
IN MEMORIAM

JOHN CLARENCE WEBSTER
1863-1950

JOHN CLARENCE WEBSTER was born in Shediac, New Brunswick, Canada, Oct. 21, 1863, and after a very active life died there March 16, 1950. He had gained international distinction, both as a specialist in gynecology and obstetrics and as an outstanding historian. He is survived by his wife, the former Miss Alice K. Lusk of New York, and a son, Dr. William L. Webster, Montreal research physicist. Last year, Dr. and Mrs. Webster observed their fiftieth wedding anniversary. Another son, Captain John C. Webster, was killed in an airplane crash at Montreal in 1931, and in his memory Dr. Webster established the Webster Memorial Trophy, for achievement in Canadian aviation. A daughter, Janet Roche, wife of a French artist, died in a German concentration camp in January, 1945. Three grandchildren, a son and two daughters of Mrs. Roche, reside in France.

Dr. Webster's life may be divided into three almost equal phases: student days, professional life as a specialist in obstetrics and gynecology, and as a distinguished citizen of Canada.

After attending primary school he spent several years in the Westmoreland County Grammar School. He matriculated at Mount Allison College in September, 1878, and graduated in 1882. In April, 1883, he sailed for Edinburgh to enter the Medical Department of the University, which was then at the zenith of its fame. Here he became one of more than two thousand medical students gathered from all quarters of the world. In 1890, he obtained his M.D. degree from the University, being awarded the Gold Medal for his thesis. He also won the first prize for research in 1894 and in 1896. While at Edinburgh, he worked as an assistant to Dr. Barbour and, later, with Professor Simpson (nephew of Sir James). In 1896, he returned to Shediac for a vacation, and on the urging of friends located in Montreal, where he became associated with McGill University and the Royal Victoria Hospital. In the spring of 1899, just before his marriage, he received an invitation to become professor of obstetrics and gynecology in Rush Medical College, then affiliated with the University of Chicago. The position carried with it headship of the same departments in the Presbyterian Hospital and Central Free Dispensary. Dr. Webster wrote that he never regretted his decision to leave the splendid possibilities at McGill for Rush Medical. "When I resigned my positions in 1919 and left Chicago, I felt deeply grateful for the wonderful experience of the preceding twenty years, and for the privilege which had been mine to have taken an active part in the development of a great Medical School, and to have been associated with a group

of enthusiastic and able men, equals of those with whom I had worked in the old world, and whose friendship I had grown to appreciate and prize.”

During the years from 1883 to 1896, Dr. Webster received 14 prizes or awards from the University in Edinburgh. He was a member of twenty scientific societies. Twelve books and 96 scientific papers are listed in his bibliography. Many of these cover fundamental research in the field of obstetrics and gynecology. He was elected a Fellow of the American Gynecological Society in 1898, and an Honorary Fellow in 1923.

Leaving Chicago in 1919, Dr. Webster returned to his native Shediac. His medical life had come to an end because of ill health. From boyhood he had been interested in history. Realizing that he knew very little about his native country, he decided to give his full attention to Canadian history, carrying on original research, and collecting Canadiana. His appointment to the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada was an incentive to investigate the range of historical interest of the entire country. Later, he became Chairman of the Board, and was recognized as one of the most distinguished citizens of Canada. He was a lay member of the Royal Commission on Railways and Transportation, 1931-1932. He was a member of twenty-six literary, historical, and other educational associations, and received many other honors. His bibliography includes fifty nonmedical literary and historical publications.

In October, 1944, Dr. Webster published a short autobiography, and in the foreword he wrote: “I have often been asked which of these two fields of activity has interested me most. My answer has always been ‘Neither.’ I have found a keen satisfaction in instructing students, in carrying on medical research, in the triumphs of the operating room, as in studying ancient documents, marking historic sites, or developing historical museums. These latter interests have carried me through the perils of old age and have saved me from the horrors of doddering senility. Physical disabilities have been annoying, but they have not been able to quench the urge of the spirit. When I can no longer work I have no desire to live.”

His wish was granted, for he was active until a few hours before the end.

Carl Henry Davis.

DR. JOHN CLARENCE WEBSTER**Fred O. Priest, M.D.***Chicago, Ill.*

[We are glad to publish the following additional account of a notable Canadian surgeon. This was presented on October 30, 1950, at the annual meeting of The Canadian Gynecological Travel Society, a small but select group which, originating in Montreal, knows no international boundaries.—EDITOR.]

