CHARLES DELUCENA MEIGS

A Leader in American Obstetrics

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I ONCE heard Whitridge Williams remark that Charles D. Meigs was a great man in spite of the fact that he was usually on the wrong side. There is much truth in this statement, and when we consider the strenuous opposition of this leader in obstetrics to the use of anesthesia in childbirth, the transmissibility of puerperal infection, and the operation of ovariotomy, it is not difficult to understand why so much of his good has been interred in his bones. In spite of this, however, we shall make no mistake in saying that Charles Delucena Meigs is a truly great figure in American Obstetrics and no survey of that subject can omit him from the roster of those who contributed greatly to its development. Meigs' contribution was that of a great teacher who devoted his life to the elevation of the standards of instruction and practice of obstetrics.

When we look in retrospect to medical instruction in this country during the first half of the nineteenth century we see in its practice a good deal of the reflected glory of that aureate period in our history. However, before we allow ourselves to become too critical of the methods used in teaching at that time we would do well to remember that the sentimental effusiveness and positive assertiveness which characterized the America of that day were intermingled with an energy and vitality which has not been seen in this country before or since. The teacher of medicine in those days in spite of his high sounding oratory and ostentatious manner was an essential force in that important period when our nation's character was forming. These were the years, points out Professor S. T. Williams, in which were developed those "qualities which, although we share them with other nations, we have come to call 'American': resourcefulness, self-reliance, energy, belief in equality, freedom in religion, sense of manifest destiny, in short, apart from its absurd connotations, American idealism."

Charles D. Meigs was not only a product of this era but in its medical aspects he was a dominant part of it. We may indeed smile as we picture him in all the drama of his lecture room but we would have liked to have been among his auditors. An eye witness has left us

this description, "His entrance into the lecture room, is that of an easy and polite visitor to a lady's parlor. His gestures are simple, unstudied and (proof of their truthfulness) never strike the listener as theatrical or artificial. His imagination bodies forth his illustrations at once beautiful and chaste, and his voice, which is not strong, is yet clear and distinct. His playfulness of manner, general simplicity and unaffectedness of style, produce a naïveté which is very winning. At one time, he exhibits all the simplicity of a young girl; at another, the dignified port of the gentleman; and again, the tedious whinings of the poor invalid female. The lecture room gradually fills, before

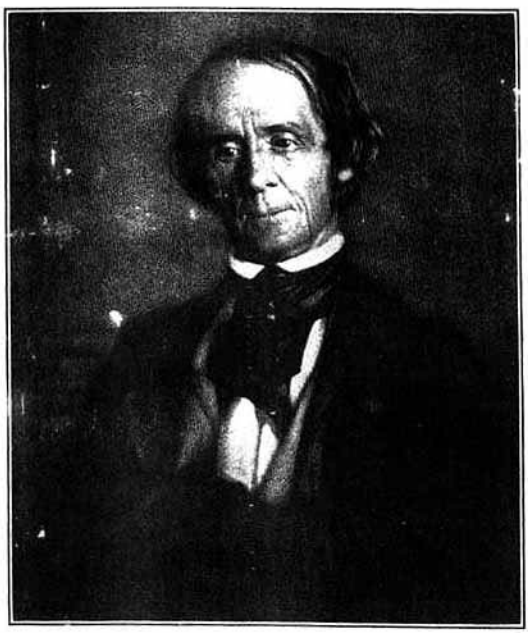

Fig. 1.

the hour of lecture, until it is entirely full, of an audience at once ready to smile, laugh or weep, at the bidding of the accomplished teacher." However much he was a showman, Meigs by his sincerity and seriousness of purpose impressed his hearers with the worth and dignity of his subject.

The true spirit of Meigs is found in his *Letters to His Class* published in 1845. Here we see his extraordinary erudition and broad culture, in language so characteristic of that period in our history. The following is a sample which should whet the appetite of those who would spend an evening of entertainment and instruction with Charles Meigs. "Are you not aware that the elegance and the polish of the Christian

nations are due to the presence of the Sex in society—not in the Zenana! Do you not perceive that Music, Poetry, Painting, all the arts of elegance: Luxury, Fashion (that potent spell!), are of her, and through her, and to her? Versailles and Marli, and the Trianons, had never been built for men. The loom blends and sets forth the dyes that add richer reflections to her bloom; the wheel flies for polishing the diamond that is to flash in impotent rivality above her eyes; sea and land are ransacked of their treasures for her; and the very air yields its egrets, and marabous, and paradise birds, that they may add piquancy to her style, and grace to her gesture. Even literature and the sciences are in a good measure due to her patronage and approbation, which is the motive power to all manly endeavor. This is true, since, but for her approving smile, and her rewarding caress, what is there should stir man from the sole, the dire, unremitted compulsion to act that he may live? With woman for his companion, he acts not only that he may live, but that he may live like a Christian and like a Gentleman."

