

IN MEMORIAM.

WASHINGTON LEMUEL ATLEE.

DR. WASHINGTON LEMUEL ATLEE was born at Lancaster, Pa., February 22d, 1808. He was a descendant of an old English family, many members of which reached distinction very early in the history of England. "Wm. Atlee,¹ of Ford-Hooke House, England, married, against the wishes of his family, Jane Alcock, a cousin of Wm. Pitt, and being, perhaps for that reason, thrown upon his own resources, obtained,

¹ Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, Vol. II., No. 1, p. 74.

through the assistance of Pitt, a position as secretary to Lord Howe. He came with Howe to America, landing in Philadelphia in July, 1734." His son, the Hon. Wm. Augustus Atlee, was an active Whig during the Revolutionary war, and was one of the judges of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania.

He left several children, amongst whom was Wm. Pitt Atlee, Esq., a lawyer who married Miss Light, the daughter of Major John Light, an officer in the Revolutionary army. They had six children, of whom the subject of this memoir was the youngest. When he had reached the age of seven years, his father died, leaving him under the care of his grandparents. While with them, he continued at school, pursuing the ordinary English studies until he was fourteen years old, when, contrary to his own wishes, he was placed in a dry-goods store.

After remaining in this business for fifteen months, he determined to leave it and study medicine. He chose his brother, Dr. John Light Atlee, as his preceptor, who made him a member of his family and directed him in his studies.

Thus encouraged he worked with ardor, and with the aid of tutors supplied the deficiency of an early classical training, studying at the same time French, German, Philosophy, and the natural sciences. He entered the Jefferson Medical College in the winter of 1826-27, where his industry and talents attracted the attention of Dr. Geo. McClellan, the Professor of Surgery, who invited him to become his private pupil.

Stimulated by the example and guided by the counsels of this great teacher, the efforts of young Atlee were redoubled, and on his return to Lancaster he at once engaged in practice amongst the poor, almost living in the Lancaster County Hospital. His efforts were so successful, and he became so popular, that before he received his degree he had attended forty cases of obstetrics.

His connection with the hospital gave him abundant opportunity to study practical anatomy, of which he was very fond; and much of his time was employed in dissection. Nor did these engagements fully occupy his time, for "during the summer of 1827-28, he actively pursued the study of practical botany, and was a correspondent of Dr. Wm. P. C. Barton, then Professor of *Materia Medica* and Botany in the Jefferson

Medical College. He collected about four hundred specimens of Lancaster County plants into an herbarium, accompanied with a written description of each plant, which collection he subsequently presented to the Linnean Society of Pennsylvania College, at Gettysburg, Pa."

Continuing these industrious habits, he returned to Philadelphia, attended another course of lectures, and was graduated in the spring of 1829. The subject of his thesis was "Parotitis Gangrenosa," an original title, the case described in it having occurred in his own practice.

Believing a small town to promise the most rapid advance in the earlier years of professional life, he selected Mt. Joy, a small village about twelve miles from Lancaster, as a suitable place for his first settlement. While residing here, he was married to a lady to whom he had been long attached, Miss A. E. Hoff, daughter of John Hoff, Esq., of Lancaster. The union proved exceedingly happy, and ten children were born to them, six of whom survived their father, Mrs. Atlee having died eight years before her husband.

In the autumn of 1834, he removed to his native city, where he continued energetically at work and was rewarded by a large practice. Soon after his return to Lancaster, he gave a regular course of lectures on chemistry to private classes. This he continued for several years, and also delivered one public course before the Mechanics' Institute of that place. These efforts established his reputation as a lecturer on chemistry, and led to his receiving an invitation, in 1844, to fill the chair of Medical Chemistry in the Medical Department of Pennsylvania College, at Philadelphia. He accepted this position and moved his family to Philadelphia, which from that time he made his permanent residence. His practice, which was then general, increased very rapidly, and occupied so much of his time that he found it extremely burdensome to continue his lectures, but he did not sever his connection with the college until the spring of 1852, when he resigned his professorship, and devoted himself almost exclusively to surgical and gynecological practice.

