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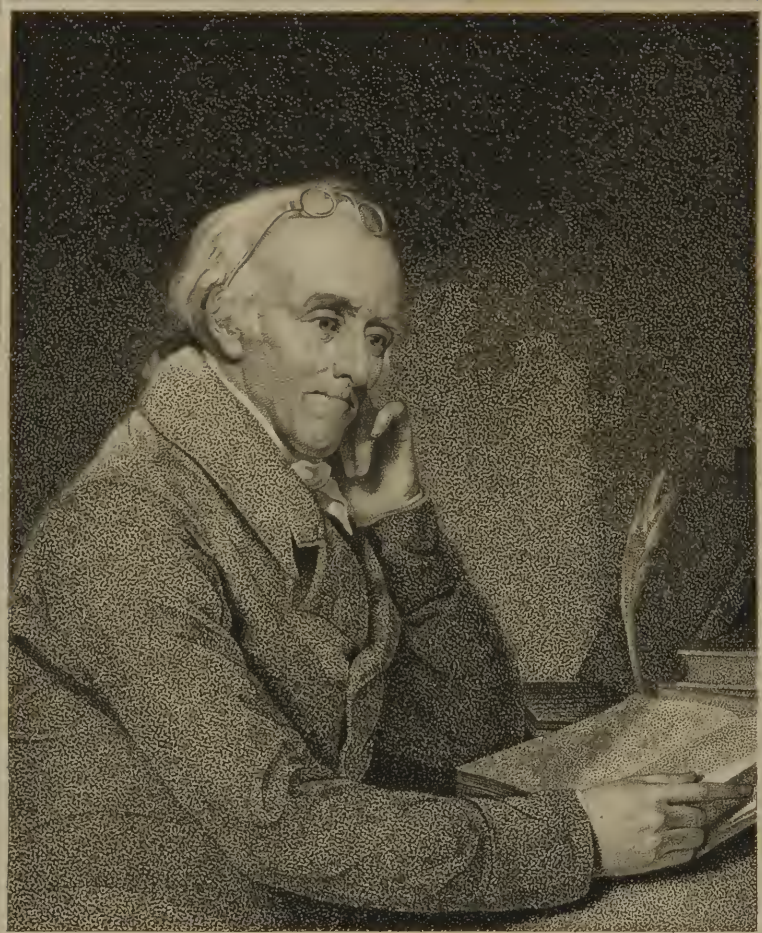


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BENJAMIN RUSH M.D.

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## LIFE OF DR. BENJAMIN RUSH.

[By Joseph Delaplaine] *Chambers*

**CONSIDERED** in relation to the entire compass of his character—as a practitioner, a teacher, a philosopher, and a writer, Dr RUSH must be acknowledged to have been the most distinguished physician that America has produced. In no quarter of the globe has it fallen to the lot of many individuals to occupy so extensive a sphere, and to comply with duties so numerous and diversified, in the public and private, the literary and practical departments of medicine.

To those who have neither learnt by experience the value of *moments*, nor, by observation, what a long course of well regulated and indefatigable industry can achieve, it might well seem that the amount of what he read, wrote, and actively performed, would be severally the business of an entire lifetime. But to him who never wasted even the fractions of time, but faithfully employed them either in the acquisition or the application of knowledge, what to others would have been impossible, became practicable and easy. For to truth and justice the avowal is due, that it was his moral, much more than his physical qualities, his habits of observation and attention, his high ambition and persevering industry, rather than any superiority in the native force and activity of his intellect, that gave to him his ascendancy over most of his cotemporaries. Such is the high and honourable reward which,

in the dispensation of human affairs, awaits the conscientious employment of time. Did the world produce more men equal in assiduity and unwearied research, it would be adorned by more of equal distinction: so true is it—a fact important to all men, but, which ought, in a more especial manner, to be zealously inculcated on the minds of youth—that industry is not only one of the parents of knowledge, but an essential component of human greatness. Without this most important of qualities, an intellect of the highest order but resembles a tract of fertile soil defectively cultivated, shooting forth a few luxuriant plants, but overrun with weeds, and not exempt from poisonous productions; while with it, minds much less richly endowed by nature, are converted into gardens abounding in all that is ornamental and useful. Even Newton himself is known to have declared, that his power of attention and painful research, was the only quality in which he was superior to other men.

