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George McClellan [1849-1913]: A Memoir read before the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, by J. Chalmers Da Costa, M.D., LL.D., Samuel D. Gross Professor of Surgery in Jefferson Medical College

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# George McClellan

*A Memoir read before the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, by  
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Surgery in Jefferson Medical College.*

"Every moment dies a man."

Death is ever gleaning his harvest. Rich and poor, young and old, happy and wretched, celebrated and obscure, are alike helpless to check the stern ordinance of Fate. Death is the law. The grave hungers for all of us. The doorway of the road to Eternity is ever open. Through it passes an endless procession. Through it shall pass all the sons of men. The young love life.

"Youth asks itself, 'How can I ever die?  
Only the old into the grave must fall.'  
While age is wondering with a gentle  
sigh

If all this wasted breath was life at all."  
*Storer.*

The young are seldom oppressed by the thought of death. This, too, is the law. Were it otherwise, the work of the world would not be and could not be performed, progress would cease and existence would stagnate. As the years pass, age lays his chilling hand upon us. The sunlit hours' seem to dance more quickly by. Year by year darkness more quickly follows dawn, winter follows summer, the river flows toward the mysterious unknown. Ever oftener death invades the immediate human circle of each of our lives. One must of necessity be resigned. It is not our right to be sorry for a dead man. We don't

know enough to dare to be. The dead are beyond the reach of envy and malice, of misery and unhappiness, of the bitter word of hate, of the serpent's hiss of scorn. Upon the phantom-haunted shore of Death the sea of Sorrow casts no wave.

One who still lives has to apprehend the manner of death Destiny has plotted out for him. It was Solon who said, "Count no man happy till you know the manner of his death." Each one of us has ahead of him the grim tragedy of earthly extinction, and to some of us it will assuredly come in its most dreadful form. So why should we pity the dead? We say, with Chrysostom, "Honor the dead with remembrance but not with tears." To live always would be an indescribably horrible thing. The gloomy legend of the Wandering Jew portrays the hopeless horror of an endless life.

When a dear friend dies we are frightened at the inexorable action of a natural law; we are appalled at our loss; we tell each other of the dead man's life, his sayings, his deeds, his character; we grieve for his lonely family; and we seek to comfort ourselves by the reflection that though he is gone he has but gone before us into the unknown.

Tonight we meet to honor the dead with affectionate remembrance. We gather to pay tribute to the memory of a distinguished scientist, of a dear friend,



of a valuable and valued Fellow of this College. On the 29th of March, 1913, George McClellan was claimed by the grave.

I shall occupy but a brief time telling of his work. I shall make no attempt to relate at length the story of his busy, useful, and successful life. A mere epitome of a man's work tells little of the man. Such a story does not breathe. It is, at best, a mere skeleton, not a flesh-clad, blood-warm, soul-stirred form.

I purpose trying to sketch the man, to draw the outline of his nature, to set forth his characteristics, to portray his character, to put him before you as he was, as the man I know him to have been. This large task has been entrusted to weak and bungling, but to tender and sympathetic hands. I loved George McClellan, and had reason to, for twice in my life when I most needed friends, he stood by my side my loyal friend. His taking off has left a gap in my human circle and an emptiness in my life which can never be completely filled.

He came from a long line of distinguished forebears. The blood of fighting Scotchmen and of revolutionary patriots ran hot in his veins. The ancient home of his race was Kirkcudbright, on Solway Firth. The Firth is an arm of the Irish Sea which separates S. W. Scotland from the English county of Cumberland. Kirkcudbright has Dumfries to the east, Ayr to the north, Wigtown to the west. The entire region is a land of song and story and tradition. Into the Firth Paul Jones used to come on the *Ranger* and escape from his English pursuers—Paul Jones, who had been born in Kirkcudbright.

