Harvey Cushing †

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On Saturday, October 7th, 1939, in New Haven, Connecticut, Dr. Harvey Cushing died of coronary thrombosis. With that statement is recorded the passing of the man who was pre-eminent in brain surgery in the world and whose lifetime of work has left a deep imprint in the annals of science and an inspiration for medical men of the future. There is no place in the civilized world of today where Dr. Cushing’s achievements are not known and scarcely a place where some pupil or co-worker of his is not following the tenets which he has laid down.

Harvey Cushing represented the fourth generation of distinguished men of medicine. He was born in Cleveland, Ohio, April 8th, 1869, the son of Henry Kirke Cushing, formerly professor of obstetrics and gynecology in the Western Reserve Medical School, grandson of Erasmus Cushing, and great grandson of David Cushing. He received his college education at both Yale and Harvard, being granted the degree of Bachelor of Arts from the former in 1891 and degrees of Master of Arts and Doctor of Medicine from the latter in 1895. After an internship at the Massachusetts General Hospital, he went to Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore in 1896 as Junior Assistant in the Surgical Service of Halsted, becoming Resident Surgeon in 1897 and thereafter instructor, assistant and associate in surgery. During this period he began his experimental studies on gall stones, bacteriology of the alimentary canal and cocaine anesthesia, and it is interesting to note that he made the first roentgenograms that were made at Johns Hopkins Hospital. In 1900 he studied in Europe with Drs. William Osier and Thomas McCrae, Kronecker in Berne, Kocher, Mosso in Turin, and Sherrington. During this period of study began his interest in intracranial tension and neurology.

During the latter part of 1901, he returned to Baltimore where he remained until 1912, having become during this period an associate professor of surgery. In 1912, he left Baltimore to return to Harvard as Moseley Professor of Surgery and Surgeon in Chief to the newly opened Peter Bent Brigham Hospital. Here he remained until 1932 when he retired from these positions and became Sterling Professor in the School of Medicine of Yale University, teaching Neurology and the History of Medicine until 1937 when he became Emeritus Professor.

Within this frame of dates and teaching positions is held a mosaic, the stones of which are literary contributions by the hundred, and honors and honorary degrees too numerous to mention, with a background of indefatigable effort, energy and zeal. On April 8th, 1939, the occasion of his seventieth birthday, a bibliography of his writings was assembled and published by the Harvey Gushing Society. There stands the record of thirteen papers and monographs and 306 addresses, papers, and reports. In addition to this, there are listed 328 papers from clinics and laboratories under his direction. The first of the monographs, which was published in 1912, is that entitled “The Pituitary Body and Its Disorders”, and his interest in this subject has led to the statement that “He held the key to Endocrinology. The story of the pituitary is not yet complete,
but the work of Harvey Cushing has accelerated progress in one of those inspired bursts of speed that characterize great epochs in the history of disease”.

Before 1912, Dr. Cushing had described the subtemporal decompressive operation and had developed his exceptional technique in neurosurgery with improved methods of hemostasis and suture. From then until his death, his precision, courage, patience and skill were to be used constantly to improve surgery on the brain. He was also to continue his observations, many of which were fundamental, on the physiology of the brain, the cerebro-spinal fluid and the pituitary.

The roster of his assistants and associates carries distinguished names in practically every country of the world today. The list of degrees and honors is far too long to mention in detail, but he has been a member of every medical association in America in any way connected with his field, and has served as president of most of them. He has been made an honorary member of many other American medical societies. He has had honorary degrees conferred on him by numerous universities in America and abroad and has been the orator in surgery and delivered outstanding addresses at many universities and assemblies. This long list of honors includes an honorary fellowship in both the Royal College of Physicians in London and the Royal College of Surgeons in England. The last mentioned fact is indicative because through all of his life he recognized the importance of a sound education in physiology and in medicine in general, as a founder of surgery, and in fact his life and attainments epitomize the aphorism that “A good surgeon is a good medical man who can cut.” Much of his writing has stressed this relationship and much of his effort in the later years of his life was directed toward maintaining the correct professional status of the physician and surgeon, and toward the sound and careful foundation of proper social health legislation in the United States. In an essay called “Medicine at the Crossroads”, published in the Journal of the American Medical Association on May 20, 1933, he wrote: “Those who deal with the science of society deal with something that actually does pulsate with so short a time cycle that conditions almost from year to year are never quite the same, so that our theories of today are likely to need modifying tomorrow. What this puzzled world needs perhaps is more study of the past, fewer commissions and surveys of the present, and a greater number of philosophically minded, self-supporting and law-abiding persons who can see all round their particular problem and independently devote themselves to it as do most doctors.”