In the way of preliminary it may be further observed, that, owing to his earnestness and eloquence as a writer and a teacher, his varied attainments as a man of science, and his extensive experience and weight of character in a practical point of view, Dr. Rush acquired over medicine in the United States a much greater influence and controul than any other physician has ever possessed. On the medical mind of his country he has left an impress of his intellect which will not be obliterated, perhaps, for the term of half a century; certainly not during the lifetime of many of those who were educated under the light and sway of his lectures.

So exalted was the opinion entertained of his skill, that the sphere of his practice, instead of being confined to the city of Philadelphia, may be said to have extended over the whole of the Union; for, from the remotest extremes of it did patients resort to him to receive advice, and from every part of it



was he consulted by letter for the benefit of those who were unable to travel. Even many of the West India Islands, by soliciting his opinion as to the treatment of diseases that had baffled all attempts to remove them, bore testimony to the extent of his practical reputation. But, descending from these general remarks, it is time we should enter on a more detailed account of his life.

Benjamin Rush was a native of Pennsylvania. He was born on the 24th of December 1745, on a small estate belonging to his father, situated in Berberry township, and distant about twelve miles from the city of Philadelphia. His family, who were originally from England, had so long resided in this country, that he was the third in descent from the period of their emigration. He was, therefore, no less in blood than in sentiment, a real American. The first of his ancestors that crossed the Atlantic was Captain John Rush, who, in the army of Oliver Cromwell, had commanded a troop of horse with high reputation, and had been not a little distinguished by the favours of the Protector. He was afterwards induced by his love of liberty to follow the fortunes of the illustrious Penn. His descendants in Pennsylvania, who, in family gradation, had preceded the subject of this notice, although industrious and upright, intelligent and respectable, do not appear to have been particularly remarkable for their talents or attainments. As far as is now known, social kindness, habits of piety, and moral worth—all ingredients of sterling value—constituted the principal amount of their reputation.

Young Benjamin, having lost his father before he had completed his sixth year, was left to the care of his mother, who, though discreet and sensible, was in straitened circumstances. By removing, however, to Philadelphia, and entering into business, she was enabled, through industry and strict economy, to bestow on him and his younger brother a liberal education. Being well

versed for his age in the elements of English learning, Benjamin was sent, when in his ninth year, to the grammar school of Nottingham, in the State of Maryland, taught at the time by his maternal uncle, the Rev. Dr. Finley, who was afterwards president of the college in Princeton. Here the temptations to vice and dissipation were few, and the incentives to morality and virtue numerous. The situation was secluded, the surrounding inhabitants orderly and devout, and, in addition to his love of letters and his peculiar art of infusing into his pupils the same passion, the teacher was one of the most pious of men. Under such circumstances, a youth of active parts and good dispositions could scarcely fail to make a rapid progress as well in his moral as his classical education. Such was the progress made by young Rush, who received, while here, from various sources, impressions that were important to him during the remainder of his life—a love of learning, studious habits, an attachment to order, and a veneration for the principles of the christian religion.

At the age of fourteen he was removed to Princeton college, then under the direction of the Rev. Dr. Davies, one of the most eloquent divines of the age, and signalized no less by his piety than his elocution. Here, although it does not appear that he particularly distinguished himself, he is known to have maintained a very respectable standing, especially when it is recollected that he was the youngest member of his class. In the month of September 1760, when he had not yet completed his sixteenth year, he obtained the degree of Bachelor of Arts.

Possessed of a lively imagination, a readiness in debate, and a talent for public speaking, and actuated by the impulse of a laudable ambition, his natural inclination would have led him to the bar. But from this course he was dissuaded by the Rev. Dr. Finley, who proved successful in his



attempt to inspire him with a fondness for the profession of medicine. He, accordingly, lost no time in commencing his studies under Dr. John Redman, then an eminent practitioner in the city of Philadelphia. So punctual were now his habits and so uninterrupted his assiduity, that, during a pupillage of six years, he is said to have been absent from the calls and business of his preceptor but two days. In the course of this period he eagerly availed himself of every source of knowledge to which he could have access. With the writings of Hippocrates and Sydenham, in particular, he rendered himself familiar; he studied attentively the works of Boerhaave, and other systematic writers, and was one of ten pupils who attended a course of lectures on anatomy, by the late Dr. Shippen, the first that was ever delivered in the British colonies. It was now that he began to register in a commonplace book all such thoughts, facts, and passing occurrences, as he considered most worthy to be remembered—a practice which, greatly to the benefit of medicine, he steadily pursued during the remainder of his life. To that journal, which he thus happily commenced when in his eighteenth year, he had recourse afterwards, when at the age of fifty, for the only record then extant of the malignant fever which had prevailed in Philadelphia in the year 1762—an interesting fact, pregnant with information and advice to physicians.

