

Bird (R. M.)

VALEDICTORY ADDRESS

DELIVERED BEFORE

THE GRADUATES

OF

PENNSYLVANIA MEDICAL COLLEGE;

SESSION OF 1842--3.

BY

ROBERT M. BIRD, M.D.

PROFESSOR OF MATERIA MEDICA AND INSTITUTES OF MEDICINE.

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CORRESPONDENCE.

Pennsylvania College, March 7th, 1843.

DEAR SIR :

At a meeting of the Graduates of Pennsylvania Medical College, Doctor G. W. Russell in the chair, the undersigned were appointed a committee to request a copy of your Valedictory Address for publication.

The undersigned respectfully beg leave to join in the request of their fellow graduates whom they represent.

GEORGE W. RUSSELL, of Mississippi.

HENRY SMITH MAYER, of Pennsylvania.

LEONARD R. KOECKER, of Pennsylvania.

JETER LYNCH THOMPSON, of Cherokee Nation.

DE WITT CLINTON BOLIVAR CALDWELL, of Virginia.

Professor R. M. BIRD.

Philadelphia, March 8th, 1843.

GENTLEMEN :

I am sorry the Valedictory Address, of which you have requested a copy for publication, is not more worthy your acceptance; but as it was written for you, it is heartily at your service.

Respectfully yours,

ROBERT M. BIRD.

Drs. George W. Russell,
Henry Smith Mayer,
Leonard R. Koecker,
Jeter Lynch Thompson,
De Witt Clinton Bolivar Caldwell,

} Committee.

A D D R E S S .

GENTLEMEN :

The ceremonies of this morning, completing your career of collegiate instruction, introduce you to the world as members of the profession of medicine ; and from these walls, in which you have pursued your studies with, I trust, equal profit and pleasure, you depart to enter upon a new sphere of life and duty ; in which, according as you may conduct yourselves, (for all, hereafter, must depend upon yourselves,) you will prove to your fellow-men agents of good or ministers of evil,—you will confer happiness, or entail affliction,—and you will win honour for yourselves and the profession to which you belong, or you will bring upon both such discredit as attaches to the incompetent physician, and to the profession of which he has the misfortune to be a member.

Under these circumstances, and at this moment, your former preceptors, the Faculty of Pennsylvania Medical College, in sending you into the world, crowned, as you now are, with the honours, and furnished with the credentials of the Doctorate, bid you farewell with a feeling of solicitude, natural to those who appreciate the responsibilities which you are about to incur, and in which they, as your instructors and sponsors, must continue to have a share.

Yet, with this solicitude, they cannot but entertain a confident assurance that your future course will be one of usefulness and credit. They feel that they have performed their part, in opening to you the great treasury of medicine ; a treasury not filled with gold, and silver, and precious gems, to feed the desires and reward the toil of avarice, but with the humble stores of knowledge—humble, yet more precious than worldly treasure—the facts accumulated by the industrious, the principles deduced by the wise men of our science, through centuries of painful research—with which philanthropy arms most efficiently in the cause of humanity. They feel that they have done this ; they trust they have not done it in vain ; and they can believe of you, their late pupils—now pupils no more—

that, with your minds thus enriched, your reason and your conscience alive to the moral obligations which you assume, you will perform the duties which the medical man owes to society and the profession,—and perform them faithfully and well.

It is not my intention, in addressing you the parting words of the Faculty, to say any thing to you on the subject of the moral obligations of the physician. This I have done on a recent occasion, at which many of you were present. My object is to make a few brief remarks on the subject of the Profession itself, in relation to the position it occupies among other professions,—to its character,—to the degree of estimation in which it is held, particularly in the United States;—and to the obligation (it is an obligation of *interest*) that lies upon you, to do your part in rendering it honourable in men's eyes.

