

**MEMOIR OF D.
HAYES AGNEW**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649279340

Memoir of D. Hayes Agnew by J. William White

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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D. HAYES AGNEW, M.D., LL.D.

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Prepared at the request of and read before the College of Physicians,
Philadelphia, January 4, 1897.

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(Reprinted from University Medical Magazine, February, 1897.)

MEMOIR OF D. HAYES AGNEW, M.D., LL.D.

IN discharging the task which has been assigned to me by the President of the college, and which I regard as at once a duty and an honor, I do not propose to detain you with an account of the early life and work of Dr. Agnew, nor with many biographical dates or details. The excellent custom of embodying such information in the memoirs of distinguished Fellows may well be disregarded in this instance, as a biography of Dr. Agnew just published gives the main incidents of his long and useful career. I shall, accordingly, content myself with the briefest possible statement of the facts which seem essential in attempting to arrive at a just estimate of his position and rank in the profession of this country and among the surgeons of the world, and with a few reminiscences, in which I beg you to excuse occasional mention of my own views or experiences, for the reason that everything relating to him is of interest to hundreds, and is, therefore, worth recording.

He, himself, said not very long ago, in a sketch of his dear friend, Dr. Beadle, that "to preserve, in some tangible or permanent form, a record of the life-work of those who, after having achieved distinction in some one or more of the various spheres of human pursuits, have gone to swell the ranks of the great silent majority is a custom no less commendable than beautiful."

Dr. Agnew was born in Lancaster County, November 24, 1818, of a family which, it is said, can be traced through many generations of North of Ireland and Scotch ancestry to Norman progenitors. In this country, for nearly two centuries, it has been prominent in the history of Pennsylvania, and especially in that of the county of his birth. He was educated at Moscow College, in Chester County, spent some time (1833-34), at Jefferson College, in Canonsburg, Pa., and a year (1834-35), at Delaware College, Newark, Del. He graduated in the medical department of the University of Pennsylvania in 1838, before he was twenty-one years of age. The first few years of his professional life were spent in practice in the vicinity of Nobleville and Pleasant Garden, Chester County. During this time he married (1841), and, being invited to enter the business which had been left by his wife's father, he joined his brothers-in-law in the formation (1843) of

the firm of Irwin & Agnew, iron founders. Fortunately this venture was unsuccessful. The firm failed in three years (1846), from causes associated with a general depression of the iron industry, which occurred at that time, and from the absence in the locality of their works of sufficient facilities for the transportation of ore and fuel. Dr. Agnew returned to the practice of medicine, and for two years (1846-48), practiced in Chester and Lancaster Counties. He was not content, however, with the future which opened up before him. His natural bent was toward the study and teaching of anatomy and surgery. In the country opportunities for dissection were obtained with the greatest difficulty, and there were not only no classes to whom to impart information, but no colleagues or co-workers with whom to discuss it. For these reasons, and probably because he had a consciousness, even though vague and unformulated, of the capacity for good work which lay within him, he came to Philadelphia, in 1848, with the purpose of making it his permanent home, and of prosecuting his studies in his favorite subjects.

I have always regarded this step of Dr. Agnew's with unmixed admiration. He was then thirty years of age. He had had seven years of country practice and three years of business experience. His life thus far had been a hard and laborious one; his disappointments must have been bitter and, as regards his extra-professional essay, almost overwhelming. He had not only failed to accumulate any capital, but he had business debts which, to his sensitive and upright nature, seemed obligations which he was bound in honor to repay.

He left the region in which he had been born and reared, the friends of his family and of his early manhood, the patients who had learned to trust and depend upon him, and came to a city in which the profession was overcrowded, the competition for place and practice keen and unceasing, and the aspirants for both the honors and the rewards of medicine many and able. The move is, perhaps, the earliest traceable indication in his public life of the self-reliance and clear-sightedness which came to be recognized as among his most marked characteristics.

After some deliberation he established himself in a large old-fashioned house at 16 N. Eleventh Street, where I first saw him when, as a boy of ten, I took a note to him from my father, asking him to see a surgical case in a member of our family. This was in 1860. For twelve years he had been laying the foundations of his future success. In 1852 he had begun his teaching of practical anatomy and operative surgery at the Philadelphia School of Anatomy, and his name is still the most distinguished in the long list of able men who have been connected with that institution. In 1854 he had been elected a surgeon

to the Philadelphia Hospital, and had thus been given not only his first hospital wards, but also his first opportunity to perfect himself in the teaching of clinical surgery. He always regarded this step as one of the most important in his professional life, and once in speaking of it to me, said he had already, at that time, decided that he "might as well attempt to be a gardener without a garden as a surgeon without a hospital." He had also, for two years, been occasionally substituting for Dr. Henry H. Smith, professor of surgery at the University, in giving clinical instruction to the students. At the time of which I speak (1860) his reputation as an able operator and a sound consultant was firmly established and rapidly spreading, but his practice was not yet, as he has told me, what would now be called a lucrative one. He was, however, only forty-two years of age, in the enjoyment of the fullest mental and physical vigor, and undoubtedly saw success within his grasp. I remember well the kindly manner in which he received me, and the promptness with which he left the fire, before which he had been reading, changed his slippers for shoes, and prepared to answer the call which I had brought, although it was late on a disagreeable evening. He had then, as always, an impressive personality and a magnetism felt by most persons who came within the sphere of his influence. It was not of the sort that is exploited in the journals as characterizing brilliant politicians and successful criminal lawyers, nor yet of the variety, which history teaches us, has been possessed by many great statesmen and victorious generals. If I attempted to epitomize or explain the secret of Dr. Agnew's attractiveness to so many and such different classes of people, I would say that "kindliness" expressed it perhaps better than any other word. There were strength and energy and determination back of it, with a basis of broad knowledge and justifiable self-confidence; but, all the same, the chief impression he made was of a tender benevolence which always regarded the feelings and interests of others, and which pervaded his whole atmosphere. It was noticeable then even to a child, and it grew as he advanced in years, until the title of the "Dear Old Man," which was given him by the younger Gross, was universally accepted as in the highest degree applicable.