Having acquired such elementary knowledge in medicine as the resources of his native country at that time afforded, young Rush, for the completion of his education, repaired, in the year 1766, to the school of Edinburgh, then in the zenith of its utility and renown. After an assiduous attendance on the lectures and hospitals of that place, he, in the year 1768, obtained the degree of Doctor of Medicine. Pursuant to the established usages of the institution, his thesis "*De concoctione ciborum in ventriculo,*" was written and defended in the Latin tongue. The style of this dissertation is correct and

perspicuous, and the arrangement methodical and clear; and he is believed to have composed it without assistance. But its literary qualities constitute its chief merit; for, as a medical performance, it is, at best, but an ingenious defence of an error. This, however, was in a less degree the fault of the writer, than of the defective state of physiology at the time.

Having spent the succeeding winter in an attendance on the hospitals and other sources of medical instruction in London, and made a visit to Paris the following summer, to derive information from the schools of that metropolis, he returned to Philadelphia in the course of the autumn. This was in the year 1769.

Having now completed an excellent education, and being about to settle in his native country and enter on his part in the drama of life, we are henceforth to contemplate him as a different personage. For the sake of order we shall consider his character in a fourfold point of view—as a practitioner of medicine, a teacher of medicine, a writer, and a man of business. Should it appear that under each of these his rank was high and his merit distinguished, the amount of the whole must prove him illustrious.

Having returned with reputation from abroad, being extensively known in Philadelphia, where his private friends were numerous, and possessing a pleasing figure and an easy address, with great affability and suavity of manners, his success in his profession could scarcely be doubted. Nor would his attention and assiduity fail to retain whatever business his other qualities might enable him to acquire. With these advantages it was not long till his brightest prospects were fully realized. In relation to the extent, though not to the profits of his business, he ranked in a very few years with the oldest and ablest physicians of the place, and was often called into consultation with them in difficult cases.

Independently of the more substantial benefits which were, in most cases, anticipated from his judgment and skill, the sympathy of his heart, the kindness of his manner, and the soothing expressions which he could so happily employ, rendered him at all times a welcome visitant at the bed of sickness and the house of distress. No man knew better than he how important it is to unite the characters of the physician and the friend; nor could any one with more facility or a better grace effect the union.

But his mildness to his patients was in no case extended to the diseases he had to combat. To them he was stern, inexorable and deadly. His practice, although far from being unnecessarily harsh, was active and energetic. He never, in the character of a passive observer, allowed nature to struggle through the conflict alone. If he did not take into his own hand so much of the work as to render himself the principal in the contest, he became at least a very powerful auxiliary. In cases of a threatening or desperate character, his decisions were firm and his practice intrepid. If the safety of his patient appeared to require it, he would assume responsibility at the hazard of his reputation. In such instances he not unfrequently lost credit, for a time, by subduing sickness and saving life through the instrumentality of remedies that were not approved of by connexions or friends. For such is the nature of the human mind that it will censure even when good is effected, rather than acknowledge its errors or resign its prejudices. But, provided the great object of his profession could be attained, he was regardless of other and inferior considerations.

This trait in his character was strikingly manifested in the year 1793. The citizens of Philadelphia will long remember that calamitous conjuncture. They were attacked by an epidemic strange in its aspect and unprecedented



in its malignity, the nature of which, at its onset, baffled the skill of the most wise and discerning, while its obstinacy set at defiance the efforts of art. For a time all who fell within its path seemed destined to become its victims. Consternation seized the public—the more so, because the opinions of the medical faculty in relation to the evil were various and contradictory. Different physicians treated it in different modes ; yet all appeared to be alike unsuccessful. However fair they might fancy their prospects at the commencement or during the progress of some cases, the death of their patients terminated in the end their theories and their hopes.

At this period of gloom and apprehension, affliction and death, the exertions of Dr. Rush in behalf of his fellow-citizens were signal and praiseworthy. For weeks and months did he sacrifice his repose, and, had Heaven so willed it, was fully prepared to surrender his life—himself at once the pious minister and the expiatory offering—on the altar of humanity.

His house, although itself the abode of sickness and sorrow, was the resort of thousands, whom he was unable to visit at their own dwellings, who pressed to his doors for advice and assistance. Nor did he ever dismiss them without ministering to their wants as far as his highest endeavours could avail.