In Kirkcudbright, William Douglas wrote "Annie Laurie." The world still sings "Maxwellton's braes are bonnie," and Maxwelltown is just across the county border in Dumfries. It was in Dumfries that Robert Bruce slew Red Comyn, the nephew of Baliol. It was in

Dumfries that Robbie Burns was an officer of excise, and it was in that town he died. Gretna Green is near by—Gretna Green, where, for so many years, the village blacksmith married runaway couples from nearby England, a custom which ended only in 1856. Adjacent is Ecclefechan (the Entophuhl of "Sartor Resartus"), where the great Carlyle was born and where his body rests. Not far away is the hill where Meg Merrilies, she of whom we read in "Guy Mannering," cursed the Lord of Ellengowan. On every hand are relics and traditions of Bruce and Wallace, of the Border wars, of the Black Douglas, of the Jacobites of 1715, of the gay and gallant Prince Charlie and "The '45."

The McClellans were loyal followers of the house of Stuart, and fought for the Pretender in 1715. After the annihilation of the rebellion many chieftains escaped the Tower and the block by fleeing to France or America. The head of the McClellans came to America and settled in Worcester, Mass. He was the grandfather of the grandfather of George McClellan. His son, George McClellan's great-grandfather, held the king's commission in the French and Indian War and was a brigadier-general in the war of the American Revolution. He lived in Woodstock, Connecticut. Three great elms which recently stood and may still stand in that town, were planted by the wife of the revolutionary soldier because he, then a captain, had come safe out of the Battle of Bunker Hill.

George McClellan, the son of Washington's brigadier, the grandfather of the McClellan of whom we speak, was born in Woodstock, educated at Yale, studied medicine in the University of Pennsylvania, settled in Philadelphia, married a Philadelphia belle, Elizabeth Brinton, resided here all his days, died here, and is buried in Laurel Hill. He was a celebrated surgeon of great originality, intrepidity, dexterity, energy, independence of spirit and force of character.

He founded the Jefferson Medical College, and was its first professor of surgery. Samuel, a brother of the distinguished surgeon, was also eminent as a medical man. He was for a time Professor of Anatomy in Jefferson.

John Hill Brinton McClellan was the father of him we honor tonight. He was Professor of Anatomy in the Pennsylvania Medical College, an institution founded by the elder McClellan after he broke with Jefferson, one which became very successful but perished during the Civil War.

John H. B. McClellan was surgeon to St. Joseph's Hospital and surgeon to Will's Eye Hospital.

John H. B. McClellan's brother, George B., became an illustrious soldier, the "Little Mac" of the early sixties, commanded the army of the Potomac, fought titanic combats, obtained the enthusiastic attachment and complete confidence of great armies, suffered, *many think*, from gross injustice and unfairness, stood upon the flaming brow of Malvern Hill, and rode between the lines at Antietam.

I have set forth the McClellan ancestry because George valued it and was proud of it—and naturally. It is pleasant to know that one's father was a gallant gentleman. Why should it not be pleasant to know that one's grandfather and great-grandfather were the same sort?

I believe that hereditary tendencies, ingrained in the race, constituted the bed-rock basis and the fibre of George McClellan's character. From heredity man gets the leaven of certain tendencies which have profound influence in shaping his destiny. Ancestral characteristics, perhaps somewhat changed, are produced again and again in a line of descent. On the stream of heredity come abilities, passions, weaknesses, capacities, strengths, and immortal longings. Heredity tendency does so much to determine our lives, it is small wonder

that myriads have believed and multitudes do believe in predestination.

When we view George McClellan's fore-elders we find influences that came to build and strengthen his courage, industry, integrity, loyalty, truthfulness, love of freedom, hatred of injustice, manly independence, outspoken honesty, readiness for a fair fight, amazement at treachery, inability to understand the trickster, the time-server, and the liar.

He had many fine qualities, and so had his ancestors before him. They were true gentlemen, and so was he.