While still in Lancaster, he was known as a skilful and courageous operator, and the publication of some of his cases in the *American Journal of the Medical Sciences* had also

introduced him favorably to the medical public; but, before leaving that city, he performed and published two operations which fixed the eye of the profession upon him as a dangerous innovator, as a man who had been performing an operation which had been previously undertaken, and had proved so unsuccessful that it had been condemned even by some of those who had practised it—ovariotomy.

Besides, there was a cloud of doubt and distrust which hung over the early history of the operation, which had not then been cleared away, and further it had been attempted but by few men of note, most of whom, after a brief trial, had abandoned it, both on account of its fatality and the difficulty attending the diagnosis. In fact, ovariotomy was an operation universally denounced, and he must be a brave and determined man who should dare attempt to establish its legitimacy. This he proposed to do, his early experience having led him to believe it a justifiable measure.

He has shown how carefully and conscientiously he prepared himself for the difficult task before him, and has also shown how great was the odium brought upon him by the performance of this operation, in his address as president of the Philadelphia County Medical Society, entitled "A Retrospect of the Struggles and Triumphs of Ovariotomy in Philadelphia." In this interesting history he says, "I found upon moving to Philadelphia that ovariotomy was everywhere decried. It was denounced by the general profession, in the medical societies, in all the medical colleges, and even discouraged by the majority of my own colleagues. I was misrepresented before the medical public, and was pointed at as a dangerous man, even a murderer. The opposition went so far that a celebrated professor—a popular teacher and captivating writer—in his published lectures invoked the law to arrest me in the performance of this operation!"

This address shows clearly the status of the operation and the unmerited opprobrium visited upon those who had the temerity to perform it at that early day. But a reward was in store for a struggle of years against professional prejudice; for he became so identified in the public mind with ovariotomy that, after its success was established, his services were in demand on every side.

From Maine, from California, from North and South, in fact from every State and Territory continually arrived letters, urging him to come and operate. He visited, for this purpose, one of the New England and two of the extreme Southern States, within the same week. These distant cases made it necessary for him to relinquish family practice; but when at home, he was kept busy with consultations, and his offices were filled by patients, many of them coming from long distances to seek relief at his hands. His success was great, and was the result, not only of consummate skill and care as an operator, but of the wonderful diagnostic tact he never failed to manifest.

As an operator he was cool and fully prepared for all emergencies. He avoided a needless array, and, although having a full reserve of instruments, used but few. His friend, Prof. Gross, in speaking of this, says: "With the knife he was, in his particular line, *facile princeps*. He appreciated the aphorism of Desault, that simplicity is the perfection of an operation. He rarely used more than one scalpel, one bistoury, one pair of forceps, one pair of scissors, and one needle. He had a just horror of display. The duties having been duly assigned to his assistants, everything proceeded as silently as possible, with the regularity of clock-work. Always self-possessed, his eye never quailed, his hand never trembled."

He was in the habit of giving his diagnosis to the medical gentlemen present before he commenced an operation, and, if he had any doubt, he told it plainly, and gave his reason for it. This, of course, afforded all present an opportunity of judging of the correctness of his opinions; and, in a close association with him of thirty years, I can recall but few errors. It is remarkable that, with so little leisure, he managed to perform so much clerical labor; for he carried on an extensive correspondence, frequently contributed to the journals, wrote an octavo volume on ovarian tumors, besides essays on subjects connected with gynecology, and kept full notes of all important cases, recording them the day they occurred; nor would he sleep until all intended work of this kind had been accomplished.

Although his time was so fully occupied, he did not fail to keep himself perfectly familiar with the medical literature of the day, and with the improvements in medicine; and none was

more ready than he to recognize and adopt them. He also added to the success of his operation by planning new methods of procedure in particular cases, among which may be mentioned, the use of the *ecraseur* to divide the pedicle in ovariectomy, which he was the first to employ, June 17th, 1857. He also practised enucleation in the same operation as early as July 25th, 1850. Many of the instruments he used were invented or improved by himself, as, for instance, the well-known clamp which bears his name.

