and this leads him to remark that "those physicians enjoy little pleasure in practicing physic who know not how much of the pain and anguish of fevers, of a certain kind, may be lessened by the judicious use of opium."

No remedy is so intimately associated with the name of Rush as blood-letting. His use of the lancet brought great obloquy upon him in his lifetime, and his devotion to the lancet, it was charged by some of his contemporaries, amounted to insanity. And yet, in the fever under consideration, he never resorted to it. "Out of several hundred patients whom I visited," he remarks, "I did not meet with a single case in which the lancet was indicated by the state of the pulse, which was generally full, but never hard;" and he adds that he heard of several cases in which bleeding was followed by fatal results.

Scarlatina, of which he gives an account in the same volume of his *Inquiries*, appeared to him quite amenable to treatment, "a vomit of ipecacuanha or tartar emetic, mixed with a few grains of calomel, never failing completely to check the disorder in its forming stage," or so far mitigate its violence as to dispose it to a favorable issue in a few days. And he even held that "when the contagion of this disease has been received into the body, a purge has prevented its being excited into action, or rendered the disorder mild throughout a whole family."

His views in regard to cholera infantum were most just. He was fully persuaded that summer fruits had no agency in developing the complaint. His remedies were, first, an emetic, then opiates, the cold bath, and, above all, country air.

Membranous croup, like scarlet fever, he regarded as altogether under the control of medicines. "The bark," he declared, "is scarcely a more certain remedy for intermittents than calomel is in this species of cynanche."

Speaking of intermittent fever, he says he had found that where bark did not succeed after three or four days' trial, the application of blisters to the wrists often rendered it effectual; but that where, from any cause, the disease was protracted into the winter months, he generally cured it by one or two moderate bleedings. He continues: "I have known several instances in which pounds of bark have been taken without effect, in which the loss of ten or twelve ounces of blood has immediately cured the disorder."

On no subject, perhaps, have the therapeutics of Dr. Rush been so grossly misapprehended, not to say misrepresented, as pulmonary consumption. It has been constantly affirmed that he bled his patients in every stage of their disease, shut them up in stove-rooms, and gave them mercury to the point of causing salivation. But so far is this from the truth that he insists, with Sydenham, on horseback exercise as the one great remedy in the disease. He bled for intercurrent inflammations, but says, "If there does exist in nature a remedy that will supply the place of exercise, I believe it will be found in the class of tonics." The prime indication is to "restore the vigor of the constitution." All depends, he taught, upon the tone of the general system. "If consumption be a disease of general debility," as he held, "it becomes us to attempt the cure of it in its first stage; that is, before it produce the symptoms of cough, bloody or purulent discharges from the lungs, and inflammatory or hectic fever." And among his remedies are the cold bath, steel and bark, exercise being put before all.

In dropsy his practice was purely empirical, but, with some good remedies, he gives a number of curious cases; as, for example, that of Dr. Samuel Johnson, who was temporarily relieved by fasting; and that of another patient who was cured by fear; and he concludes the chapter with the following words, in which we have an expression of his singularly hopeful temper: "But let us not despair. It becomes a physician to believe that there is no disease necessarily incurable; and that there exist in the womb of time *certain*

remedies for all those disorders which elude the present limits of the healing art."

He has, in the same volume, an interesting chapter on the "influence of the military and political events of the American revolution upon the human body," in which, among others, he mentions the curious fact, that "the population of the United States was more rapid from births during the war than it had ever been in the same number of years since the settlement of the country." This he attributed "chiefly to the quantity of money, and to the facility of procuring the means of subsistence during the war, which favored marriages among the laboring part of the people." Such was the cheapness of living that, he says, beggars of every description disappeared in the year 1776, and were seldom seen till near the close of the war.

Science has been truly said to consist in its facts, and the same may be remarked of the value of Dr. Rush's writings. They constitute a repository of trustworthy observations to which the reader always turns with instruction. I know not where else, in the same compass, so large a number of interesting facts is to be found recorded. He himself felt that his strength was rather in these than in his deductions from them; for, in his paper on consumption, he says: "In relating the *facts* that are contained in this essay, I wish I could have avoided reasoning upon them; especially as I am confident of the certainty of the facts, and somewhat doubtful of the truth of my reasonings." In this the modesty of a true philosopher appears.