To find a subject not essentially medical, of interest to a group of distinguished obstetricians and gynecologists of Canada, to my own colleagues and friends, is not an easy assignment. Our avocations and hobbies are so diversified that a topic of great interest to one of us may be boring to another. I have, therefore, tried to select a subject of which both you and we may claim joint ownership. The subject, a man, born one of you, spent his early life in Canada, came to us and, more specifically, to our own medical college and hospital and, after twenty years of arduous and devoted service here, returned to Canada to give to you the remainder of his busy life. This man, of course, was Dr. John Clarence Webster. While it was not my privilege to know Dr. Webster, those who did will remember him as a man of outstanding personality, a human dynamo until the day of his death.

John Clarence Webster, of Scottish and Yorkshire stock, was born in Shediac, New Brunswick, October 21, 1863. His early education was at the Westmoreland County School where he developed a great admiration for his teacher, Mr. D. B. White, who had been educated in Edinburgh. This teacher and Webster's father were the incentive for his own later medical education in Edinburgh. He entered Mount Allison at the age of fifteen. Here little is recorded except that he had a definite dislike for Latin and Greek, which he always considered a waste of time. An Arts

degree was received at the age of 19 and Webster planned to begin the study of medicine in Edinburgh in the fall of 1882. Illness, however, detained his admission there until the following year. In Edinburgh he found an atmosphere quite different from that in which he had lived. The university was at the height of its fame and had an extremely large enrollment. A five-year course was offered, after which the Master of Surgery and Bachelor of Medicine degrees were given, two years' additional work being required if the Doctor of Medicine degree was given. Webster found the competition keen and the professors superb at Edinburgh. In 1890 he received the degree of Doctor of Medicine and was awarded the gold prize for original work. He was stimulated by meeting the many famous visitors to the university, the great names in medicine, the arts and letters. He was a shy fellow and had taken little part in student activities. But this had given him much time to explore the city and for the study of Scottish history. This early study was to show its influence in his later life.

Shortly after his graduation he was appointed assistant to Sir Alexander Simpson, Professor of midwifery. He seemed marked as Simpson's successor for he remained in this capacity for six years. He had come to feel himself a part of Edinburgh and planned to make it his permanent home. Illness, a chronic upper respiratory infection, influenced him to leave, however, and he returned to Canada where he became demonstrator in gynecology at McGill University and assistant gynecologist at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal. Here he developed septicæmia from an infected patient. This influenced him to introduce the use of rubber gloves in surgery, a technique which he brought with him to the Presbyterian Hospital.

In 1899 Dr. Webster accepted the professorship of obstetrics and gynecology at Rush Medical College of the University of Chicago and the chairmanship of those departments in

the Presbyterian Hospital. Shortly before coming here he was married to Alice Lusk, the daughter of William T. Lusk, an eminent New York obstetrician. In Chicago Webster found an atmosphere very different from that to which he had been accustomed. Here was a spirit of newness; new ideas and initiative were encouraged and he stated that he found a group of colleagues comparable to those with whom he had worked in Edinburgh. He was welcomed by the heads of the other departments and was given a free rein in the development of his own department. This he conducted with an iron hand. His keen intellect, unlimited energy, advanced surgical principles and deft technique brought him prompt recognition and a large and remunerative surgical practice. He spared himself no pains and accepted no excuses for mediocrity in others. He was a difficult taskmaster but always in the interest of the patient or of accurate teaching. His department was soon well organized and much of the didactic teaching was left to his subordinates. Thus he obtained more time in which to carry on his research, the development of an excellent departmental museum and the writing of medical papers and books. He had been and continued to be a prolific writer. He had published five books or monographs on obstetrics or gynaecology while in Edinburgh and he published five additional ones during his first eight years in Chicago. His original work on human placentation, on ectopic pregnancy, and on the anatomy of pregnancy through serial sections gave him world renown. Many of the beautiful illustrative drawings in his papers were done by himself or his accomplished wife. He published 65 medical papers during his stay in Chicago.

I think that you should know something of Webster, the man, while here. He had a great fear of upper respiratory infections and always tried to avoid being chilled. In the operating theatre he was quite unpopular. Besides the warmth of the surgical attire and the room, he could easily increase his temperature by the smallest irritations. At the end of each surgical case a large blanket was brought to him and he draped himself somewhat like "Standing Bull"—hence he was soon designated as "The Chief" in more senses than one.

