

IN MEMORIAM

ROBERT LATOU DICKINSON
1861-1950

IN THE death of Dr. Robert Dickinson, on Nov. 29, 1950, the American Gynecological Society has lost one of the most extraordinary personalities of its seventy-five years. The scope of his activities had spread far beyond the customary confines of his specialty into unexplored regions and the span of the years of his influence had been double that of most men.

Born in Jersey City in 1861, he received his formal education in Brooklyn and in 1882 his medical degree from Long Island College Hospital. After an internship, he began the private practice of gynecology and obstetrics, continuing his work as an associate in the Long Island College Hospital under Alexander Skene and Charles Jewett. Dr. Dickinson became Attending Surgeon in charge of Gynecology at the Brooklyn Hospital in 1897 and, years later, Senior Attending Obstetrician and Gynecologist at the time of the organization of the combined department in that hospital. He also served briefly as Senior Attending at the time of the organization of the Obstetrical Division at the Methodist Hospital. In 1919, he became Clinical Professor at the Long Island College. With the attainment of these distinctions, his attention began to turn away from the clinical aspects of his specialty.

Dr. Dickinson's first medical article had been published at the age of 26 and by the year 1916, he had written nearly 100 papers, chiefly on clinical topics, but with an occasional incursion into the social, psychological, or educational field, to give a preview of what his subsequent interests were to become. Dr. Dickinson's contributions to clinical gynecology and obstetrics, fifty of them made over a half century ago, are already so remote in time that his fine clinical work has tended to be forgotten in the light of his later activities.

In 1917, he went to Washington as Assistant Chief of the Medical Section of the National Council of Defense and in 1918 was commissioned as a Lieutenant Colonel on the General Staff. After the war, he did little private practice and was free to devote himself to the physiologic and social problems of marital relations and of reproduction, with which his younger colleagues now chiefly associate his name.

During the last quarter of a century of his life Dr. Dickinson was the undisputed medical leader in these fields. He combined the function of scientific investigator with that of crusader and prophet, and, being far ahead, was often in the apparent position of having to drag his admiring but embarrassed followers after him. There were indeed others who were convinced that Dr. Dickinson's views were too advanced or too extreme and perhaps there was an element of truth in these contentions. Yet he blazed a trail which sociologists,

psychiatrists, and even physicians are now following with increasing conviction. Dr. Dickinson recognized the importance of this area of work even though he may have found few of the answers.

This, the second of Dr. Dickinson's careers, may be said to have begun with his return from the service after the war and ended only with his death. This period yielded another fifty publications, including several books. The subjects ranged widely in this new field and included books on *The Control of Conception*, *A Thousand Marriages*, and *On Human Sex Anatomy*, and articles on the techniques of sterilization, the timing of ovulation by palpation of the ovaries, the use of models for instruction, and a dozen other topics. Dr. Dickinson's teaching in these fields had a wide influence, but his independence and originality made it difficult for him to found a school and he seems to have left no direct intellectual successors.

These, then, were Dr. Dickinson's contributions to his profession. Yet he was active beyond this and he will be remembered elsewhere for his sometimes irritating but always captivating literary style and still more for his skill as a draughtsman. Indeed, he, himself, seems occasionally to have voiced his own misgivings that he might have been a better artist than a surgeon. His medical illustrations will remain classics and the landscape drawings for *The New York Walk Book* are something unique in the artistic history of the city. Dr. Dickinson had also his years of interest in political reform, with, in his younger days, some socialistic leanings. He was something of a poet, a lover of nature, and, in his own gentle, unconventional way, a deeply religious man.

Dr. Dickinson was a Fellow of the American Gynecological Society for fifty-eight years, having been elected in the year 1892. In 1920, he was President and, with characteristic sweep, delivered as his presidential address, "A Program for American Gynecology." In the later years of his life, as his own interests deviated more and more from those central to the Society, we saw less of him.

It is perhaps one of the tragedies of this Society, and indeed of our American system in general, where the virtues of consistence and persistence in routine are so essential, that the nonconformists like Robert Dickinson are so seldom found and still more rarely placed where they can be heard.

Howard C. Taylor, Jr.