Henry Ingersoll Bowditch

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HENRY INGERSOLL BOWDITCH, M.D.

Dr. Henry Ingersoll Bowditch died January 14th in the eighty-fourth year of his age, after a long illness, which he bore with such courage and cheerfulness and manly patience, that it was a benediction to be near him.

Dr. Bowditch inherited from his father, Nathaniel Bowditch, the eminent mathematician, and his mother, Mary Ingersoll, those sterling qualities which, developed by their example and teaching, made him, in later years, a leader among men. His child-life was fortunate in the companionship of three brothers and two sisters, all very like him in having individuality and force of character. As a school-boy he was kind, generous, sympathetic, truthful, manly, but thoroughly a boy, and the shout that there was "a nigger on the common" or a fight going on between the boys of the opposing sections of the town, brought him quickly to the front. From the open-air life insisted upon by his father came the healthy mind in the sound body. The simple living, the early love of nature, the habits of industry and self-denial so common to the New England life of his time encouraged a thoughtfulness, self-reliance, independence of mind and vigor of action which have become more rare with the increase of wealth and luxury.

In college, he was the same warm-hearted good

fellow, straightforward, impulsive, pugnacious, ardent — although not an ardent scholar — sensitive and popular, always to be depended upon.

After taking the degree of A.B. at Harvard in 1828, and later the A.M., he graduated at the medical school in 1832, having also been house-officer at the Massachusetts General Hospital. Dr. Bowditch spent two years in Europe studying for the most part with Andral, Chomel and especially Louis, whom he fondly called his master. It was still the day of dogmatism and pedantry and system-making, but Louis, one of the first of the iconoclasts, was teaching the close study of nature and the careful observation, faithful records and accurate analysis of facts as the true basis of medical knowledge and practice. Dr. Bowditch came back to Boston full of enthusiasm for Louis's methods, where, indeed, he found Dr. Jacob Bigelow, his senior by twenty-one years, already a pioneer in the new field. While waiting for practice he devoted much time to benevolent work and took great pleasure in helping those who needed encouragement or assistance, especially the young — interests which he kept up to the last. Having by chance been an eye-witness of the famous Garrison mob in 1835, his quick sympathy and intelligent foresight led him to devote his "whole heart to the abolition of slavery." "But," he adds in his diary, "even anti-slavery never has taken me away from constant labor for the elevation of medicine." When he became an abolitionist, church, State, the constitution and laws of the country, old friendships, social ties were all against him. He was mocked, sneered at, passed on the street without recognition by his father's old friends; but his courage never faltered,

his faith in humanity and the final triumph of his cause never failed. Without even any feeling of bitterness for his opponents, he worked steadily on, with pistol in one hand carrying the runaway slave in his chaise to a place of safety; a member of the vigilance committee in 1846 and in 1850; working for the fugitive slave Latimer until his release was secured; a coworker with Phillips and Garrison until the emancipation proclamation. When an escaped slave, Anthony Burns, was given up to his master (May, 1854), and taken in fetters down Court and State Streets with "an overwhelming force of soldiers," Dr. Bowditch dashed past the police on guard, through the cordon line, at the head of a procession of excited citizens, down to the wharf, where a devoted band of abolitionists stood in horror to see the United States cutter, bearing the returned slave, steam away. Vowing that that disgrace should never again happen to the soil of Massachusetts, they formed the anti-man-hunting league, at the instigation of Dr. Bowditch, who was its secretary. Less than a decade later he saw Colonel Shaw march down the same street at the head of his negro regiment; he lived to see slavery abolished, peace and industry established in the South, and himself honored with Phillips and Garrison, and loved by his Southern associates.

With the same qualities he conquered success in his chosen profession. He became admitting physician, 1838 to 1845, and later, visiting physician, 1846 to 1864, at the Massachusetts General Hospital, visiting physician at the Boston City Hospital, 1868 to 1871, consulting physician to the Massachusetts General, City, Carney and New England hospitals, professor of

clinical medicine in the Harvard Medical School, 1859 to 1867, a member of the leading medical societies in Boston, president of the American Medical Association in 1876. He was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, of the Paris Obstetrical Society, of the Paris Society of Public Hygiene; and honorary member of the New York Academy of Medicine, of the Philadelphia College of Physicians, and of the New York, Rhode Island and Connecticut State Medical Societies.

