

Obituary - THEODRIC ROMEYN BECK, M.D., LL. D.

August 11, 1791 - November 19, 1855

“It is a swift current - that stream of life on which, we ride. We fall asleep - and awaking, find ourselves almost home. Our companions, too, are constantly changing; at every moment new ones come aboard, and old ones leave us; and we have scarcely time to become familiar with their faces, or to make ourselves acquainted with their characters and purposes, before they are summoned to the gangway - the boat is lowered, and we wave them a friendly farewell. All along the sands of that silent shore, which we now so faintly see, our friends have left us; and we are awaiting the time when, cheerfully, manfully and hopefully, I trust, we shall receive our summons, and ‘depart alike to the inevitable grave.’

I am not, gentlemen, one of your oldest members - yet, of those who occupied these seats when, for the first time I listened to your deliberations, not a few are now dead; but of the pioneers - the founders and early members, not one remains. Most of them died many years since, and their vacant places have been so long filled by others, that we have ceased to notice their absence.

But to-day, a chair is vacant which no one has yet come to fill - where, for nearly forty years, has sat a beloved associate, and to which you have, for as many years, been accustomed to look for counsel. During all this period its claimant has been rarely absent, unless detained by sickness or by urgent and imperative duties. But, in the absence of its venerated occupant, during our deliberations which have just closed, and on this anniversary occasion, you have, I am instructed to tell you, the sad and significant announcement that Theodric Romeyn Beck is dead, and that he, also, will counsel with us no more.

Let us pause, while we review his labors, and contemplate our loss - for, in such a life as has here terminated, there must be something instructive, and we ought carefully to estimate its value. Upon the speaker, who was once his pupil, subsequently his colleague, and now, by your partial suffrages, his successor, has seemed to devolve the duty to trace his history - to epilogue the long chapter of his life, and to draw the moral; in order that these things may hereafter find a faithful record upon the annals of our society. With an earnest desire that I

may do no injustice to a theme so sacred, both to the living and to the dead, yet with doubting and unequal steps, I undertake the task.

Theodric Romeyn Beck was born at Schenectady, in the State of New-York, on the 11th day of August, 1791. The family were of English origin, but so long settled at Schenectady that their descendants, by association and intermarriage, became identified with the Dutch population. The first of the family, of whom we have any knowledge, was Caleb Beck, who sailed as master of a vessel from Boston to England, and who having married at Schenectady, was subsequently lost at sea. His son, the great grandfather of the subject of our memoir, as we learn from the probate of his will before the commissioners at Albany, in the year 1733, was 'Caleb Beck, gentleman, a freeholder in this colony; having during his life, and at the time of his death, goods, rights and credits in divers places in our province.'

His grandfather was admitted an attorney at law, to practice in all the courts, at Albany, in the year 1751.

The father of Dr. Beck, who also studied law, but never practiced, married Catherine Theresa Romeyn, only daughter of the Rev. Derick Romeyn, D.D., then pastor of the Reformed Dutch Church, at Schenectady, and well known as a distinguished professor of Theology in that church.

The ancestral name Caleb, was preserved through five successive generations, having only ceased with the brother of Dr. Beck. The Romeyn family came from Holland, and settled in New-York about the middle of the seventeenth century. Among those who acquired distinction, and whose names have come down to us, in addition to the Rev. Derick Romeyn, of whom we have spoken, we may recognize the brother of Mrs. Beck, the Rev. John B. Romeyn, D.D., who died in New-York, in 1825; and a cousin, Nicholas Romaine, M.D., who was president of this Society in 1809, 10, and 11, and who was made an Honorary Member in 1812.

Dr. Beck's father having died in 1798, at the age of 27 years, left his five sons to the sole care of his young widow, to whose indomitable energy, sound education, piety and good

judgment they are probably mainly indebted for the distinction which they all subsequently attained.

Abraham, a lawyer of much promise, died at St. Louis, Missouri, in 1821.

John Brodhead Beck, M.D., who was elected in 1829 a member of this Society, late Professor of Materia Medica and Botany, at the College of Physicians and Surgeons in the city of New-York, and author of many medical works, besides the chapter contributed by him to "Beck's Medical Jurisprudence," died in New-York, in 1851.