A sage has told us that men are more like their times than their fathers and the life of this man bears out this contention. Although Meigs was rooted deeply in sober New England it was in the romantic South that he spent his formative years. His father, Josiah Meigs of Middletown, Connecticut, was the sixth generation from Vincent Meigs of Dorsetshire who emigrated to East Guilford, Connecticut, about 1647. The Meigs family were farmers in that region and the name is today remembered in Meigs' Point, a beautiful promontory bordering the Hammonassett River as it enters Long Island Sound. His mother was Clara Benjamin of Stratford. Her brother Charles Delucena Benjamin was named after a Spanish gentleman to whom the father had become strongly attached during the Revolution, and it was from this uncle that Charles D. Meigs was named.

Josiah Meigs was educated at Yale and after his marriage in 1790 removed to St. George's in Bermuda where he practiced as a proctor in the Admiralty Courts. It was on this island on Feb. 19, 1792, that Charles Delucena Meigs was born. Four years later the family removed to New Haven where the father was elected Professor of Mathematics and Natural Philosophy in Yale College. When Charles was eight years old the father was called to the presidency of the University of Georgia and the family removed to Athens in that state. Here the boy grew up and among his boyhood experiences may be mentioned his visit among the Indians for a month as a guest of the Cherokee Nation. In 1809 Meigs graduated from the University of Georgia and shortly after was apprenticed in medicine to Dr. Thomas H. M. Fendall of Augusta. From 1812 to 1815 he took two courses in the University of Pennsylvania, taking his degree in 1817. After the first course he

states in one of his manuscript lectures that he "then went home to set up for myself and practice on that stock in trade. I was still lamentably ignorant of all save some methods. I was twenty-one years of age and assumed to be a physician!! Everybody called me Doctor; I thought so myself." In 1815 Meigs married Mary, the daughter of William Montgomery, a merchant of Philadelphia, and set up in practice in Augusta, Georgia. After a year and a half he removed to Philadelphia and although practice was slow at first he soon became intimate with the medical leaders there who recognized his ability as an independent thinker. He was one of the first editors of the *North American Medical and Surgical Journal*. In 1831 he translated and published Velpeau's *Elementary Treatise on Midwifery* which he dedicated to Thomas Chalkley James. His first independent work was entitled *The Philadelphia Practice of Midwifery*. In 1837 he was appointed by the College of Physicians with Drs. Gerhard, Houston and Ruan to act with a committee of trustees of the estate of Dr. Jonas Preston which resulted in the founding of the "Preston Retreat."

In 1841 at the time of the reorganization of the Jefferson Medical College Meigs was elected to the post of Professor of Obstetrics and the Diseases of Women and Children. Among his faculty associates were Franklin Bache, John K. Mitchell, Thomas D. Mütter, Joseph Pancoast, Robert M. Huston and Robley Dunglison. From this time Charles D. Meigs came into his own as one of the most popular and influential medical teachers of his generation. In addition to his extremely busy obstetric and medical practice he took time to publish many medical works chiefly on obstetric subjects. He also took up a serious study of German and was thus able to bring to his field the work of the most important German obstetricians. His dramatic style of lecturing made him famous as an orator and among his public addresses is a notable one on *The Augustan Age* which was published in 1841. His son wrote of him that "perhaps the most remarkable feature of his life was his wonderful activity. He was never idle. I never knew him to go to bed without a book in his hand." The same authority says that in the garret of their home was maintained a most complete workshop with carpenter's bench, lathe, furnace, etc., where the father worked in metal and wood. He also expressed his artistic abilities in painting and modeling.

Among Meigs' best known publications are *Woman, Her Diseases and Remedies*, 1847, *Obstetrics, the Science and Art*, 1849, *Treatise on Acute and Chronic Diseases of the Neck of the Uterus*, 1854 (excellently illustrated with colored lithographs from drawings by the author) and *Memoir on the Reproduction of the Opossum*, 1847. This latter monograph illustrates in a fine way the scientific mind of the author through a series of careful experiments and observations carried out with all the completeness and accuracy that true research demands.

long other scientific achievements should be mentioned his recognition of cardiac thrombosis as a cause of sudden death in labor. In speaking of this observation Gaillard Thomas writes "It has been remarked that Meigs just escaped the honor which is now and will be hereafter given to Virchow for a great pathological discovery." In 1845 Meigs visited Europe and while in Paris presented a paper on Cyanosis before the Academy of Medicine.

It seems not unlikely that the extraordinary activity which characterized Meigs' life should have eventually worn him down. In 1856 at the age of sixty-four he suffered an attack of nervous exhaustion. He realized the cause, however, and immediately set about changing his way of living. He bought 38 acres of land in Delaware County and built a country home complete with barns, workshop and equipment for carrying on farming on a small scale. He named this place Hammonassett after the region in Connecticut where his forefathers had settled. Soon after this adventure, his health very much improved but following his course at Jefferson in 1859-60 he sent in his resignation to the faculty. In commenting on this act he wrote in his garden record, "This afternoon I delivered my last lecture at the Jefferson Medical College and shall never more appear in public as a teacher of obstetricy, though I am to go on Wednesday at 4 P.M. to deliver an address of farewell to the class. I am surprised that this finale of my public life causes in me not the slightest excitement; I am simply very glad to get out of it. I am not mad with joy but am serenely cheerful at the prospect now before me of enjoying a little of the *libre arbitre* that I never yet did know."