His "Account of the state of the body and mind in old age, with observations on its diseases and their remedies," abounds in personal observations, in incidents in biography and history, and in medical facts, and is one of the most charming essays to be found in any literature. Among other means for securing a green old age, he mentions "young company," which, he contends, should be preferred by old people to the company of persons of their own age. And he goes on to say: "I think I have observed old people to

enjoy better health and spirits when they have passed the evening of their lives in the families of their children, than when they lived by themselves. Even the solicitude they feel for the welfare of their descendants contributes to invigorate the circulation of the blood, and thereby to add fuel to the lamp of life."

Philadelphia was visited in 1773 by an epidemic of yellow fever more fatal than any that had preceded it, and the year following he published an account of the disease, which forms the third volume of his "Inquiries." He believed, at one time, that the fever was contagious, but had the candor to acknowledge that he was led by the arguments of Webster and of his pupil, Dr. Charles Caldwell, to change his opinion. He thought, for a time, that he was the first to ascribe the pestilence to a domestic origin, but when he learned that Dr. Bond had maintained the doctrine before him he candidly published the fact to the world. No more graphic history of an epidemic is to be found in our language than is here given of yellow fever. He describes with great force the distress of mind with which he saw the scourge advance and his patients sink under it, regardless of his remedies. "Baffled in every attempt to stop the ravages of this fever," he says, "I anticipated all the numerous and complicated distresses in our city which pestilential diseases have so often produced in other countries. The fever had a malignity and an obstinacy which I had never before observed in any disease, and it spread with a rapidity and mortality far beyond what it did in the year 1762. Heaven alone bore witness to the anguish of my soul in this awful situation. But I did not abandon a hope that the disease might yet be cured. I had long believed that good was commensurate with evil, and that there does not exist a disease for which the goodness of Providence has not provided a remedy. Under the impression of this belief, I applied myself with fresh ardor to the investigation of the disease before me. I ransacked my library, and pored over every book that treated of the yellow fever. The result of my researches for

a while was fruitless. The account of the symptoms and cure of the disease by the authors I consulted were contradictory, and none of them appeared altogether applicable to the prevailing epidemic. Before I desisted from the inquiry to which I had devoted myself, I recollected that I had among some old papers a manuscript account of the yellow fever as it prevailed in Virginia in the year 1741, which had been put into my hands by Dr. Franklin, a short time before his death. I had read it formerly, and made extracts from it into my lectures upon that disorder. I now read it a second time. I paused upon every sentence; even words in some places arrested my attention. In reading the history of the method of cure, I was struck with the following passages: 'Evacuation by purges is more necessary in this than most other fevers. I have given a purge when the pulse has been so low that it could hardly be felt, and the debility extreme, and yet both one and the other have been restored by it.' Here I paused. A new train of ideas suddenly broke in upon my mind." He at once tried the practice, giving, at first, calomel and jalap in doses of ten grains each, but as this proved to be too slow finally increasing the jalap to fifteen grains; and the effect, he said, far exceeded his expectations. It perfectly cured four out of five of the first patients to whom he gave the purgatives, notwithstanding some of them were advanced several days in the disorder. He imparted the prescription to the College of Physicians, and endeavored to remove the fears of his fellow-citizens by assuring them that the disease was no longer incurable. "I can never forget the transport with which Dr. Pennington ran across the street to inform me, a few days after he began to give strong purges, that the disease yielded to them in every case."

But we must not infer from this strong testimony to the value of purgatives, that he employed no other remedies. With their use he conjoined cool air, cold drinks, cold water bathing, and above all blood-letting. The success of his practice, as has been said, surpassed his fondest hopes, and he

exclaims, "Never before did I experience such sublime joy as I now felt in contemplating the success of my new remedies. It repaid me for all the toils and studies of my life. The conquest of this formidable disease was not the effect of accident, nor of the application of a single remedy, but it was the triumph of a principle in medicine." On the 10th of September he wrote in his diary: "Thank God! Out of one hundred patients whom I have visited or prescribed for this day, I have lost none."