The profession of medicine is, in its own nature, there can be little doubt, one of the noblest which man can follow : but men have never, except in mere theory,—they have never *practically*—admitted its claim to this high distinction. It is easy to concede the superior *merit* of those who toil among their fellows only to do good,—to lessen the sufferings with which nature oppresses man, and the miseries with which man afflicts himself; but to concede to them the *place* of merit is another thing; and the age or country has never yet been known, in which medical men have enjoyed that real regard and respect to which their character entitles them. They have always occupied—they have been compelled, and they have submitted, to occupy—a comparatively low rank; and even in our own country, in the free America, in which talent and ambition so readily secure their meed of reward, medicine is far from being respected as the most deserving and honourable of professions. I do not say this of physicians, but of the general profession: I do not say there is any want of respect to individual practitioners, who may secure each for himself, according to his own particular deserts, as high a place in the esteem and reverence of communities as any; witness the examples of Rush and Physick, in our own land, and the many great medical men in Europe, who so often render the names of physician and surgeon illustrious; I speak of the collective body of medical men, who, in their mere professional capacity, do not enjoy a degree of estimation so great as that awarded to many other professions.

Nor is this surprising ; it is, perhaps, even inevitable. It is the nature of man, however, in his calmer moments of reflection, he may look up to virtue and wisdom as the only earthly divinities worthy of his adoration, because the only beneficent ones ; it is his nature to bend down in homage to the darker spirits which inspire him with dread. *Power* which can grind him in the dust ; and *wealth*, which buys power, or which *is* power, are the true gods of his idolatry. And it is under the influence of fear, that he has been taught to measure the degree of respect in which he holds the occupations of men ; thinking meanly or indifferently of those which do him good, and highly and reverentially of those which do him evil ; just as savages neglect the good spirits who will not harm them, to bestow all their worship on the malignant fiends who have the power to injure.

The profession of *arms* has always been, and always will be, esteemed the highest and most honourable. It is this profession which gives men their rulers ; and which, winning fame in blood, and glory in devastation, builds up thrones ; from which he that, to-morrow, shall be a clod of the valley, may, to-day, step forth upon the necks of nations. A bankrupt debauchee of Rome, snatching a sword and heading an army, becomes "the mightiest Julius ;" and a Corsican soldier of fortune seizes the imperial crown of Europe, won by the same fatal magic of the steel. And this is the reward of those who have the power of evil, and use it. What wonder, since half mankind are ambitious of power, and the other half feel and dread it, that arms should be held the noblest profession ! It is the same with other professions, in their different degrees of power. The orator, skilled to inflame the passions of the multitude, becomes a demagogue and rules his mob, or his republic ; the gownman, with tongue to make the worse appear the better reason, slides into the robe of the Senator, or wears the coronet of a noble ; the priest—at least, the priest of other days—armed with the rack and faggot, and the imaginary power of heaven and hell, won his way to the crosier and mitre (how much less reverence is really accorded to the evangelic character of the clergy of our own times than was yielded to the fierce and tyrannical spirit which distinguished the holy profession in its days of power ;) and even the merchant, with wit to purchase for a penny and sell for a shilling, accumulates treasure and becomes as a prince among men—at least, among the poor and venal. Politics, law, divinity, and

commerce are all, in the practice of the world, held more honourable professions than medicine.

How could it, indeed, be otherwise? The physician wins neither power nor treasure; and his sphere of usefulness is one that admits no observers and witnesses, and from which is never heard the voice of praise and admiration. The warrior sweeps over the battle-field: the lawyer, the priest, and the statesman find ostentatious theatres of action among crowds, who admire and are swayed by the charm of speech; while the physician toils in the obscurity of the sick-room, wrestling darkly with disease and death, and achieving victories, of the merits of which even those most interested in them are ignorant. No wonder that we can look back upon ages, opening wider fields than now to the ambitious, when every really useful occupation was held disgraceful, and medicine was an art open only to the aspirations of *slaves*. We might admire, that, in the progress of reason and civilization, it has reached the point in which it is allowed to be *respectable*.

