AGNEW (D. H.)

MEMOIR

OF

JOHN LIGHT ATLEE, M.D., LL.D.

[Extracted from the Transactions of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, Third Series, Volume VIII.]

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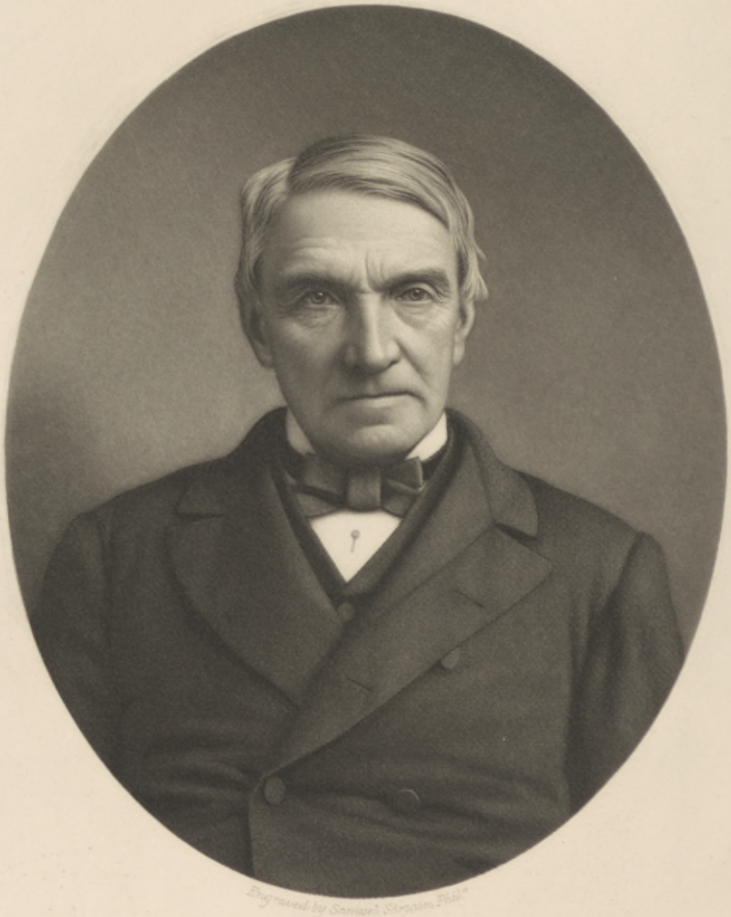

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Wm. L. Atlee.

MEMOIR

OF

JOHN LIGHT ATLEE, M.D., LL.D.,

FORMERLY ONE OF THE ASSOCIATE FELLOWS OF THE COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS OF PHILADELPHIA; EX-PRESIDENT OF THE AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION, ETC.

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BY

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

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On the fifth day of October, 1885, might have been seen one of the most notable gatherings that had ever taken place in the city of Lancaster. This assemblage embraced members of the learned professions and citizens of every rank and condition of life. All gathered together in order to participate in the last sad rites of burial to one of their most distinguished townsmen—Dr. John Light Atlee. And how preëminently fitting this pageant of love and respect! Here was a man who had seen portions of four generations of his fellows come upon the stage of life, play their varied parts in the great drama of humanity, and then silently pass out of sight. Here was a man who had participated more or less actively in all the chief and moving questions of beneficence, education, and government which belong to the body politic of a populous city. Here was a man who had been admitted for an exceptionally long period of time, in the exercise of professional duties, into the innermost sanctities of a vast number of households. Ever a conspicuous figure among his fellow-men, known to every dweller in the city of

his birth, no wonder that his mortal remains should command such reverent respect before being committed to their kindred dust.