He was the first to clearly indicate the importance of tapping as a means of diagnosis in obscure cases of abdominal dropsy, and also the first to point out the true value of the removed fluids for the same purpose, particularly to differentiate cysts of the broad ligament and fibro-cystic tumors of the uterus from ovarian tumors. It is well known to surgeons that in ovariectomy the thickened and opaque peritoneum has been frequently mistaken for the cyst, and separated from the muscles for some distance before the error has been discovered. This mistake, besides embarrassing the operator, has added to the risk of the operation, and no method of avoiding it was known until Dr. Atlee pointed out a safe and valuable guide, depending upon a knowledge of the anatomy of the part, by which such an error was made impossible. This test is the passing up of the hand or of a sound to the umbilicus, when, if it be peritoneum, the hand is arrested, but if it be the cyst, it passes easily. There was a remarkable originality in him, which was frequently displayed in his operations. It was manifested in his case of vaginal ovariectomy, which antedates all others.¹

But, perhaps, this was more strikingly seen in his operation for the removal of uterine fibroids. His first case of this kind occurred in 1845. Its complete success fully disproved "the position hitherto esteemed as an axiom by surgeons of authority, that polypus of the uterus cannot be subjected to operative measures until it has escaped from the uterine cavity."² The numerous cases following this, he embodied in a paper which was one of twelve essays presented to compete for the prize at the meeting of the American Medical Association,

¹ *Gynecological Transactions*, Vol. 2, p. 266.

² *Prize Essay*, p. 25.

held in the City of New York, in 1853. His paper was one of the two to which the prize was awarded. It was entitled "The Surgical Treatment of Certain Fibrous Tumors of the Uterus, heretofore considered beyond the resources of Art." A synopsis of some of the cases contained in this essay was previously embraced in the *Report on Surgery* in 1850 by Professor Mussey, who says: "Of all the achievements of modern surgery, we meet with none more striking or extraordinary than the operations performed by Professor Atlee for the removal of intrauterine fibrous tumors."

Professor Pallen, in his prize essay, presented to the American Medical Association in 1869, says: "In 1853, Dr. Washington L. Atlee startled the profession by this method of heroically attacking uterine tumors with the knife. . . . His successes were numerous, and the ingenuity of his devices are deserving of the highest commendation." And Dr. J. Marion Sims, in the *New York Medical Journal*, April, 1874, writes: "The name of Atlee stands without a rival in connection with uterine fibroids. His operations were so heroic that no man has as yet dared to imitate him. A generation has passed since he gave to the world his valuable essay on the surgical treatment of fibrous tumors of the uterus; but it is only within the last five or six years that the profession have come to appreciate the great truths which he labored to establish. Meadows, of London, and Thomas, of New York, have each achieved splendid results in this direction, and made valuable contributions to our literature. A few isolated cases of fibroid enucleation have been published by others, and this is about all that we can boast of since Atlee first led the way for us."

The last paper which he wrote on this subject was entitled "The Treatment of Fibroid Tumors of the Uterus." It was read before the International Medical Congress, September, 1876. In it he gave the result of his great experience in the treatment of these growths, both by medical and surgical means. This elaborate paper evinced great originality, and was warmly applauded by the section before which it was read, composed of some of the most distinguished men in this branch of medical science.

With all these engrossing labors, he never ceased to feel the warmest interest in the general welfare of the profession.

He took an active part in the organization of the Philadelphia Co. Medical Society, of the Medical Society of the State of Pennsylvania, and of the American Medical Association. He was also one of the founders of the American Gynecological Society. In all of these bodies he retained his membership until his death. Of the Philadelphia Co. Medical Society he was president in 1874, and president of the State Medical Society of Pennsylvania in 1875. In the same year, he was vice-president of the American Medical Association, and first vice-president of the American Gynecological Society in 1876-77.

At the meetings of these bodies, "he was known as a brilliant extempore speaker and an able debater; his influence being always exerted in favor of a higher medical education, and a broad and liberal construction of the rights and duties of medical life."¹ In his long connection with these societies, he allowed nothing but the most urgent engagements or sickness to interfere with his attendance on their meetings. That this interest was earnest and sincere was well seen in the last journey which he took, which was to attend the meeting of the State Society at Pittsburgh in May, 1878. He was then so feeble as to require support in walking, and so emaciated that every movement was painful to him, and yet he endured the trying journey merely to meet them once more.