It is inevitable, therefore, from the nature of things, that medicine should enjoy but a comparatively low rank among the professions: and this is its position in America. With all that is really republican in our institutions, with all that is reputed independent in our character, have we escaped the shackles of opinion, with which the people of the Old World are held most firmly in the bondage of their rulers? Are we less complaisant to wealth and power? are we more ready to respect the worth of the poor and lowly? Have we exploded the weakness which founds the distinctions of merit only on the differences of occupation? In these particulars, we are still men, and bondmen: and those professions are the most honourable with us, as with our neighbours, which lead to the highest wealth and the widest influence.

In the abstract, the high claim of medicine is more readily confessed in America than elsewhere; but in point of fact, the profession may be said to hold a somewhat lower character even than in other lands,—a disadvantage arising from causes that originate, in part, with the profession itself,—causes which, however, are, in a measure, removable, and which it is the interest and duty of every medical man to aid in removing.

One, and perhaps the most general and influential, of these causes is the fact that the medical profession is not all that it ought to be in the United States,—that its standard of scientific attainment is not sufficiently high,—that,

although it boasts great numbers of gentlemen equal in knowledge and skill to their brethren in any country in the world, it embraces also many individuals of very inferior acquirements;—so inferior indeed, that it is questionable whether they could have been admitted to a medical degree in any country but our own. This is an evil resulting from the system of medical education pursued throughout the United States, which is, in some respects, a defective one,—or, at least, is capable of opening a door to abuses, from which the character of the profession suffers injury. The first medical college established in this country, encountered a great indifference—or, rather, a great unwillingness—on the part of students to submit to the severe requisitions of time and labour, such as were necessary to obtaining a degree in the European colleges; and it began by abating these requisitions,—by throwing open its doors to all comers, without any examination into their fitness or unfitness to study Medicine, and by requiring a shorter term of study,—one, indeed, almost too short for any but very active, diligent, and well disciplined minds to travel, with profit, through the wide circle of the Medical Sciences. I might add another disadvantageous innovation,—the substitution of a private, brief, and hurried method of examination for a degree (by which, though the general attainments and intelligence of the candidate may be discovered, it is scarce possible to determine the real extent and accuracy of his knowledge) for the long, the searching, the public inquisition, by which all his qualifications and disqualifications were laid bare,—and laid bare to the light of day. The system thus established, has been perpetuated in the numerous medical schools, which have since sprung into existence; and evils are entailed by it, which can be readily understood. It is true, these evils are sought to be remedied in all respectable institutions; and they can perhaps be always prevented by faithful students and conscientious teachers. But a glance through the profession—at the men who fill it—will show they are not always prevented.

The general evil of this system is, its making access to the profession so easy as to seduce many persons to enter, or attempt to enter it, who are destitute of all the requisites essential to the formation of a true medical character; and the profession is insulted by the prevailing idea that any body may be made a physician. This is a very fatal error; but it drives to the threshold of medicine many incompetent persons,—incompetent from want of education and

want of talent,—among whom it would be wonderful if some were not permitted to enter. It drives many, even, who have not complied with the moderate requisitions of the established system. The American colleges call only for three years of study; a term which students and their friends sometimes presume to consider superfluously long. They require that this period of study should be passed in the office of a respectable physician,—not merely that the student may be directed in his reading by an instructor, but that he may be carried to the bedside of the sick, in order to be made practically acquainted with disease, and with the duties which he will soon be called on to perform; and yet it has happened that students have even regarded this requisition as useless, and presented themselves as candidates for graduation, without complying with it—as if books and lectures *alone* could make them physicians,—as if this requisition, always considered a most important one, were made only in jest, and never meant to be enforced. In fact, medicine seems to be regarded as a very good sort of business, easily entered, and perfectly well adapted to those who are not well qualified for any other.

The admission of such incompetent persons, sometimes effected by accident, by error, by false humanity,—perhaps, in some quarters, by a want of regard for the solemn obligations incurred by those who grant medical degrees—is productive of various ill consequences by which the community suffers, and the profession is depreciated. It is to the introduction of individuals not of the highest tone of manners and feeling, that we owe so many of the petty quarrels, the mean jealousies, the tricks of rivalry and hostility, for which the profession is ridiculed; while baser spirits, imitating the examples of successful quackery, by which we are continually surrounded and *they* seduced, appear, by their own degradation, to sink the whole profession down to the level of their wretched rivals.