Dr. John Light Atlee was of English origin, and came of a long line of distinguished antecedents, dating their lineage back in an unbroken line anterior to the time of Charles II., and most of whom had filled places of great responsibility and honor. His great grandfather, William Atlee, of Fordhook House,[1] England, in the parish of Acton, came to this country in 1733, as private secretary to Lord Howe, at the time the latter entered upon his duties as Governor of Barbadoes. William Atlee's wife was the daughter of an English clergyman and a cousin of William Pitt. The grandfather of Dr. Atlee, William Augustus Atlee, first son of William and Jane Atlee, was born in Philadelphia. He studied law in the office of Judge Shippen, was admitted to the Lancaster bar, rose to eminence, and in 1777 became First Associate Judge of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania. He was an ardent and patriotic supporter of the Colonial cause, and after the establishment of our independence was appointed President Judge of the First District Court, which embraced in its jurisdiction the counties of Chester, Lancaster, York, and Dauphin; and while still in the exercise of his judicial functions fell a victim to yellow fever. William Pitt Atlee, son of Judge Atlee and Esther Sayre, married a daughter of Major John Light, and of the six children resulting from this union, the subject of the present sketch, Dr. John Light Atlee, was the eldest. He was born November 2, 1799, in the city of Lancaster. His academic education was received at the academy of Gray and Wiley, a school for a long time famous in the city of Philadelphia, both for its thorough curriculum of instruction and the strictness of its discipline. Dr. Atlee's medical education, hastened by the early death

[1] In a drawing-room, in the more modern portion of this family homestead, wainscoted in oak in the year 1500 by one William Atlee, Ada, the daughter of Lord Byron, whose wife then resided there, was married to Lord King.

of his father, began in 1815, in the office of Dr. Samuel Hulmes, of Lancaster. In 1817 he entered the medical department of the University of Pennsylvania, from which institution he received the degree of Doctor of Medicine in 1820. After graduation, Dr. Atlee returned to the city of his birth and there commenced the practice of his profession. Two years later, March 22, 1822, he married Sarah H. Franklin, daughter of the Honorable Walter Franklin, a distinguished jurist, and for a long time President Judge of the courts of Lancaster and York Counties. Mrs. Atlee was a woman of great nobility and force of character, and adorned every relation of life with a rare grace and dignity of manner, until called away by the hand of death fifty-eight years after her marriage. The children who survive these parents are Dr. Walter F. Atlee, of Philadelphia, the well-known surgeon and honored Fellow of the College of Physicians, William Augustus Atlee, a prominent member of the Lancaster bar, and Miss Anne Franklin Atlee, whose long and untiring devotion to her parents entitles her to King Lemuel's commendation, "Many daughters have done virtuously, but thou excellest them all." A third son, Dr. John L. Atlee, Jr., a physician greatly endeared to all who knew him, died in the early years of his manhood.

From the time of his graduation, in 1820, until within a few days of his death, Dr. Atlee was actively engaged in the duties of his profession. A few months before his demise he had an attack of facial paralysis, induced, it is believed, by indiscreet exposure. This was the signal for a halt. Up to this time, the multiplying years had dealt so generously with the man that he seemed to possess a spring of perpetual youth. His tall, erect, agile figure, his quick, elastic step and sunny face betokened no abatement of bodily force. His mind never for a moment experienced even a partial eclipse, but continued to act with its wonted energy, and in a short time, despite a moderate physical disability, he was again engaged in professional

work. The final summons came in the form of an attack of pneumonia, and on the afternoon of October 1, 1885, the gentle spirit of Dr. Atlee left the clay tenement which it had worn and animated, for well nigh eighty-six years, for another and a better world.

In the contemplation of a life like that of the subject of the present sketch, it may be viewed from three distinct points of observation, as a citizen, as a physician, and as a man, for we find three distinct sides to his character. While it is true that the professional man must ever be loyal to his calling, yet the common, public interests of the community in which he lives, and of which he is an integral part, cannot be ignored. There are men who possess that singular flexibility and versatility of the mental constitution which enables them to project their personality into many and diverse lines of benevolence or education, becoming in each a recognized force, and yet at the same time carry along all the routine of their own professional work with scrupulous exactitude. Such men, however, are insular. Dr. Atlee was one of that select and unique class. When the effort was made to introduce the system of general or free school education which had been created by our State Legislature in 1838, it was met by a formidable opposition, especially among the Germans, who formed a large element of the population in Lancaster County. These people still clung to that school system which existed under the Act of 1820. When the time arrived for the substitution of the new method of instruction for the old, Dr. Atlee appears as the public man, and it was largely through his personal influence and individual efforts with the people among whom he lived, that their prejudices were overcome, and the system of free schools successfully inaugurated. Nor did his interest in this great scheme of education cease with its establishment. He became the chairman of the superintending committee, and for forty years acted as a director of the School Board of the county. In founding the Normal School at Millersville, he exhibited the same

untiring zeal. The resolutions of the School Board of Lancaster City, passed after his death, fully attest the value of his services in the cause of education. Again, as a trustee, no one was more active in the organization of Franklin and Marshall College, in which institution he was chosen Professor of Anatomy and Physiology, and from which he received the degree of Doctor of Laws.