It is almost needless that with his warm attachment to the profession, he was scrupulously correct in all that related to medical ethics and in his intercourse with his medical brethren honorable and considerate.

But these professional labors of a life give us but little idea of the man, except of his capacity for work, his increasing industry and his untiring energy. In this brief sketch, no allusion has been made to his more marked personal traits, but a memoir of him would indeed be incomplete which should fail to represent that he was a most devoted husband. This devotion which commenced in his early days, and only ceased with life, was a beautiful feature in his character which, although it may be thus mentioned, is too sacred to be dwelt upon.

He was an affectionate father, a firm and warm friend, and

¹ Physicians and Surgeons of the United States, p. 560.

a thoroughly conscientious, honest, and truthful man. In person, he was above the ordinary stature, erect and commanding in his carriage, his face benevolent, his manners courteous and dignified, and although kind, forbidding familiarity. In the sick-room, he was uniformly cheerful, and as tender and sympathetic as a woman. His very appearance inspired confidence. His movements were quick and decided, indicative of his character. Although nearly threescore years and ten, his eye was undimmed, his mind was strong and clear, his perception quick, and his judgment sound. He was a man of strong feelings, but had complete control of them. Although firm in his opinion, he was tolerant of those of others.

He was benevolent, hospitable, and, above all, a religious man. Not ostentatious, nor one who loved to parade his goodness before the world; but those who knew him best can testify to his thorough conscientious regard for all his Christian duties. When but a young man he was confirmed in Christ Church, Philadelphia, by the venerable Bishop White, and ever remained a consistent professor of religion, conscience influencing every important action of his daily life.

"A life well spent, whose early care it was
His ripper years should not upbraid his green."

After contributing so much to the relief of human suffering, it might have been hoped that his last days would have been peaceful, and free from pain, but in April, 1876, the disease which terminated his life after intense suffering, seized on him. At this date he performed operations in three different cities on three succeeding days, travelling for this purpose three nights in succession. One of the patients on whom he operated was suffering from cancer of the uterus. He returned home feeling greatly prostrated and at once took to his bed. He had a low fever, a tympanitic abdomen, and tenderness in the left iliac region, in fact had most of the symptoms of a patient in the second week of typhoid fever. He recovered from this in about ten days, but from that time his health failed, he lost color, and emaciated rapidly. About six months before his death he was attacked with rheumatism which added greatly to his distress, but no marked local symptoms manifested themselves until last February, when a small hard mass was

found projecting below the border of the ribs on the left side. This increased rapidly, and by June extended from the nipple to the anterior superior spinous process of the ilium. It consisted of a comparatively soft mass above, terminating below in hard nodules. It was supposed to be a malignant disease of the spleen. The liver was also greatly enlarged, its lower border touching the anterior superior spinous process of the ilium of the right side.

In the latter part of June, the tumor slowly diminished in size, and continued to contract until nothing could be felt of it except the hard nodules just below the ribs.

In the autopsy, made on the day after death, the spleen was found enlarged to about twice its usual size, but was healthy in structure. It was located more anteriorly than normal, and just under it was a large tumor, which a careful examination proved to be the left kidney. It reached from the diaphragm above to the promontory of the sacrum below, and was firmly adherent to the parts beneath it, incorporating the aorta and other vessels in its mass. Its estimated weight was between two and three pounds.

It proved to be a medullary cancer of the left kidney, its upper border being hard, while the remainder of the mass was cerebriform.

In its early stage it evidently pressed on the vessels of the spleen and liver, producing congestion of these organs, which in the last two months was relieved by the softening of the mass. The spleen being thus greatly enlarged and covering the diseased kidney like a cushion, led us into the error of supposing it the organ at fault. The urine was carefully and frequently examined in all stages of the disease, but nothing abnormal was ever found in it. The right kidney was rather larger than normal, and contained in its cortical substance a number of cysts, some of them as large as a nutmeg, and filled with a yellowish fluid.

The heart contained, in the right ventricle, and firmly attached to its right wall and to the columnæ carneæ, a growth of a light-fawn color and firm consistence, about the size of a large English walnut. It was situated just below the tricuspid valve. The mitral valves were thickened, but the aortic valves were healthy.