A great deal more, gentlemen, might be said upon this subject; but I have said enough to confirm what I advanced,—that the medical profession in the United States does not altogether possess the high character, nor enjoy the elevated rank to which it might aspire; and that there are reasons for this,—reasons, for which the profession is itself answerable. The great remedy would be a reform of the system of medical education,—such a reform as should elevate the standard of acquirements, general and professional, of medical men to that point of high accom-

plishment, demanded by the honour of the profession and the interests of society.

But, in the meanwhile, the system continues; and the evil can be counteracted only by the efforts of the schools to resist the admission of incompetency and unworthiness, and by the exertions of medical men to maintain the honour of the profession in their own persons.

This is an obligation which now rests upon you. Remember that, in becoming practitioners of medicine, you assume responsibilities and enter upon duties, in which incompetency is a crime. If you are conscious of ignorance in any matter of practical moment, (and who, indeed, is not conscious of ignorance?) remove it by instant and zealous perseverance in study; and continue that perseverance in the acquisition of knowledge during your whole lives; for what physician can know *too much*? alas! what physician can know *enough*! Remember that you have united yourselves with a profession, which, in the abstract, is admitted to be sufficiently noble, and which cannot endure, without dishonour, any unworthy conduct on the part of its disciples. If you should envy the success of empiricism, cast the temptation aside, and convince the world of the integrity, and the superior merits, of science. And if professional rivalries should beget jealousy and ill-feelings towards your brethren, discard them, act not upon them; reflect that all are engaged, it should be believed, with equal earnestness,—perhaps with equal purity of motive,—in the great work in which we profess a pride to be employed, and that mankind will never so highly appreciate the merits of the profession as when physicians are seen toiling together harmoniously, rivals only in zeal and generosity.

Be honourable in all things; be just and virtuous in all things; be what you know physicians *ought* to be, men of professional learning, of lofty principles, and blameless lives; so shall you deserve, and attain, that success in your professional career, that advancement in the respect of your fellow-men, which are always reached by the good and just, and which your friends, the Faculty of Pennsylvania Medical College, most earnestly and sincerely wish you.

List of Graduates, March 7, 1843.

<i>Names.</i>	<i>Residence.</i>	<i>Subject of Thesis.</i>
Charles Butcher,	New Jersey,	Primary Causes of Disease.
De Witt Clinton B. Caldwell,	Virginia,	Diseases of the Antrum.
John M. Green,	Pennsylvania,	Constitutional Susceptibility.
George Gourlay,	Pennsylvania,	On Utero-Gestation.
Frederick Conrad Husmann,	Pennsylvania,	De Structura et Evolutione Encephali.
James S. Kennedy,	New Jersey,	Atmospheric Air.
Leonard R. Koecker,	Pennsylvania,	Tetanus.
Alfred A. Lane,	New Hampshire,	Delirium Tremens.
Levi H. Lenher,	Pennsylvania,	Tetanus.
John Myers,	Pennsylvania,	Rheumatism.
Thomas G. Morris,	Pennsylvania,	Organs of Digestion.
Henry Smith Mayer,	Pennsylvania,	Typhus Fever.
Walter Moore,	Pennsylvania,	Dysentery.
Charles Matthews,	Pennsylvania,	Amenorrhœa.
James F. X. M'Closkey,	Pennsylvania,	Science of Anatomy.
John H. Pierce,	New York,	Whooping Cough.
George W. Russell,	Mississippi,	Hydrocele.
Jacob Schuyler,	Pennsylvania,	Clinical Practice.
Jeter Lynch Thompson,	Cherokee Nation,	Cold and its Effects.
Cornelius Tyson,	Pennsylvania,	Physiology of Vision.
Henry Tyson,	Pennsylvania,	Respiration.
Felix Paul Wierzbicki,	Rhode Island,	On Baths.