Possessing a rare faculty for management, his aid was sought in other fields than those of education. He was one of the managers of the House of Refuge in this city; he was appointed a trustee in the Bishop Bowman Church Home, in Lancaster, acted as president of the Board of Trustees of the Home for Friendless Children, and held the same position in the Board of Managers for the State Lunatic Asylum at Harrisburg.

In turning now to the medical career of Dr. Atlee, we find in him a remarkable and harmonious combination of all those qualities which go to make up a good and great physician. He was a life-long student, a close observer, bold and self-reliant without being rash, honorable in professional intercourse, the implacable foe to all forms of charlatanry, or doubtful methods, whether in or out of the profession, and withal possessed a sweet, gentle disposition, combined with a cheerful and dignified deportment, eminently calculated to inspire confidence and hope in the sick, and to command respect among his medical brethren. Ever active in all that concerned the interest and advancement of medicine he was among those who, very early in the history of medical organizations, discerned the importance of centralizing professional power, not only as a scientific measure, but as calculated to establish a kindly reciprocity of feeling among physicians, and thereby elevate medicine in the public estimation. Accordingly, we find Dr. Atlee a leading force in founding the Lancaster County Medical Society in 1844, over which body he twice presided as its president. He was one of those also who, in 1848, were prominent in the organization of the State Medical Society,

and in 1857 was honored by being chosen the presiding officer of that body. When the scheme to organize a national representative body of physicians (the American Medical Association) was conceived, in 1847, we find Dr. Atlee's name among its founders. In 1868 he was elected vice-president, and in 1882 president of this organization. In 1877, in recognition of his high professional reputation in the department of abdominal and pelvic surgery of the female, Dr. Atlee was elected an honorary member of the Gynecological Society of Boston. He was also an Associate Fellow of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia.

The most noteworthy event, however, which towers conspicuously above others in the surgical career of Dr. Atlee, was the revival of the operation of ovariotomy. As new discoveries, or methods of managing disease, become established and made common property, we soon forget or underestimate the merits of the originator.

The man, for example, who, without a single precedent to illuminate the path of experiment except his own singular faith, pressed ether to the stage of profound anesthesia, must have been animated by nothing short of a God-given courage, and though no monument of brass or of marble records the name of Morton or Wells, yet until the end of time humanity will be their debtors. And so with regard to ovariotomy. When Dr. Atlee conceived the idea of reviving this operation (in 1843), there was nothing to lighten his path, save the cases of McDowell, dating back to 1809, and these almost forgotten; on the contrary, there was everything to intimidate and discourage one less bold. Men occupying the highest positions in the profession as writers and teachers, on both sides of the Atlantic, men who had for years moulded medical and surgical thought like plastic clay, had spoken their condemnation of the procedure, some of them in no charitable terms; yet, this man with a dauntless courage, the offspring of inborn convictions, steps forward out of the rank and file of imperious authority, assumes the respon-

sibility of being singular and antagonistic, and inaugurates anew an operation which every succeeding year delivers an army of women from death and lays the world under tribute to his genius. Nor do the far-reaching results of this surgical venture terminate with ovariotomy, it was the germinal promise of all that rich harvest of abdominal surgery which has marked the progress of our art in these later years. Indeed so wonderfully articulated and dependent are the outgrowths of these seminal thoughts, that it is impossible to predict what avenues of surgical venture are yet to be opened. They are like some of those divine epigrams, "Who is my brother?" "No man liveth to himself," "No man dieth to himself," the profound depths of application of which have never yet been plumbed by the measuring instruments of man. Ah, yes, in the magnitude and resistless sweep of the river we too often forget the spring-heads, the sources of its strength and power! To America belongs the honor of that great boon which renders painless the knife of the surgeon and the throes of maternity; to America belongs the seed-thought of subcutaneous osteotomy, and to America belongs the glory of ovariotomy.