Meigs spent his remaining years chiefly at the farm, only occasionally seeing patients in consultation. A biographer tells us "The doctor's robe cast off, he donned that of the bibliophile." These years we may believe were essentially pleasant ones and his son has given to us this description of his library which also tells us much of the man. "He had crowded together a vast mass of knowledge, of which the disorder in his library was symbolical. This was a very paradise of confusion, and the spirit of disorder there ruled over all. Here were three bookcases, whose arrangement was like that of the night before the creation. There was an Italian Bible of the sixteenth century almost squeezed to death between two fat volumes of obstetrics; and of the complete works of Cicero there were generally two or three volumes on a piano stool for the children to sit on. The mantelpiece was in a yet more uncultivated state than the bookshelves. The centerpiece was commonly a tin canister of hunkodora tobacco, looming up from a waste of empty match boxes, two or three half-finished busts of General Grant, and some scissors for pruning the trees, all of which had a tendency to be brought together by the lumps of beeswax that were scattered about. From this disordered wilk, lying on a

sufficient to bring the reader over to my way of thinking, I at least can never convince him, and must be content forever to let him alone in his fantasy." We recognize in such statements Meigs as an indomitable fighter for what he considered the truth but it is difficult from our viewpoint to see how he could have gone so far astray.

Meigs was against the employment of ovariotomy for any reason, stating that "no urgent, imminent and definite necessity can ever be supposed of an ovariotomy operation," and also, "I am opposed then to the operation of ovariotomy, and I am opposed to it on the grounds of objection I consider valid against all surgery that is not unavoidable." Meigs certainly had some ground at least for his opinion concerning this procedure and based his argument chiefly on Lee's statistics of all known operations of ovariotomy from 1809 to 1846, which reported 118 cases with 40 fatalities. We may come to the conclusion honestly, I think, that there was some justification for the attitude of Meigs toward anesthesia and ovariotomy. With regard to puerperal infection his was one of those mistakes which is nothing short of disaster. The evil which he unconsciously did lives after him so that in the light of present-day knowledge it is somewhat difficult to appraise his usefulness. However, in spite of his errors Charles Delucena Meigs stands out as a brilliant and stimulating personality, who unquestionably elevated the standards of teaching and practice of obstetrics in America. He was indeed a great leader in medicine and those who came under his influence were better men for that contact. His life in the standards of his day was an eminently successful one and we can truthfully think of his career ending, as described of old,

"in a full age,
Like as a shock of corn cometh in, in his season."

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cushion, which the dogs had almost torn to pieces, and with Humboldt's *Cosmos* staring him in the face, he was wont to declaim to his grandchildren upon the incalculable advantages of order, and the keen pleasure it gave him to see everything in its place."

On the twenty-second of June, 1869, at the age of 77, Charles Delucena Meigs died.

Having briefly reviewed his life, let us try to approach some understanding of Meigs' antagonistic attitude toward anesthesia in childbirth, the transmissibility of puerperal fever, and the operation of ovariotomy. We may expect that a man of his forceful nature would hold strong opinions. A search into his writings reveals the positiveness with which he stated these views. In the early days of anesthesia it is not difficult to imagine the lack of skill with which it was probably administered. Meigs' opposition to its use in obstetrics was chiefly based on its dangers and his biographer John Bell states that this opinion was common with the majority of practitioners in Philadelphia. Meigs' opposition to chloroform he states "was certainly not without reason when scarcely a week passes but we hear a death from chloroform." Meigs further opposed anesthesia on the ground that it lessened or stopped labor pains and therefore was contrary to normal physiology, an indictment which at that time was probably true in many instances.

On the subject of puerperal fever Meigs made an exhaustive study. He was particularly impressed with the value of Gordon's pioneer work. In his *History, Pathology and Treatment of Puerperal Fever* he writes, "Dr. Gordon's volume . . . has so convincing and truthful an air in every page and line that I cannot imagine anything more fitted to impress the mind of a reader with the warm and irresistible convictions of the author." Meigs' work on this subject was a republication of the essays of Alexander Gordon, William Hey, John Armstrong and Robert Lee. Both Gordon and Armstrong were convinced of the infectiousness of the malady while Hey and Lee, though not as positive in their assertions, recommended using all precautions for its prevention preferring thereby to be on the safe side. In spite of these doctrines which Meigs himself had edited, it is somewhat amazing to find him stating his opinion that "Should the student ask me how to explain the curious occurrence of cases in the practice of one medical gentleman, while his neighbor meets with no such cases, I cannot account to him for so great a mystery; one which evinces rather a strange coincidence of accidents, than a peripatetic causation by the doctor. I prefer to attribute them to accident, or Providence, of which I can form a conception, rather than to a contagion of which I cannot form any clear idea, at least as to this particular malady." And again, "if my exposition of the doctrine of this contagion . . . is in-