Nicholas Fairly Beck died while holding the office of Adjutant General of the State, under DeWitt Clinton, in 1830. And Lewis C. Beck, M.D., late Professor of Chemistry in the Albany Medical College, and in the Rutgers College, New-Jersey, author of several scientific works, and who, as a member of the scientific corps which made the New-York Geological Survey, contributed the volume on Mineralogy, one of the most valuable portions of that excellent State Report, died in 1853.

The rudiments of Dr. Beck's education were acquired at the grammar school of his native city, under the more immediate supervision of his maternal grandfather, the Rev. Derick Romeyn, D.D. He entered Union College, at Schenectady, in 1803, and graduated in 1807, when only sixteen years old. Union College had then been established but a few years, and, in a great measure, through the exertions of Dr. Romeyn.

Immediately on leaving college he came to this city, and was admitted to the office of Drs. Low and McClelland, the latter of which gentlemen was the first president of this Society.

His medical education was completed, however, in the city of New-York, under the personal instructions of the celebrated Dr. David Hosack. At the same time, also, he attended the lectures at the College of Physicians and Surgeons of the Eastern District, then recently established in that city; and in 1811 he received the degree of Doctor in Medicine; on which occasion he presented, as the subject of his inaugural thesis, a paper on 'Insanity' - the first fruits of the study of that subject which afterwards engaged so large a share of his attention,

and upon which he expended such stores of learning, and exhibited such powers of research. The thesis was published in a pamphlet form, containing thirty-four pages, and received from various quarters highly flattering notices.

In this early composition of the young student, we may see plainly enough the presage of his future eminence. Claiming, with characteristic modesty, no credit for originality, and acknowledging that he had no practical experience to relate, he gathered from a great number of sources facts and opinions, and so condensed and arranged them as to present a complete epitome of what was then known upon this, with us, hitherto neglected subject. With great care he arranged also, in a multitude of foot notes, all his references, which, in themselves, testify to his already remarkable classical attainments, and to his laborious habits.

After a brief notice of the history and literature of insanity, there follows a synopsis of its symptomatology, its etiology, pathology, and prognosis. In conclusion, he has devoted a chapter to medical jurisprudence and police, and a section to the treatment of the insane, wherein he protests against the confinement of criminal lunatics in jail, as incompatible with proper attendance and with the safety of the other prisoners. He advocates also the establishment of public asylums, which shall be subject to the supervision and control of competent commissioners.

On his return from New-York, he commenced at once the practice of medicine and surgery in this city, and the same year he was appointed physician to the alms-house. On resigning this office, he presented a memorial to the supervisors on the subject of work-houses, the practical wisdom of which daily experience proves at this time.

Dr. Beck was married in 1814, at Caldwell, Warren county, to Harriet, daughter of James Caldwell, a merchant of this city, but whose principal estate and residence was at Caldwell, on Lake George. He was a gentleman of Irish birth, and well known for his wit and hospitality. His humor has been especially celebrated in several of the entertaining tales written by J. K. Paulding.

In the year 1815, at the age of twenty-four, Dr. Beck received the appointment of professor of the Institutes of Medicine, and of lecturer on Medical Jurisprudence in the College of Physicians and Surgeons for the Western District, established under the auspices of the Regents, at Fairfield, in Herkimer county, New-York; an institution then in the third year of its existence. Notwithstanding this appointment, which required his absence from home only a small portion of the year, he continued in the practice of his profession at Albany.

At the opening of the term in 1824, he delivered an introductory lecture on the *Advantages of Country Medical Schools*, which was published by request of the class. The subject had been suggested by a remark made in an introductory lecture by one of the professors in New-York, disparaging to country schools, and which had found its way into some of the New-York prints, to which this discourse was a severe, but dignified and dispassionate reply. In testimony of their utility, he referred, among other things, to the not inconsiderable number of their graduates who had already risen to merited distinction; and in answer to the illiberal declaration of the New-York professor, that the Legislature ought to withdraw its aid from all other schools and concentrate its efforts upon the 'school of the metropolis,' Dr. Beck justly said:

'The State of New-York, we may safely predict, will never adopt the counsel that has been given her. Her statesmen, her legislators, her learned men and her citizens generally, have not thus estimated the wants of the community. Her course uniformly has been to cherish learning in every situation, and to foster its first fruits with the care of a parent. At this crisis, flourishing in arts, unrivalled in commerce and exalted in wealth, she surely will not stint her supplies, or pour them with a partial hand into one portion of her dominion, while she leaves the other to need. She will not destroy what is flourishing, or overturn what is becoming permanent. She will, as she has ever done, regard the interests of education with an impartial eye. In thus doing she can alone perform her proper duties, and fulfil the promises of her high destiny.'