The practice, however, was not universally accepted by his brother practitioners; on the contrary, it encountered a storm of opposition. Kuhn, one of his colleagues, as well as Wistar, denounced it as most dangerous; and Currie, a physician and writer of note, went so far as to declare that it "could not fail of being certain death." By many of his brethren he was represented as insane, and some of his fellow-citizens even proposed to "drum him out of the city." "One of my patients," he says, "who had believed it (his insanity) expressed her surprise at perceiving no deviation from my ordinary manner in a sick room." His own health gave way at last under the severe pressure to which it was subjected, and his friends urged him to retire to the country; but to a correspondent he wrote that he "had resolved to stick to his principles, his practice, and his patients, to the last extremity." And he refers to the slanders propagated against him "only for the sake of declaring, in this public manner, that I most heartily forgive them; and that if I discovered at any time an undue sense of the unkindness and cruelty of those slanders, it was not because I felt myself injured by them, but because I was sure they would irreparably injure my fellow-citizens, by lessening their confidence in the only remedies that I believed to be effectual in the reigning epidemic." He adds magnanimously, "I commit them to the dust."

His history of yellow fever is a truly great work. His account is minute, spirited, graphic, and possesses all the interest of a personal narrative. I am sure that no one who begins to read it will be disposed to lay it down without con-

cluding it; and no one can follow the author through his faithful story without a conviction that he was at once a philosopher and a man of true nobleness of soul.

Theory, a hundred years ago, was a leading feature in the teachings of every medical man who claimed to be an instructor. When a student with Dr. Redman, Rush adopted that of Boërhaave respecting fever, that the proximate cause is "a lentor of the blood," together with morbid matters in the vital fluid; but on going to Edinburgh he relinquished this theory and embraced that of Hoffman, which Cullen had accepted and improved, to-wit, that the cause is a spasm of the capillaries of the surface of the body. This he found unsatisfactory when he became a teacher, and so he framed one of his own, according to which fevers of all kinds are preceded by general debility, which gives place, sooner or later, to increased excitability. There is but one cause of fever, and that is a stimulus, which gives rise to irregular or convulsive action in the arteries. And as there is but one cause of fever, so fever itself is a unit, as fire is one and the same whether created by friction, fermentation, electricity, or combustion; pleurisy, dropsy, angina, phthisis, and the rest, being but symptoms of the primary disease in the sanguiferous system. Apoplexy is but an apoplectic form of fever, and so of rheumatism, mania, nephritis, etc. The eruptive state of fever is shown in small pox, measles, and the other exanthemata.

Dr. Rush submitted this theory to his pupils, as a substitute for that of his great master, Cullen, with the lines:

"We think our fathers fools so wise we grow,
Our wiser sons, I hope, will think us so."

No professional son of Dr. Rush will ever account him a fool. At the same time it must be admitted that anything more baseless than his theory it would be difficult to find in all the dreams of philosophers. But we are to remember that it was of such stuff that medical speculation had been composed for ages and still consisted in his day, and his hypotheses are as substantial as those that had preceded them. Happily, a

change has come over the spirit of medicine, and medical teachers no longer waste much time framing theories of fever.

He had remarked, in the treatment of fever, that convalescence was a pretty sure attendant upon salivation, and naturally but falsely inferred that the specific effect of mercury was curative in such cases; and hence it became a practice with him, which unfortunately obtained long and extensively after his time, to induce ptyalism in acute diseases. I have a most vivid recollection of the appearance of patients in the infirmary at Baltimore, in connection with the University, under the care of his pupil, Dr. Potter, with bowls at their cheeks to catch the saliva as it flowed day after day from their mouths. Long since the barbarous practice has been relinquished, the profession having come to understand that salivation follows convalescence, and is in no sense or degree the cause of it.