The disease having been recognized in February, all hope of cure was abandoned, but he persisted in attending to his practice, and continued to operate until three months before his death. His last operation was performed at Sligo, Clarion Co., Pa., May 30th, 1878. This was his 387th case of ovariectomy. Although he continued to attend to office patients for some time after this, his suffering and weakness soon confined him to his room, and compelled him to divide his time between a reclining chair and his bed. He settled all his worldly affairs, yet he did not lose his interest in his profession, but continued to read the medical journals and see his friends, making but little complaint, and patiently awaited the final summons. The waste of body did not impair his intellectual faculties, for his mind remained clear until the last. Although he knew that his end was rapidly approaching, he showed no fear of death, but welcomed it, not only as a relief, but as a means of realizing his hopes as a Christian.

"About the hour of eight (which he himself
Foretold should be his last),
He gave his honors to the world again,
His blessed part to heaven, and slept in peace."

THOMAS MURRAY DRYSDALE.

The following is a complete list of his published writings upon the subject of gynecology :

- "A Case of Ovariectomy." *American Journal of Medical Science*, 1844.
- "A Case of Successful Extirpation of a Fibroid Tumor of the Uterus by the Large Peritoneal Section." *Ibid.*, 1845.
- "A Tabular Synopsis of One Hundred and One Operations of Ovariectomy." *Ibid.*, 1845.
- "Two Cases of Protracted Gestation." *American Journal of Medical Science*, 1846.
- "Excision of the Cervix Uteri for Carcinomatous Disease." *American Journal of Medical Science*, 1848.
- "Ovarian Dropsy Cured by the Long Abdominal Incision in 1701." *Ibid.*, 1849.
- "Three Cases of Ovariectomy." *Ibid.*, 1849, 1850.

- "Analysis of One Hundred and Seventy-nine Cases of Ovariectomy." *Ibid.*, 1850.
- "A Table of all the known Operations of Ovariectomy from 1701 to 1851." Comprising Two Hundred and Twenty-two Cases, and giving a Synoptical History of each Case.
- "On the Treatment of Certain Fibroid Tumors of the Uterus, heretofore Considered beyond the Resources of Art." (Being the Treatise for which the prize for the year 1853 was awarded by the American Medical Association.) Transaction American Medical Association, 1853. Also in pamphlet.
- "On Placenta Prævia." *The Medical and Surgical Reporter*, Philadelphia, 1858.
- "A Case of Vesico-Vaginal Fistula." *American Journal of Medical Science*, 1860. Also pamphlet.
- "A Case of Acute Puerperal Tetanus." *Ibid.*, 1860.
- "A New Cause of Vesico-Vaginal Fistula." Reply to Prof. Brickell. *Maryland and Virginia Medical Journal*, 1861.
- "A Case of Quadruple Birth." *Medical and Surgical Reporter*, Philadelphia, 1860.
- "Numerous Cases of Ovariectomy," published in the *American Journal of Medical Science*, and in the *Medical Times of Philadelphia*.
- "A New Clamp in Ovariectomy." *American Journal of Medical Science*, 1871.
- "The Uterine Dilator." *Ibid.*, 1871.
- "The Use of the Speculum in the Diagnosis and Treatment of Diseases of the Uterus," being the Address in Obstetrics before the Medical Society of the State of Pennsylvania. Transactions of Medical Association of Pennsylvania for 1872.
- "General and Differential Diagnosis of Ovarian Tumors with Special Reference to the Operation of Ovariectomy." 1 Vol. Published by J. B. Lippincott & Co. Philadelphia, 1873.
- "A Retrospect of the Struggles and Triumphs of Ovariectomy in Philadelphia," being the annual address before the Philadelphia County Medical Society, by the retiring President, in 1875. Also pamphlet.
- "A Female with Double Organs of Generation." Transactions of Medical Society of Pennsylvania, 1873. Also pamphlet.
- A paper on "The Treatment of Fibroids of the Uterus." Read before the "International Medical Congress," September, 1876. Transactions of International Medical Congress, Philadelphia.
- A paper on "Sarcoma of the Ovaries." Read before "The American Gynecological Society," Boston, 1877. Transactions of American Gynecological Society.



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