In the midst of these distresses, when every thing around him presented an aspect of woe and despair, it was his good fortune to devise a mode of treatment that added not a little to the success of his practice. The remedies which he employed, being somewhat novel and administered in doses larger than usual, neither met, at first, the approbation of physicians, nor were accommodated to the prejudices that had taken possession of the public mind. The consequence was, a loud and extensive burst of reprobation against his practice and himself. Hundreds of tongues were clamorous in their reproaches, while the public prints were converted into vehicles of the most unwarrantable

abuse. He was even charged with murder, and threatened with prosecution and banishment from the city.

Unshaken by these slanders, and preferring the welfare of his fellow-citizens to his own reputation, he resolutely persevered in the practice he had adopted, because he was supported in it by the conviction of his judgment and the approbation of his conscience. The issue was, that of those physicians who at first censured, many afterwards adopted his remedies, while the public, abandoning their prejudices against them, acknowledged their propriety and were benefited by their use.

It was honourable to Dr. Rush both as a physician and a man, that during the prevalence of the several pestilential epidemics which visited Philadelphia from 1793 to 1805, he fearlessly stood by his patients and his practice, while many of the faculty deserted their posts, and sought in the country an asylum from danger.

For several years the prejudices that had been excited against him in his professional capacity by unfounded censures both public and private, tended not a little to the diminution of his business. They threw around him a cloud, which, without sullyng, obscured, for a time, the brilliancy of his reputation. But the storm passed away, and he came forth again in renovated lustre. In the latter years of his life the confidence of the public in his judgment and skill was higher than it had been at any former period. Hence, instead of becoming more limited, as is usually the case, the sphere of his practice appeared to widen with the progress of his age.

In the course of his long continued and extensive practice there is scarcely a malady to which human nature is liable that did not fall under his notice and his care. Nor is there reason to believe that he often failed to render whatever of service and relief the state of the profession was calculated to

afford. But his highest excellence as a physician lay in his knowledge and treatment of fever. It was in his combats with that form of disease, that he manifested, at once, the strength of a giant and the skill of an adept. Although it must be acknowledged that he was frequently vanquished in the conflict, the misfortune arose, not from any fault in him, but from the imperfect condition of the art which he practised.

For many years pulmonary consumption and the diseases of the mind constituted especially the objects of his attention. In their philosophy and treatment he was himself convinced that he had been the author of improvements. On the correctness of this belief it belongs neither to our province nor our inclination to decide. But it will be permitted us to observe—nor do we make the observation without reluctance and regret—that, whatever may have been the degree of his own success in treating those diseases, neither his precepts nor his example in practice are sufficient to ensure in them success to others.

Dr. Rush possessed most of the qualifications of a great teacher. Ardently attached to his profession, ample in his resources, eloquent and animated in his delivery, and unusually perspicuous in his style and arrangement, his mode of communicating knowledge was pleasing and impressive. By enlightened foreigners, as well as by those of his own countrymen who had visited the medical schools of Europe, he was acknowledged to be one of the most popular lecturers of the age. His warmth and enthusiasm had the happy effect of awakening in his pupils a similar spirit. Hence, his own discoveries were not his only contributions to science. The habits of observation and the love of experiment which he was instrumental in implanting in the minds of others, conducted them to discoveries they would not otherwise have made, which were, therefore, justly though indirectly to be attributed to him.



“*Qui facit per alium facit per se*” is a maxim true in physic as well as in law: and it cannot be denied, that from the influence and example of him whose life we are considering has arisen much of that enlightened energy and spirit of enterprize with which, for the last twenty years, the science of medicine has been cultivated in the United States. What Boerhaave was to the school of Leyden, and Cullen to that of Edinburgh, was he to the medical school of Philadelphia—an awakening spirit that threw the minds of the pupils into a state of action and research, which will accompany many of them to the end of their lives, shedding light on their paths, and diffusing around them the works of beneficence.