The "Inquiries" close with "a defense of blood-letting as a remedy for certain diseases," in which are displayed the boldness, the independence of thought, the earnestness, and the enthusiasm, by which Dr. Rush was distinguished above all his contemporaries. Blood-letting, he taught, was indicated in the inflammatory state of fever; by sudden suppression of natural discharges inducing plethora; by the proximate cause of fever; by the symptoms of its first state; by the rupture of blood vessels; by the relief obtained in fevers; by the immense advantages attending it in inflammatory fevers. Some of these advantages he recites. Thus he says: It frequently strangles a fever; it imparts strength by removing indirect debility; it reduces frequency of pulse when excessive, and increases it when preternaturally slow; it relieves nausea and vomiting; it renders the bowels more soluble by purging physic; it renders the system easier of salivation; it removes or lessens pain in every part of the body, relieves burning heat of the skin, checks sweats, sometimes checks a diarrhœa and tenesmus, after astringents have failed; it removes coma, induces sleep, prevents effusions of serum and blood, and the chronic diseases of cough, con-

sumption, jaundice, abscess in the liver, and all the different states of dropsy, which so often follow autumnal fevers.

The following case affords at once an example of his heroic practice, and some insight into his character as a man. He says:

“My friend, Mrs. Lennox, after having been cured of the yellow fever by seven bleedings, was affected, in consequence of taking a ride, with a slight return of fever, accompanied by an acute pain in the head, which I was afraid would end in a dropsy of the brain. As her pulse was tense and quick, I advised repeated bleedings to remove it. This was not followed. The pain in the meantime became more alarming. In this situation, two physicians were proposed by her friends to consult with me. I objected to them both because I knew their principles and modes of practice to be contrary to mine, and that they were proposed only with a view of wresting the lancet from my hand. From this desire of avoiding a controversy with my brethren, where conviction was impossible on either side, as well as to obviate all cause of complaint by my patient's friends, I offered to take my leave of her, and to resign her wholly to the care of the two gentlemen who were proposed to attend her with me. To this she objected in a decided manner. But that I might not be suspected of an undue reliance upon my own judgment, I proposed to call upon Dr. Griffiths or Dr. Physiek to assist me in my attendance upon her. Both these physicians had renounced the prejudices of the schools in which they had been educated, and had conformed their principles and practice to the present improving state of medical science. My patient preferred Dr. Griffiths, who in his first visit to her, as soon as he felt her pulse, proposed more bleeding. The operation was performed by the doctor himself, and repeated daily for five days afterwards. From an apprehension that the disorder was so fixed as to require some aid to blood-letting, we gave her calomel in such doses as to excite a salivation. By the use of these remedies she recovered slowly, but so perfectly as to enjoy her usual health.”

Yet, after all, Dr. Rush was not an indiscriminate bleeder, but points out clearly the state of the pulse and the circumstances in which bleeding is proper or inadmissible; and he alludes to numerous cases in which the lancet, unwisely employed, had seemed to him to have been the cause of death.

An anecdote is related of him, bearing upon his extravagant use of the lancet and calomel, which shows that the idea of insanity which prevailed in relation to him was not altogether unnatural. When the epidemic of 1793 was at its height, he had gone one day over to Kensington, one of the suburbs of Philadelphia, to visit a friend ill with the fever. The fact that he was in the neighborhood soon became generally known, and the friends and relations of the sick collected, according to the story, not by dozens but by fifties and hundreds, near a bridge which it was known he must cross in returning, to consult him. Finding his way blocked up by the great assemblage, and unable to visit all who sought his aid, he directed his carriage to be stopped and requested the multitude to approach him as closely as they could, when he said to them: "I treat my patients successfully by blood-letting, and copious purging with calomel and jalap, ten grains of each for adults, and six for children; and I advise you, my good friends, to use the same remedies." "What!" cried a voice from the crowd, "bleed and purge every one?" "Yes," replied the doctor, "bleed and purge all Kensington;" and then drove on.*

His opposition to nosology is as well known as anything relating to his medical opinions. Rising from his chair as he lectured, it is related by his old pupils, he would exclaim with intense earnestness, in imitation of Cato, "*Delenda, delenda, delenda est nosologia.*" This hostility resulted partly from his peculiar notions about the unity of disease, but was chiefly excited by the routine practice which he saw physicians continually pursuing. Disease he held, and held wisely, is to be treated, not for the name but according to the morbid conditions in each case.

* Caldwell's Autobiography.