He was born in Philadelphia, October 29th, 1849, of the union of John Hill Brinton McClellan with Maria Eldredge, of Boston. He was the eldest son and was given the name of his distinguished grandfather. He went to school under Dr. Short, and passed three years in the Art Department of the University of Pennsylvania, leaving there in 1868 to study medicine in Jefferson College. During his student days he listened to the Elder Gross, Joseph Pancoast, John B. Biddle, James Aitken Meigs, Benjamin H. Rand, Samuel H. Dickson, and Ellerslie Wallace. He was enthusiastically interested in surgery and anatomy, and had the privilege of studying those branches under the two greatest surgeons and the greatest surgical anatomist of the country. He graduated in medicine in 1870, and at once began practice, devoting himself particularly to surgery and studying anatomy with unflagging zeal. In 1872 he went to Europe and studied under the master anatomist Professor Hyrtl of Vienna. Josef Hyrtl was by birth a Hungarian. He was professor first in Prague and then in Vienna. He was not only a famous human anatomist, but was one of the first comparative anatomists of his day. He was celebrated for the beauty of his anatomical specimens (some of which are in our Museum), and was a noted author and a most impressive

and original teacher. The teaching of this great anatomist captivated the young surgeon, caused him to take up anatomical teaching as a career, and led him to follow Hyrtl's methods through all his teaching days. In the way he thought of anatomy, in the way he studied it, in the way he taught it, he was essentially a follower of the great Hyrtl.

In 1873 McClellan returned to Philadelphia, established himself in practice, and taught private students anatomy and surgery. In that year he married Miss Harriet Hare, the grand-daughter of the celebrated professor of Chemistry in the University of Pennsylvania. In 1875 he became a fellow of this College. We all know what a useful Fellow he was. The Mutter Museum speaks more than words could do of his interest and industry. In 1880 he became surgeon to the Philadelphia Hospital, where he served for ten years. During this period, and for a number of years later, he was surgeon to the Howard Hospital. In 1881 he founded the Penn. School of Anatomy and Surgery, where he taught until 1893. It was a very successful institution. The fame of his teaching drew great numbers of students, especially from Jefferson College. It was in his school of anatomy I first had the privilege of meeting him and hearing him.

The school was a small building on Medical Street. Its site is now covered by Jefferson College. It was an axiom when I was a student that if you would really like and understand anatomy you must go to McClellan's demonstrations. I was charmed with his teaching. His perfect familiarity with his subject, the beauty of his dissections, the clearness of his demonstrations, the pictures which he drew on the board with such marvellous speed, accuracy and dexterity, excited the warmest admiration of his class. His anatomy was art. He dissected a body as a great sculptor

would carve a statue. He taught surface relations as well as regional anatomy, and discussed the medical and surgical bearings of every triangle, structure and neighborhood. All the tissues of the body were as familiar to him as the objects which were on his road from Spruce Street to the Jefferson College. I thought then, and I think now, that nobody ever gave more useful anatomical lectures. In 1890 he was elected Professor of Artistic Anatomy in the Academy of Fine Arts, and there he taught for many years with great success.

In 1906 he came to his Alma Mater as Professor of Applied Anatomy (where many thought he should have been long before). There he taught with distinguished success to the time of his death. His chief literary work is the "Regional Anatomy." It was published in 1891, went through four editions in the United States, was translated into French and went through two French editions. It is a wonderful and beautiful book. The numerous pictures are real works of art. They were made from photographs. He made the dissections, took the photographs, and colored the pictures. They are absolutely accurate. They show real anatomy—anatomy as it is, not as it ought to be, or as we might wish it to be, or as we may make it seem to be through carelessness or lack of knowledge. Another highly important work is his "Anatomy in Relation to Art"; it is a splendid production.

An address which attracted attention and which many of us heard was called "The Cerebral Mechanism of Emotional Expression."

So much for the man's work. What of the man himself?

A prominent element in his nature was sensitiveness. He was keenly affected by external impressions, and his spirits responded to them like the sensitive flame to a sound. Sensitiveness may create much happiness and may build



many sorrows. It was sensitiveness which gave him his fine artistic impressions. It was sensitiveness that made him suffer acute mental pain when angry words were said, when antagonistic things were done. He could not understand the unfrank attitude, the disregard of a promise made or implied, the language used to conceal thought. He looked upon such things as he did the cloaked form, the masked face and the deadly stab in the dark. An attitude of personal opposition on the part of one he loved and trusted hurt him to the depths of his nature. In such a situation his looks seemed to say, "Had it been mine enemy who had done this thing then might I have borne it, but it was even thou, mine own familiar friend." Opposition is inevitable in the life of every man, and it acts differently on different men. Some it nerves to effort. Some it perverts and damages. Some it utterly destroys. In some it breeds anger and resentment. It causes some to scoff and jibe with cynic bitterness. To most it brings at least a disenchantment with life, the attitude which is common in those of middle age or beyond. The iron of it entered into McClellan's soul and he felt a sad sense of disappointment. He was conscious of great ability, fine training and peculiar fitness for distinguished place. He had seen lesser men pass him in the race. He was obliged to wait for weary years before he received suitable recognition. He always felt with a tinge of bitterness that the delay had wasted something of his life by keeping him so long from the proper field for the exercise of his highest abilities.