When he was appointed admitting physician, negroes were not received as patients in the hospital. He offered a test case of pneumonia, resigned his position when his negro patient was not admitted, and carried his point, his resignation not being accepted.

After he became of the first eminence in his branch of the medical profession, and his reputation had extended throughout this country and Europe, he was still the man before the physician, and kept in close touch, through the Thursday Club and constant attendance on scientific and medical society meetings, with the spirit of progress in all branches of knowledge. Whatever interested humanity interested him. He gave his assistance freely to all movements to elevate mankind, regardless of race or creed. When his fame was at its zenith, probably even his own family did not learn when his quick eye of sympathy had seen so many ways to help that after a long day's work he had given away far more than the amount of his fees, so little did his right hand know what his left hand was doing. He gave himself freely and gladly with his gift.

To his professional associates he was an inspiration; to the younger men his unfailing kindness of heart and

generosity gave strength and courage; the example of his life raised them to a higher plane of living. To one who had sought advice from many older physicians, and had heard how to get practice and fame and wealth, Dr. Bowditch's words were: "Never do anything which will make you think afterwards that you have been a sneak." Even before the surgeons, in 1850, he successfully operated for empyema; to one surgeon whom he considered one of the boldest, but not willing to open a perinephritic abscess, he proposed himself to push in the scalpel where the surgeon pointed out the proper spot. In sanitary science, too, he led the way. With the eloquence of sincerity, showing to a committee of the legislature his chart indicating the prevalence of pulmonary consumption in Massachusetts, he explained to them the law which he discovered, in 1862, of its relation to soil-moisture, and did much to persuade them to create the first State Board of Health in this country, an example which thirty States have followed. When the board was appointed, in 1869, Dr. Bowditch was easily first in the estimation of the medical profession and the community for the arduous and responsible duties of its president, a position which he retained, at great sacrifice of his time and professional income, until 1879. When the powerful interests attacked by the board in the cause of the public health resisted, and the politicians threatened, and other members of the board hesitated, he pushed on, ardent and impulsive until the point was gained. If his enthusiasm carried him too fast or too far, he was always ready to modify his course. If in his vehement indignation and scathing rebuke of anything which he considered mean or unworthy he had

seemed to wrong any one, he was quick with generous redress. His simplicity and earnestness were so transparent that, as one of the members of the board said, there could be no real dissension in a board of which he was the chairman; and his sense of humor, love of fun, and quick intuition helped him out of many difficult places.

When the yellow fever epidemic of 1878 aroused the nation to the need of a National Board of Health, the chairmanship seemed the opportunity of Dr. Bowditch's life. No one else had the personal qualities and the reputation to fill the place. Unfortunately, the state of his health prevented his accepting it, or, indeed, of serving as a member of the board for more than a year; and there followed its melancholy wreck, which so many thought that he, if he had been chairman, might have averted.

He was one of the earliest advocates of specialties in medicine in this country, freely asking the advice of men much younger than himself, and treating with respect the sincere opinions of the least experienced if given, as he gave his opinions, without assumption. He was one of the first to believe in women as physicians, and thought it but justice to them, as well as good policy for the community, to give to them the same advantages of study as to men.

More than 90,000 manuscript pages of records of cases of private patients, ten printed papers and sixty-six pamphlets printed in twenty-nine journals or society transactions, with numberless short articles on various subjects, attest the industry of his life. His letters and notes and diaries are full of his work with scarcely a mention of his honors.

His epoch-making work in medicine was his thoracentesis, his first operation with the Wyman aspirator having been done in 1850, some time after Dr. Morrill Wyman's "brilliant operation." But his greatest title to honor from his professional associates was his character. An earnest searcher after truth, he stimulated and encouraged good work in others. Honest, fearless, outspoken, he made friends of his enemies by the simplicity, purity, sincerity, and unselfishness of his purpose. He compelled an admiration of the right and a hatred of wrong.