No man perhaps has more successfully filled the various departments of medicine than Dr. Atlee. Almost half a century of his professional career was lived before the specialties of medicine had attained any very marked public recognition. In over two thousand operations of which he has left us a record are embraced every manner of surgical procedure, covering every branch of the now specialized surgery, and these followed by a success which compares not unfavorably with the leading operators of the world.

On the 23d of January, 1822, he operated for fistula in ano, and on the 9th of September, 1885, he performed tracheotomy. These operations were almost sixty-four years apart. Six times in his eighty-third year, and three times in his eighty-fourth year, he made the operation of ovariotomy. The cunning had not left his hand, nor had a shadow crept across his mind. What an immense

well-spring of vitality must have been that, which could so continue to energize the evening life of this man—*quando ullum invenient parem?*

As an obstetrician his experience, under the circumstances of locality, was exceptional, having attended three thousand women in childbirth, and as a practitioner of medicine he enjoyed an extended and unrivalled domain of patronage. It was this great wealth of experience gleaned from so wide a field of medicine, that commanded the confidence of his professional brethren, who, from all parts of the land, sought his counsel and aid.

There is something after all, besides grace of manner, force of intellect, and public spirit, which is necessary to round out character to its full and just proportions, and that is a conscious sense of moral responsibility. It has been said that the physician, constantly absorbed with the phenomena which largely concern the physical nature of man, is prone to forget the ego, the spiritual, indestructible essence which survives decay, and for which the body is only a convenient environment during the probationary period of existence. I cannot believe that, in any general sense, the charge of materialism can be justly made against our profession; or that medical men, who, as a class, have enjoyed the benefits of a liberal education, and therefore, it may be assumed, have some knowledge of the higher domain of philosophy, can believe that either this body instinct with deity and law, or the principle of consciousness and thought which inhabits it, when the nexus is dissolved, sinks into a gulf of annihilation. Be this as it may, Doctor Atlee, with all his devotion to the study of the human body and its diseases, ever maintained that mental equipoise which moored him to the great verities of the future, and left no place in his mind or heart for the shallow vagaries which ever and anon rise on the sea of speculative thought. Very early in life he connected himself with the Episcopal body of Christians, was for forty years a senior warden in that church,

attending with uniform regularity her ecclesiastical courts, and always taking an active interest in all the philanthropic activities of this religious organization. Singularly pure and exemplary both in his private and public life, there was yet nothing of austerity in his demeanor. A man of great simplicity and honesty of character, he hated shams. On one occasion when asked by a clergyman of his church, who, on a preceding Sabbath had performed the service in an assumed affectation of voice, how he liked the intonation, the Doctor replied with considerable feeling, "if there is any time in this world, sir, when a man ought to be natural it is when he is addressing the Supreme Being."

It is said, I think, by Macaulay, that no power is more formidable than that of being able to make men ridiculous. When a man ahead of his day, like Fulton, like Jenner, like Paré, after announcing some fact out of the common experience, has been made the mark for taunt and ridicule, and when time, that great adjudicator and vindicator of the real and the true, places that fact beyond the region of controversy, how great is the temptation to retaliate, and yet after ovariotomy by the common consensus of the medical world became an established operation, no man ever heard Dr. Atlee say one unkind word toward, or use his commanding vantage-ground to cover with confusion his detractors. Sixty-five years of public life, as physician, citizen, and Christian gentleman, and in each of these spheres blameless; what a royal legacy to leave behind! "A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches, and loving favor rather than silver or gold." There is a philosophy which asks in tones of horrid despair, "Is life worth living?" a philosophy the monuments of which are countless suicides and unhonored graves. Here was a life that was worth living, and the hand of love could write no more appropriate epitaph than those simple words which are reverently inscribed on the gravestone of our distinguished and beloved associate, "*Pertransivit Benefaciendo.*"