He was no hypocrite. He was prone to say what he thought. He always believed what he said. He told fearlessly what he held as a truth. He might be mistaken, but was never false. Telling the truth often requires resolution and courage, but is seldom popular. In asserting profound conviction he was not

always tactful. This is a statement and not a criticism, for tact, after all, is either a social anesthetic or a lie with a college education. He would not meekly acquiesce in the popular or profitable error. He did not pretend to love those whom he believed had wronged him. He never turned the other cheek. He followed clearer lights and walked in sterner paths. If he distrusted or disliked a man he practiced the hand of Douglas in his own theory:

"My castles are my king's alone,  
From turret to foundation stone.  
The hand of Douglas' is his own  
And never shall, in friendship's grasp,  
The hand of such as Marmion clasp."

He would have been a poor diplomatist according to Sir Henry Wotton's definition of an ambassador, viz.: "A man sent abroad to lie for his country."

He was a man destined for the minority. He preferred combat to cowardly silence. He had a good, honest temper, and in controversy he was positive and uncompromising. No man had a more tender heart. No man was more quick to forgive, if forgiveness was asked. He forgave the unfortunate without being asked, and extended his help and pity. He hated guilt, but did not always hate the guilty. He loved animals and understood them. Birds, horses, dogs commanded his affection. He never tried for popularity. He never sought to reach a lucrative celebrity by shedding ink and language, by posing, by tricks, by beating the big drum to attract the attention of the crowd. He never in his life played to the gallery. He was a modest gentleman of the old school, a school now so very old as to be neglected and all but forgotten. He believed in its formal courtesies, grave dignity, spotless cleanliness, cherished obligations, chivalrous loyalty, ample hospitality, high integrity, its gentle voices, its culture, refinement, conventions and traditions.



Comparatively few knew him really intimately. It was only to the chosen of his heart that he opened his entire nature.

He was a dignified man. He liked and fitted refined and intellectual society. The baldly unconventional jarred him. It shocked him because of its savor of vulgarity. The really vulgar he utterly repudiated. We cannot picture him supping in a cafe with Cassanova, or roystering in a tavern with Villon. He would have had none of the friendship of Rochester, and would have hated the habits and principles of Tom Paine. He would have admired the learning of Johnson, but would not have been anxious to dine with him. In the Middlesex election he might have voted against Luttrell, but would not have been the friend of Wilkes. When he passed his word he kept it loyally. He was loyal in all things—loyal to his profession, loyal to his professions, loyal to his friendships. He had the loyalty of that Scottish race from which he sprang, the race that would not betray Charles Edward, though it was death to hide him and though there was a fortune ready for any man or woman who would give him up to the English. He fought hard battles for his assistants, taking and giving blows. When he held a man

his friend he loved him, trusted him, believed in him, and stood by him through thick and thin. When he said he was for you he was. You did not have to send, from time to time, an investigating committee to take the temperature of his advocacy. He made no one a friend because he was rich. He refused no man friendship because he was poor.

He was by birth, instinct and training the truest of gentlemen. The very nature of a gentleman looked out from his kindly face, showed in his genial greeting, sounded in his refined voice, was manifest in his cordial and polished hospitality. He showed at his best as a host in his own house. In that house he entertained his friends. He did not care to do it in present-day style in a club or hotel. He was gentle to his family, his friends, his servants. His old servants loved him and were really retainers. To women he was deferential, courtly and chivalrous. A complete story of his life would bloom with gentle deeds. He was clean of life, clean of word, clean of thought.

“And thus he bore without abuse  
The grand old name of gentleman,  
Defamed of every charlatan  
And soiled with all ignoble use.”