At the meetings of the American Medical Association, at which he was constant in attendance so long as his health permitted, men from Maine to California caught the spirit of his enthusiasm; they felt the stimulus of his eager search for the truth; they were so filled with admiration of his noble life that they went back to their work with a higher sense of personal duty and professional obligation.

During our civil war Dr. Bowditch was an untiring worker in numberless ways. He was enrolling-surgeon, and to him more than to any other single individual was due the persistent effort by which Congress passed the law creating an efficient ambulance service in the army. The ardor of the patriot accepted the loss of the son bearing his grandfather's name, killed while leading a squadron of cavalry at Kelly's Ford; but to the father's love it was a life-long grief, how deep few only could know.

Dr. Bowditch's home-life was ideal. "I think of his home as more filled with love than any other home I ever knew," writes one of his friends. In one respect Dr. Bowditch possessed a remarkably judicial mind: in

that he clearly recognized his own defects. Indeed, he was not only always modest and free from assumption, but he was his own severest critic even where others saw only cause for praise. When he erred in judgment, he did so from spontaneous self-forgetfulness born of a righteous impulse. In the days of chivalry he would have been the knight without fear and without reproach.

Some of his more important medical publications are:

The young stethoscopist; or, the student's aid to auscultation. 1848.

On pleuritic effusions, and the necessity of paracentesis for their removal. 1851.

On paracentesis thoracis, with an analysis of cases. 1852.

On paracentesis thoracis. An analysis of twenty-five cases of pleuritic effusion in which this operation was performed. 1853.

On paracentesis thoracis. 1857.

Paracentesis thoracis: a *résumé* of twelve years' experience. 1863.

Thoracentesis, and its general results during twenty years of professional life. 1870.

Two fatal cases of pleuritic effusion. Would not thoracentesis have saved life? European and American treatment of pleurisy. 1882.

Topographical distribution and local origin of consumption in Massachusetts. 1862.

Consumption in New England; or, locality one of its chief causes. 1862.

Is consumption ever contagious, or communicated by one person to another in any manner? 1864.

Consumption in New England and elsewhere; or, soil-moisture one of its chief causes. 1868.

Consumption in America. 1869.

Open-air travel as a curer and preventer of consumption, as seen in the history of a New England family. 1889.

Report of the committee on climatology and epidemics in Massachusetts, 1868-69. 1869.

Preventive medicine and the physician of the future. 1874.

Annual address in state medicine and public hygiene. 1875.

Address on hygiene and preventive medicine. 1876.

Public hygiene in America. 1876.

Sanitary organization of nations. 1880.

Yellow fever epidemic: what should be done? Imper a tive need of a national sanitary board. 1888.

An apology for the medical profession as a means of developing the whole nature of man. 1863.

Letter from the Chairman of the State Board of Health concerning houses for the people, convalescent homes, and the sewage question. 1870.

The medical education of women. The present hostile position of Harvard University and of the Massachusetts Medical Society. What remedies therefor can be suggested? 1881.

Intemperance in New England. How shall we treat it? 1872.

Intemperance, as governed by cosmic and social law. How can we become a temperate people? 1872.

Inebriate asylums, or hospitals. 1875.

Abuse of army ambulances. 1862.

A brief plea for an ambulance system for the army of the United States. 1863.

The past, present, and future treatment of homœopathy, eclecticism and kindred delusions which may hereafter arise in the medical profession, as viewed from the standpoints of the history of medicine and of personal experience. 1887.

Louis (P. C. A.). Pathological researches on phthisis. Translated from the French, with introduction, notes, additions and an essay on treatment. By Ch. Cowan. Revised and altered by H. I. Bowditch. 1836.

Louis (P. C. A.). Memoirs on the proper method of examining a patient and arriving at facts of a general nature. From the French, by H. I. Bowditch. 1838.

Brief memoir of Louis and some of his contemporaries in the Parisian school of medicine of forty years ago. 1872.

C. F. Folsom.