At the time of the World War he served with such distinction as to be universally acclaimed. In March, 1915, he left Boston with the Harvard Unit to serve in the British Expeditionary Force, returning in 1917 to help organize the United States Army Base Hospital No. 5, of which he became the director, and subsequently the senior consultant of neurosurgical surgery with the American Expeditionary Forces. For the work he did during this period, he was decorated by the governments of the United States, England and France. Upon his return from his war service he was suffering from peripheral neuritis which affected his health for the remainder of his life but did not seem to diminish his activity. He has published a record of his war days entitled “The Diary of a War Surgeon”.

Perhaps his supreme achievement of a literary nature is the “Life of Sir William Osier” which was published in two volumes in 1925, having been written at the request of Dr. Osier’s widow. It was awarded the Pulitzer Prize as the best biographic writing of the year and is almost a standard part of the library of at least every American and English physician. As Arnold Klebs
has said, “It is the happiest fusion of the objective and subjective that biographical art has ever turned out in our rich literature”.

There is much to bear evidence of Harvey Cushing’s wit, humor, kindliness and philosophy. Superlatives are meager to add tribute to what he himself has left behind him, for he made his monument as he lived worked. There is gone a great worker, educator and author and, above all, a great physician. One of the brightest torches of contemporary medicine has gone out but during its long, full burning it lighted numerous other torches so that the dark corners of medical problems which it illuminated will remain unhidden, and still others will be brought forth to view, and thus the work of Harvey Gushing will go on.

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Arthur E. Hertzler: The Horse and Buggy Doctor. The Bodley Head. 12/6d.

“The Horse and Buggy Doctor” is a book of reminiscences by an American country doctor who began general practice in a small town in Kansas fifty years ago. He was the son of a struggling farmer and during his school days took his share in the work of the farm. For the first two years of his medical education he had to work for his board.

He started practice before diseases caused by bacteria were recognised as such, when all wounds suppurated and abdominal operations were almost unknown. He visited his patients in a horse-drawn buggy, often averaging only three miles an hour over rough roads and in bad weather; sometimes at the end of a six hour journey he had to perform a major operation by candlelight. During a typhoid epidemic one summer he was constantly on the road for many weeks and for six days all the sleep he got was in the buggy. Nevertheless he kept abreast of the rapid advances then being made in medicine and during his long journeys studied the medical literature and text books, always keeping a revolver at hand for use against wild dogs at outlying farms. His capacity for work seemed boundless and although money was hard to come by he was able to realise his dream of building a hospital for his patients and later to visit Germany.

The book is full of anecdotes mingled with philosophy and reveals a keen sense of humour and rather severe candour. “He cures or he palliates, or he does no good at all. In most cases the patient just gets well as a matter of course.” But there is present always a real sympathy for his fellowmen whose sufferings are so often as unmerited as they are severe. Dr. Francis Brett Young summarises the book in his preface. “It has the humane wisdom of the kind which no practising doctor who isn’t a fool can fail to acquire. It has the humour (sometimes self-critical) without which no doctor can stomach the grimness of his work. It has the poise and detachment which are necessary to a man who daily confronts the human tragedy. It has a record of great good humour and sanity and courage. It is in short, the history of the average medical man.”  S. Robinson

London.