

**THE S. WEIR MITCHELL
ORATION, PHYSICIAN,
MAN OF SCIENCE, MAN OF
LETTERS, MAN OF AFFAIRS**

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The S. Weir Mitchell oration, physician, man of science, man of letters, man of affairs by
Charles W. Burr

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BY

CHARLES W. BURR, M.D.

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THE WEIR MITCHELL ORATION was established by the College of Physicians of Philadelphia in an amendment to the Ordinances and By-Laws adopted December 2, 1914:

"This triennial Oration shall have for its subject the life and work of Weir Mitchell in their various aspects, or the relation of the physician to public life, or the physician in science and letters, or broad considerations of psychiatry and neurology, or surgery and military surgery in relation to morbid conditions and wounds and injuries of the brain and nervous system, or of scientific research, or medical books and libraries, or medical history and biography, and shall be, so far as possible, of general as well as professional interest."

S. WEIR MITCHELL

PHYSICIAN, MAN OF SCIENCE, MAN OF LETTERS,
MAN OF AFFAIRS.

THOUGH the College founded the Weir Mitchell oration December 2, 1914, within a few days of five years ago, this is the first address given under the terms of the resolution. The explanation of the delay is simple. Though the United States for three long, dismal years was held back from the performance of its duty by a timorous administration, reeking with inefficiency, pretending to be saturated with idealism, taking advice from idols of the parlor socialists, flirting with real socialists, striving to lead the people away from their strong and healthy belief in Americanism to the worship of the false god Internationalism, and having at its head a President who was slow to learn that worse things may come to a country than war and that upholding national honor is nobler than maintaining a disgraceful peace, individual Americans were doing their duty; many Fellows of this College, many men from all parts of the country, were already giving themselves up to the great task in hand and, for that reason, a speaker could not be had. Men of worth were doing, not talking, and even those of us, like myself,

left at home had little time to think of the dead. The World War is over, another has replaced it, has come partly in consequence of it, and the curtain of futurity, ever retreating but never rising, hides an unending succession of tomorrows. But whatever the future may contain for us, we may safely, for a moment, forget the present sickness of the world and go back to old habits, one of the best of which is the study of the lives of the illustrious dead.

It was very properly decided that the first oration should be devoted to a study of Weir Mitchell himself, and the College has conferred upon me the honor of making it. I wish now, at the beginning, to thank the Fellows for the opportunity they have given me to speak concerning one of the two men who did more to influence my intellectual life during my later adolescence than all others. To Weir Mitchell and William Osler I owe a debt. These two men opened for me, as for many others—rather they showed us how to open for ourselves—the gate that bars the way to fruitful study, ignorance of scientific method. They had sympathy with our desire to learn how to satisfy intellectual curiosity. Above all, they taught us the paramount necessity of intellectual honesty. I can give no higher praise than this. I purpose to speak of Mitchell as physician, man of science, man of letters, man of affairs. I do not purpose, nor can it be done in the short time at my disposal, to give a detailed biography of the man. Indeed, biography, as a rule, is a sorry business, unless written by someone who knows the real soul of the man, and then usually favoring prejudice prevents clear seeing. I had no such close personal relations with Weir Mitchell. I was too much his junior to write his biography from my personal knowledge. Of his youth I know little, mere shreds and patches of half-remembered stories, and for this I am sorry, because early in adolescence there appear signs,

marks and tokens, had we only the eyes to perceive them and the knowledge to comprehend, from which we could prophesy with certainty, barring disease and accident, the boy's whole mental and moral future. The story of the boyhood of a man like Mitchell, written by a real psychologist, a real student of behavior, would be a valuable contribution to our slight knowledge of mental development in the individual. A thousand such would be of incalculable value. As I have said, I know little of Mitchell's boyhood, but when his autobiography is published, in his officially written life, there will be revealed how it impressed him years after, when he had attained middle life or early old age. Such impressions are never accurate. A man sees his boyhood through a mist; it may be roseate or somber-hued, but always it is there, the mist of memory falsified. One thing is certain, he was not precocious, but slowly and steadily grew to maturity, nor did he stop then, but continued to grow through the later years. His intellectual horizon continued to broaden after the period in which in most men the mind is fixed, set, crystallized, brittle. This characteristic, as well as endurance, which causes the mind to continue bright, active, alert and willing and able to accept new ideas until a very advanced age, is, I think, more common among men of affairs, doers, than among pure thinkers. Many great statesmen have lived long, most great poets die at an earlier age. Those whose only ability is to talk do not, for some mysterious reason, as a rule, attain great age. In that the gods are kind to us. Mitchell was not one of those children who startle by their brilliancy and make the wise old family doctor fear for the future, knowing full well such brilliancy more often portends a mental smash-up and moral degradation in adolescence than fruitful genius. That he was an imaginative child there is no doubt. Let me tell a story that

reveals it. When about seven years old he told his mother he had just seen a golden chariot with horses and trappings. She, not realizing that he, like all imaginative children, had in very truth seen a vision, seen by the physical eye the thing he dreamed of, chided him for untruthfulness. He felt the injustice of the charge, never forgot the incident, and years later, during his professional life, many times warned parents to be careful, when their children related such things, not to mistake richness of imagination for poverty of the moral sense.

Mitchell was fortunate in heritage and environment, in nature and nurture. The first is the more vital, because good inheritance may, and often does—we see it daily—overcome the evil of bad environment. He came of a high class, intellectual and scholarly family. His father was not only a distinguished physician but a man of science. He himself passed all his youth in an atmosphere of books, and, as a boy, he had that best education, hearing his elders converse on things worth talking of. He was, I am told, a bookish boy and early showed a love for poetry. He belonged to a generation in which it was the custom to read the Bible, and he was unconsciously but profoundly influenced in his literary style, years after, by the reading. Of course, today we have progressed so far that reading the Bible, like reading history, reading anything older than the twentieth century, is regarded as a waste of time. Our problems, the moderns tell us, are all new; our world is new; old times can teach us naught. But old proverbs continue true, and if pride goeth before destruction, ignorance causeth destruction.

I suspect that environment had a large influence in leading Mitchell into medicine. His father, being a physician, could help him materially. He had lived all his life in a medical atmosphere, and I am inclined to believe that had not these external things

existed his inclination toward literature would have proved stronger than that toward science and he would have been purely a man of letters. The two have much in common. Art and science are not as unlike as they seem: both require of their disciples imagination; science demands also compelling curiosity to learn causes. Literature is the study of the adventures of the human soul; science the study of the adventures of the universe and the why of things. At all events, whether it was the pull from within or from without that controlled him, after ending his collegiate studies at the University of Pennsylvania he entered Jefferson Medical College and graduated in 1851. Early in his medical career he showed he was being driven by influences within himself toward scientific investigation.

His early professional life was not all beer and skittles; it was a period of hard, grinding work and heavy responsibilities. Mr. Talcott Williams tells us that, in the autobiography, it is recorded "that in the ten years after he began the practice of medicine his receipts in practice were only a thousand dollars, and in that year he had suddenly thrown upon him the responsibility of caring for his father's family and was approaching his own marriage." But his nature asserted itself. He was not content to be merely an every-day doctor, mechanically, routinely, without mental interest, dealing out pills and potions. The scientific instinct ruled him. In 1853 he was elected to membership in the Academy of Natural Sciences, and two years later was placed upon the Library Committee. In 1858 a biological section of the Academy was instituted on the petition of Mitchell, Leidy, J. A. Meigs, Hammond, Hays and others. At the first meeting Mitchell presented the first paper on "Blood Crystals of the Sturgeon." Years after, when the whole biological point of view of men of