Already, in 1817, Dr. Beck had withdrawn entirely from the practice of medicine, having in this year accepted the place of Principal to the Albany academy. His success as a practitioner had been quite equal to his expectations, and with less devotion to science, or with less care

for his patients, he might have continued in practice. But it was soon manifest, both to himself and to his friends, that he could not long continue an equal attention to both. He was unwilling to assume the responsibilities of a physician without devoting to each case that exact amount of careful investigation which his high standard of fitness demanded. Every new feature in disease provoked, in a mind trained to accuracy and observation, new solitudes, new doubts, and claimed new and more thorough examination. Added to this, the scenes of suffering which he was compelled to witness wore gradually upon a frame naturally sensitive, and his health began visibly to decline.

At first, one must naturally regret that a mind so well stored, and so eminently qualified, in many respects, to minister successfully to the sick, should have been diverted thus prematurely from its original purpose. It would be difficult to measure the amount of good which, as a practitioner of medicine, he might have accomplished; how much individual suffering such talents might have alleviated, and how many valuable lives such attainments might have saved. This is a loss which the citizens of his adopted town, and of the country adjacent, have chiefly sustained, and which they must estimate. It is a question to them whether he has made himself as useful as a teacher as he might have been as a physician; but I believe they will be slow to find fault with his choice, when they have carefully figured up the account, and have balanced the reckoning. In fact, I think, that in the fame alone which his illustrious name has given to their city, they must find an adequate apology and compensation for all his apparent neglect of their physical sufferings.

But this would be indeed only a narrow view of the question upon which the young, and, I have no doubt, conscientious Beck, assumed thus early the right to decide for himself. Although Dr. Beck formally, at this time, relinquished the practice of medicine, and never again resumed it, yet his interest in the science did not cease, but to the improvement and perfection of some one or another of its departments the balance of his life was, in a great measure, devoted, and especially to such portions as were of general or of universal interest. He seemed to have called in his attention from a narrow range of objects, only that he might fasten it again upon a much wider range. He withdrew himself from the alms-houses and the jails, in which the unfortunate maniacs were treated rather as criminals than as proper objects of sympathy and of medical care, that he might, in the retirement of his study, within

which he had accumulated nearly all the experience of the world, devise the more unerringly the means of unfettering their intellects and their limbs, then so cruelly chained.

In a letter to his uncle, Dr. Romeyn, then in Europe, dated June 30, 1814, he says: 'I have begun to look upon medicine in a very different manner from what I formerly did. Although delighted with the study yet I dislike the practice, and I had not acquired sufficiently comprehensive views of its value and great importance as an object of research. I now find it a subject worthy of my mind, and for some time past I have brought all my energies to its examination.'

From this remarkable passage, in which we have definitely the plan of his future life, we learn also what enlarged and intelligent views he entertained of the value of true medical science.

In 1829 Dr. Beck was elected President of this Society, and was re-elected the two succeeding years - in itself a sufficient testimony of the esteem in which he was held by his fellow-members.

His first annual address was devoted mainly to the subject of 'Medical Evidence,' which he regarded as embracing not only the interests of the profession, but of the community generally. In this address he urges the propriety of appointing in certain counties, districts, or parts of the State, medical men, who shall be especially charged with the duty of making the examinations upon the cadaver, in order that by experience and study they may become better fitted for the performance of this important duty. In all cases he believed the medical witness ought to be permitted to present a 'written report' of his examination, and not be required to give it verbally and without sufficient preparation. Nor could Dr. Beck see any good reason why, if such services are important to the community in promoting the proper administration of justice, the medical men who render them are not entitled to receive an adequate compensation. 'There is not,' says Dr. Beck, 'an individual attending on any of our courts, who is not paid for his time and services, with the exception of such as are engaged in these investigations.'