He enjoyed the distinction of having more interns quit his service, or threaten to do so, than any other head of a department. After one of his episodes in surgery, a red-haired Scottish intern reached into the instrument tray and picked out a hanging speculum. "And what do you intend to do with that?" asked Webster. When told that he knew very well what he intended to do with it, Webster replied: "Come, come, my boy, one damned fool in the operating room is enough." On another occasion the intern who was giving anaesthesia for Webster became somewhat irritated with

his continual nagging and said: "Doctor Webster, if you'll attend to your end of the patient, I'll take care of my end." When Webster later began to limit his obstetrical practice he referred many of his patients to this man. Once he was out of the operating rooms he became himself again and really enjoyed the respect and admiration of his subordinates.

He enjoyed the meetings of the faculty and staff, these being educational in value, but found many of the medical society meetings unprofitable. At the latter he was a severe critic, particularly at the Chicago Gynaecological Society. The younger essayists were always pleased when he was absent for he demanded proof of any statement made.

Webster did very little socially while in Chicago—both because his program of work was so heavy and because he chose not to do so. But it was here that he and Mrs. Webster became interested in oriental art and began the collection of Japanese and Chinese art objects. This was continued for many years and became one of the most famous in the world. They later presented the collection to the New Brunswick Museum.

In 1920, at the age of 57 and at the height of his medical career, he abruptly withdrew from all medical activities and returned to his native Shediac, New Brunswick, and resumed his Canadian citizenship. He had offered his services to the Canadian Medical authorities in 1941 and to the United States authorities in 1917 but had not been accepted. Many of the younger men were in service and he had been overburdened with work during the war. His resignation was accepted with many regrets by the College and the Presbyterian Hospital.

At the age of 57 Webster was not in the best of health, had acquired a comfortable financial status, and, had he been like many of us, would have retired to a life of ease. But it was during the last thirty years of his life, after he left the field of medicine, that he accomplished those things for which he will be remembered longest and most loved. When questioned as to which of the two fields of his life had been of most interest to him he replied that he had found as much satisfaction in one as in the other, but that his historical research had carried him through the perils of old age and saved him from the horrors of doddering senility. Also it was in his second field of endeavour that he worked closely with Mrs. Webster and spent most of his time with her. It was in Edinburgh that he had first interested himself in Scottish and Canadian history, music and painting. Together they had continued these studies throughout the years. After his retirement from medicine he and Mrs. Webster devoted themselves to research in Canadian history. For ten years they visited Europe annually, studying the related archives and

laying the foundation of the "Webster Collection of Canadiana". This collection was donated to the New Brunswick Museum also, is valued at one million dollars, and is rivalled only by the collection in the National Archives in Ottawa. Mrs. Webster played an inestimable part in this work and is as tireless a worker as was her husband. Dr. Bartlett Brebner, an historian at Columbia, has said: "It is faulty mathematics to add a Webster to a Webster and get two Websters. In order to understand all they have been able to do, you multiply Webster by Webster and get Webster squared."

In 1923 Webster was made a member of the "Historic Sites and Monuments Board," an honorary group of Canadian historians to advise the government in the marking of historic sites and national historic parks. Twenty years later he was made chairman of this board and remained in that capacity until his death this year at 87 years of age. This was perhaps his most cherished appointment because of its connection with the history of Canada. In this span of his life he published 50 papers and several books, dealing with Canadian history. His thesis on the life of General Wolfe is a classic. He was largely responsible for the establishment or restoration of numerous

historical museums. His favourite was perhaps the museum at Fort Beausejour. Many presentations were made here through his generosity and at his own expense. It was quite fitting that an addition to the museum in 1949 should be named 'The John Clarence Webster Wing'. He has, I believe, done more for the preservation of historic sites in the Maritimes than any other man.

He received honorary degrees from five universities and honours from the governments of several countries. His active later life in Canadian history and literature was so full that many may forget his contribution to medicine but it is as a physician that we wish to remember Dr. Webster.

ADDENDUM

Since I did not have the opportunity of knowing Dr. Webster personally, I obtained my information from the following sources:

"Those Crowded Years". By J. Clarence Webster. (His autobiography, written for his children.)

Dr. Stanley Pargellis, Librarian of the Newberry Library, Chicago, a friend of Dr. Webster in his later life.

Webster's personal correspondence with Mrs. Edwin Miller of Chicago.

Various medical and historical magazines of the British Empire.

Conversations with staff members and with former interns of Dr. Webster at the Presbyterian Hospital.