An erroneous impression has prevailed that he disregarded the voice of nature in disease, and would "turn the *vis medicatrix naturæ* out of a sick room as he would a noisy cat;" and the idea derives color from his use of the expression quoted. But under what circumstances does he advise such a course? When, in violent diseases or those of feeble reaction, nature is doing nothing but mischief. For example, where there is a burning fever, he would reduce it by cold water; where there are wasting watery discharges, as in cholera, he would check them; where the patient is cold, he would warm him; where he has no appetite, still he would feed him until appetite returns. He would reduce reaction to the level of nature's salutary efforts. Follow nature, he inculcated in his writings and his lectures, but not implicitly or blindly. In many cases there is no guide so trustworthy, but the physician must determine when and how far to follow her. "One of the greatest attainments and frequently the last in the practice of medicine," he said, "is to know when to do nothing." "No medicine," he adds, quoting Hippocrates, "is often the best medicine."

Besides his four volumes of *Inquiries*, Dr. Rush published a volume of essays, literary, moral and philosophical, the sermons to young men already mentioned, a volume of introductory lectures, and a treatise on diseases of the mind, which appeared only a short time before he died, and may, perhaps, be accounted the ablest of his works. Of all the books pertaining to medicine written in our country, it is the one oftenest quoted by our brethren abroad. In it the author shows that he was abreast with the most enlightened writers of his day on mental diseases. He had caught the spirit of the great Pinel, and recognized the nature of insanity and the true principle in its treatment. To him the new world is indebted for the application of the law of kindness in the management of lunatics, and their condition has been one of steady improvement from his time to the present day. It is a eulogy justly due him that "he opened the prison doors of

the maniac, unbarred his noisome dungeon, and knocked the shackles from his limbs, substituting moral treatment for brute force, and love for fear."

Of a most sanguine temperament, he had the utmost faith in the capabilities of medicine, and was persuaded that a beneficent Creator had provided a remedy for every physical as well as every moral evil incident to our present state. One of these he predicted, and in the true spirit of the Baconian philosophy. In the following passage the discovery of anæsthetics in childbirth is clearly foretold: "I have expressed a hope in another place (*Med. Repos.*, Vol. VI.) that a medicine would be discovered that should suspend sensibility altogether, and leave irritability, or the powers of motion, unimpaired, and thereby destroy labor pains altogether. I was encouraged to cherish this hope by having known a delivery to take place, in one instance, during a paroxysm of epilepsy, and having heard of another, during a fit of drunkenness, in a woman attended by Dr. Church, in both of which there was neither consciousness nor recollection of pain."

Not many medical writers have ventured to introduce themselves so often and unreservedly to their readers as Dr. Rush. The act is always one of delicacy and some danger, and if not performed gracefully and with dignity is sure to offend. Dr. Rush is never more interesting than when speaking of himself. Among the many charming features that belong to his writings none are more pleasing than his personal allusions, always unaffected, perfectly devoid of vanity, and in good taste. Nothing that I have read exceeds in beauty or pathos the following passage, for example, in which he refers to himself in connection with his forefathers. He is standing in the cemetery where they sleep. "While considering this repository of the dead," he says, "then holding my kindred dust, my thoughts ran wild, and my ancestors seemed to stand before me in their homespun dresses, and to say, 'What means this gentleman by thus intruding upon our repose?' and I seemed to say, 'Dear and venerable friends,

be not disturbed. I am one who inherits your blood and name, and have come here to do homage to your Christian and moral virtues; and truly I have acquired nothing from the world, though raised in fame, which I so highly prize as the religious principles I inherited from you; and I possess nothing that I value so much as the innocence and purity of your character.'"

It is known to you all that Rush was something more than a great medical writer and teacher and philosopher. The storm of revolution, which for a time closed his lecture-room, drove him into politics, and his name appears among those of the great statesmen of his period. A hundred years ago he was subscribing it to our Declaration of Independence, where it will be read by the latest generations of men. Five members of Congress from Pennsylvania had refused to sign the declaration, deeming it premature, and so refusing had retired from the house. Rush was one of those who were elected to fill the vacancies thus created; and so, as has been said, "did not sign the tremendous parchment because he was a member, but became a member that he might sign it."

In the century that has elapsed since that momentous event American medical literature has made very great progress. Many able works have been given to the world by our physicians—works of great research, of true erudition, of immense practical value to the profession—works of which our country is justly proud; but if I were called upon to declare which among them all I would prefer to have written, I should unhesitatingly name the writings of Benjamin Rush.

LOUISVILLE, KY.