This tribute to Dr. Rush as a teacher of medicine is not to be received as an expression of our assent to all the doctrines and sentiments which he inculcated. His unqualified adoption of many of the crude notions of Dr. Brown led him to mingle a mass of error by no means inconsiderable with the salutary truths which flowed from his lips. His doctrine of life, which he laboured with patience and fortified with great ingenuity and address, his theory of fever, his unity of disease, and his rejection of nosology,—all of them the offspring of Brunonian principles—will not long survive their illustrious author. We might almost have said that they descended with him to the grave. Nor does a better fate await his doctrines respecting the functions and uses of the spleen, the liver, and the thyroid gland; to neither of which, indeed, were his eloquence and elevated standing able to give popularity or weight even amongst his favourite pupils in the University. But, to make amends for this, many of his practical precepts will be recollected and referred to as canons in medicine while the human constitution and the nature of the diseases to which it is subject shall remain unchanged.

Various are the academical honours, which, in the course of his life time, were conferred on Dr. Rush. In 1769 he was chosen professor of chemistry in the college of Philadelphia. In 1789 he, in the same institution, succeeded to the chair of the theory and practice of medicine, which had become vacant by the death of Dr. Morgan. In 1791 the college being merged in the University of Pennsylvania, he was, in the latter establishment, elected professor of the Institutes of medicine and of clinical practice; and, on the resignation of Dr. Kuhn, in 1796, he was promoted to the chair of the practice of physic, retaining also that which he had previously held. In the discharge of the duties of this combined appointment, although much too arduous for the powers of an individual, he continued till his death.

Dr. Rush began early in life to exercise his talents in the art of composition. He is said to have become an author when in his nineteenth year. But the first fruits of his pen, like most other juvenile performances, have passed away, and are forgotten. Nor is it probable that either the interests of society or his own reputation have suffered by their loss. The art of writing *well*, so as to benefit mankind, adorn literature, and do honour to the author, is too difficult of attainment to be possessed by a youth at the age of nineteen. For, although early authorship ought to be encouraged for the sake of discipline, and *will* be attempted from the impulse of necessity, or from motives of vanity, it is notwithstanding true, that the scholar of thirty five can but rarely examine without a blush the crude productions of his juvenile years. However rich they may be in blossom and abundant in promise, they cannot present the maturity and polish of finished compositions.

To the reputation of a fine writer, which belongs not to the province of science but of literature, Dr. Rush had no pretension. His object was excellence in matter rather than in manner—his ambition, to write usefully

rather than elegantly. Yet his style was animated, easy, and perspicuous—not classical, yet highly pleasing, and in all respects superior to that of the generality of medical productions.

His professional works are comprized in five volumes, octavo, under the modest title of “Medical inquiries and Observations” and a sixth volume composed entirely of introductory lectures. Of these may be repeated what has been already said of his public lectures. Although most of the theories which they contain appear to be destined to a premature death, their practical part will live with the writings of Hippocrates and Sydenham. To the physicians of the United States they will be even more useful than the productions of the Greek or the British philosopher.

The first four volumes of this work consist of tracts and essays on various subjects ; the fifth, treats exclusively of the diseases of the mind. The latter volume was not only prepared with greater labour, but was more highly valued by the author himself than either of the others. Notwithstanding this, it exhibits, if we mistake not, the strongest marks of weakness and decay. The rules of practice which it sets forth, being the result of experience, are valuable : but its metaphysics we think exceptionable, and some of its views of mental affections among the most unsatisfactory of the professor’s speculations.

In addition to his medical writings, Dr. Rush was the author of a volume of miscellaneous essays, besides many fugitive papers which have never been collected. This volume does not rank high in the literature of our country. It treats of a variety of subjects that are deeply interesting to the welfare of society : but many of the speculations which it contains are considered fanciful and erroneous ; and there is not in the manner merit sufficient to make amends for the deficiency of value in the matter. One of the papers in particular



which the volume contains avows sentiments that proved for a time not a little injurious to American literature—in the city of Philadelphia its pernicious effects have not yet entirely ceased to exist. The paper alluded to is that in which the author labours to prove, that the study of the Latin and Greek languages, far from being either necessary or useful, ought to be rejected from a course of liberal education. In a country which has yet to acquire a name in letters, it is not a little surprising that a philosopher, remarkable for his genius and enlightened patriotism, and exhibiting, in his own character, a striking example of the advantages derived from classical learning, should make a laboured effort to withhold these advantages from the rest of his fellow-citizens. Yet such an effort was made by Dr. Rush. Indeed, singular as it may appear, the course of instruction to which he seemed partial even in medical science, was favourable only to moderate attainments : for, although he himself had pursued his studies for eight years before he received the degree of Doctor of medicine ; he professed to be able to qualify others for the same honour in the space of three years. But in this he was mistaken. The term is disproportioned to the object to be attained. Believing that he had been instrumental in greatly simplifying the principles of medicine, he set too high an estimate on his plan of instruction. A very limited knowledge of the subject is sufficient to convince us that a medical education acquired in three years is too superficial to adorn our country with men of primary eminence in the profession.