During the civil war Dr. Agnew had large opportunities—chiefly at the Hestonville General Hospital—for operative work, and it is needless to say profited by them to the utmost. In 1863 he was elected surgeon to Wills' Eye Hospital; in 1865, surgeon to the Pennsylvania Hospital; in 1867, surgeon to the Orthopedic Hospital; in 1870, professor of Clinical Surgery, and in 1871, professor of Surgery in the University of Pennsylvania, retaining the latter positions until 1889, when he resigned them to be created emeritus professor of Surgery, and honorary professor of Clinical Surgery.

During all these years he grew steadily in professional strength, his clinics were crowded, his office was filled, his services were in daily demand in all parts of the Middle States, and the University of Pennsylvania was sending out, year after year, hundreds of young men who regarded him, and justly, as the best possible adviser in all cases of surgical disease or injury.

His election in 1889 to the Presidency of the College of Physicians was a distinction which, like all the others, came to him unsought and unsolicited but which he nevertheless highly appreciated. It resulted from the very wide-spread feeling in the college that he should not be permitted to end his days without adding his name to the list of those gentlemen who, without exception, have for years reciprocally honored and been honored by this organization, perhaps the most conservative in America.

My personal remembrances of him begin again in the winter of 1868 when, twice a week, after supper, I used to hurry back to the University to get a front seat at his half-past seven o'clock lectures on surgical anatomy. He was then probably the most popular teacher at the University, and deservedly so. I certainly have never heard lectures on anatomy which, for clearness of description, actual teaching force and living interest, could compare with those which he then gave. On those two nights the room was crowded with the students of both classes and, as he always spent the latter part of the evening in the dissecting-room, every subject was surrounded by its full quota of diligent workers who, if I may judge others by myself, found the chief attraction in the chance of getting a pleasant word of advice or instruction from him.

He looked then very much as he did for the next twenty years of his life. His hair was already thinning and beginning to turn white, as was the moustache, which was prolonged on the cheeks in a military fashion. His height, of more than six feet, and his fine muscular development made his figure commanding in spite of the slight professional stoop which he always had, the result of hours spent over sick-beds and operating tables. His blue eyes were keen but kind in their expression. An old blue dress-coat with brass buttons, which he wore to these lectures, gave him, I remember, to my imagination, a military air, and this fancy came back to me in one of his last attacks of illness, when I found him sitting up in bed with a handkerchief tied around his forehead on account of a severe supra-orbital neuralgia. He looked like a wounded grenadier. I told him of my boyish idea about the blue coat, which he recalled, and said smilingly he would hardly venture to wear it before a medical class of the present day, in spite of their alleged improvement in manners. He has twice in my presence

alluded to himself, half laughingly, half seriously, as "homely." Homely he was in the sense in which Chancer and most English people at the present day employ the word, that is, he was domestic in habits and simple and affable in manners; but homely in our perverted American signification, which usually implies not only plainness of feature but positive ugliness, he never was. A cold-blooded critical analysis of his features might disclose some reason for such an opinion, but no one who knew him looked at Dr. Agnew in that spirit. Goodness and kindness of character shine so clearly through some faces that defects or irregularities are forgotten, and his was one of them.

The College of Physicians and the University are fortunate in possessing masterly portraits of him, which will help to bring before future generations of Fellows and of students his striking personality. We of the present day need no such reminders. We carry his likeness in our hearts.

In reviewing his life one is struck with the fact that both hereditary and personal influences were such as favored the growth and development of that side of his character upon which, as fate willed it, the greatest demand was to be made in years to come. The strain of Scotch blood brought with it dogged perseverance, enduring patience, disregard of luxury, even of personal comfort, ability to sustain uncomplainingly the reverses of fortune, and to submit contentedly to the long-continued economies which they necessitated. But it must be added that these virtues, so often associated with a sombre or stern disposition, were in his case tempered by geniality, cheerfulness and an unvarying and all-embracing tolerance that was one of his chief characteristics.

The wholesome out-door life which he led in the country for so long a time was the best sort of "physical culture," and doubtless those years, which he sometimes thought had been in a sense wasted, came back to him in the form of increased energy, endurance and good health later in life. His very misfortunes supplied an additional stimulus to a character which naturally was so domestic and affectionate that ambition alone might not have brought about its transplantation from the familiar soil in which it had been reared and nourished.

It is a trite observation that our apparent trials often prove to be our greatest blessings. There can be little doubt that Dr. Agnew contained within him the qualities which would have commanded success, even under the unfavorable conditions associated with material prosperity, but neither is it doubtful that the years spent while waiting for practice, when he went to the dissecting-room after his morning office hours, went back after his midday dinner, spent most of the afternoon there and returned after an early supper to leave only when the last