In his second annual address he calls the attention of the society to the rapid progress of the science of medicine, especially in its growing distrust of mere medical theories, and in its devotion to pathology, anatomy, chemistry, materia medica, and the collateral sciences. In defense of those who pursue the study of anatomy, he utters the following just sentiment: 'All will grant their pursuit would not have been selected except from a high sense of duty. It requires some lofty incitement - some moral courage, to be thus employed. The mysterious change which death induces, is alone sufficient to startle the most buoyant spirit; but with this, the pathologist must familiarize himself. He proceeds to his high office at the risk of health - often, indeed, of existence.'

In conclusion, he bestows a well merited rebuke upon those who pretend to employ vegetable remedies to the exclusion of mineral, on the assumed ground that while minerals are poisonous, vegetables are innocuous, demonstrating, by a reference to their well known properties, that among vegetables may be found the most active poisons in nature; and he appeals to his countrymen that they will not open wide the door to empiricism, and thus contribute to the destruction of a profession so important as that of medicine.

As a theme for his last annual discourse, Dr. Beck selected the subject of Small Pox, as one of 'permanent and abiding interest, not only to us as medical men, but to the whole community, indeed to the whole human race.'

This paper consists mainly of a rapid history of the origin and progress of this terrible scourge, and of the value and necessity of thorough vaccination, with a view to its ultimate extinction.

'I do not pretend,' says Dr. Beck, 'to recommend laws exactly similar to those that have been enumerated, for our free governments, but I will say that they furnish subjects for serious consideration. Whether some regulations could not be devised to arouse the apathy of that portion of the community who are always the largest sufferers - whether the appointment by authority of medical men, particularly charged with the duty of vaccination, and preserving and transmitting the vaccine matter, and obliged to keep registers of those they attend - whether the promulgation of instructions, stating the dangers that threaten, the misery and

mortality that may be avoided, the circumstances that prevent the complete influence of the cow pox, and the precautions necessary for its constitutional effects - whether, in fine, a census should not be taken of those who have not labored under one or other of these diseases, and they be compelled, under proper penalties, to submit to the latter - are suggestions which, to my mind, deserve some weight with those who have the power to render them imperative. Life can be hazarded under our own roof as much as in the field of battle, and the experience of all nations shows that in this case the chances have been fearful. When the means of prevention are within the power of a determined and united community, what can prevent their adoption with as much efficacy as ever resulted from the mandates of an absolute monarch? As a profession, we have not been wanting in sounding the alarm and providing against the danger. And it is a proud reflection, that the dangers of the small pox, its wide-spread ravages, and its constant succession, have been broken in upon by one who lived and died a physician. But he must be insensible to the loftier bearings of the subject, who can leave its consideration without referring to the government of that Being in whose hands are the 'issues of all things.' Its history teaches us gratitude to that Providence which does not willingly afflict the children of men; which suffers physical as well as moral evil only for a season, and which, while it has permitted former generations to be scourged by ravaging infection, has, in mercy to us, removed the dreaded pestilence, or confined the operation of its destructive march.'

I have been thus diffuse in my quotations from these several addresses of Dr. Beck, that you may see to how late a period he continued to feel an interest in, and to cultivate laboriously the science of medicine. Selecting always those themes for his discourses which were of the largest interest to the largest number, he was able to discuss them in a manner which indicated an intimate acquaintance with all their relations and bearings. His suggestions are constantly such as might become a physician, a philanthropist and a statesman; and that they were not Utopian is proven by the fact that very many of them, either in their original forms, or only slightly modified, have been adopted as measures of state policy and general hygiene, or, if not adopted, they still continue to commend themselves to the intelligence of enlightened men everywhere, and physicians still continue to reiterate his sentiments, and to urge their adoption upon those who have the care of the public interests.

Nor can I omit to indicate as worthy of especial notice, the humble, christian-like deference with which he recognizes the hand of a kind Providence in all those discoveries and improvements in medicine, resulting in the amelioration of the condition of our race, of which our profession has been so long the chosen and honored medium.”

SOURCE: Excerpt from *Eulogy On The Life And Character Of Theodric Romeyn Beck, M.D., LL. D.*, By Frank Hastings Hamilton, Published by Order of The Senate, Albany: Printed By Charles Van Benthuyzen, 1856, Pages 3-18. <<http://books.google.com/>>