As a man of business Dr. Rush moved in a sphere that was extensive and important. In the year 1766, when he had not yet completed the twenty-first year of his age, he was deputed to negotiate with the Reverend Dr. Witherspoon, of Paisley in Scotland, an acceptance of the presidency of the college in Princeton. The commission was executed with reputation to him-

self, and to the perfect satisfaction of the parties to the contract. This event proved the commencement of an intimacy and correspondence between him and the great Scottish divine, which terminated only with the life of the latter.

He took a zealous and an active part in the revolutionary conflict which severed the British empire, and gave existence, as a nation, to the United States. Both his tongue and his pen were effectively employed in the sacred cause, and he was closely associated with many of the most distinguished Americans of the time. In July, 1776, he became a member of the celebrated congress of that year, and, pursuant to a rule of the house, subscribed his name to the declaration of Independence which had been previously ratified on the fourth day of the same month. In 1777, he was appointed physician general of the military hospitals for the middle department, and was elected, in 1788, a member of the convention of the State of Pennsylvania for the adoption of the federal constitution.

Besides these delegated and official trusts, he took, as a member of the community, a very prominent concern in all the leading national transactions that occurred from the commencement of the revolutionary war till the organization of our present form of government. Cotemporary with this latter event was the termination of his political life. He afterwards devoted himself exclusively to his profession, and to the discharge of his duties as a private citizen. The only appointment he ever held under the federal government, as an acknowledgment of all that he had contributed towards its establishment, was that of cashier of the mint of the United States.

In addition to these already enumerated, he held many other places of honour and confidence, which were conferred on him by the suffrages of select associations. He was, for many years, one of the physicians of the Pennsylvania Hospital, to the interests of which he most faithfully devoted a

portion of his time. He was president of the American Society for the abolition of slavery, vice president of the Philadelphia Bible Society, an early member and, for a time, president of the Philadelphia Medical Society, one of the vice presidents of the American Philosophical Society, and a member of many other learned and benevolent institutions both in America and Europe.

In private charities and acts of hospitality, in public contributions for benevolent purposes, and in donations to churches, colleges and other useful establishments, Dr. Rush was always liberal—more so, perhaps, during a part of his life, than was consistent with his income. But his object was to do good, and he recognized no value in money, except what arose from the proper employment of it. His charities as a physician were also extensive: for, throughout the whole of his life, he regularly set apart a portion of his time for the rendering of professional services to the poor. Those persons, in particular, who, in a season of prosperity, had employed him as their physician, he never forsook in the hour of adversity, when the hand of penury was heavy on their spirits. To their shattered and desponding minds he feelingly administered the balm of comfort, while, by his attention and skill, he removed or alleviated their bodily sufferings.

But an hour awaited himself the severities of which neither caution could avert, art countervail, nor all the solitudes of kindness assuage. In the midst of his honours and usefulness, advanced in years, but in the meridian of his fame, he died, after a short illness, on the 19th of April 1813. From one extreme of the United States to the other, the event was productive of emotions of sorrow. Since the death of Washington no man, perhaps, in America was better known, more sincerely beloved, or held in higher admiration and esteem. Even in Europe the tear of sensibility descended on



his ashes, and the voice of eulogy was raised to his memory—for the man of genius and learning, science and active philanthropy, becomes deservedly the favourite of the civilized world.

In enumerating the excellencies of Dr. Rush's character, it would be an unjustifiable omission not to mention, that during his whole life he was distinguished by a spirit of practical piety and a strict observance of the rites and ordinances of the Christian religion.

His person was above the middle stature, and his figure slender but well proportioned. His forehead was prominent, his nose aquiline, his eyes blue, and highly animated, and, previously to the loss of his teeth, his mouth and chin expressive and comely. The diameter of his head from front to back was uncommonly large. His features combined bespoke the strength and activity of his intellect. His look was fixed, and his whole demeanor thoughtful and grave.

He was temperate in his diet, neat in his dress, sociable in his habits, and a well bred gentleman in his intercourse with the world. In colloquial powers he had few equals, and no one, perhaps, could be held his superior. His conversation was an Attic repast, which, far from cloying, invigorated the appetites of those who partook of it. Yet none could enjoy it without being conscious of intellectual refreshment—so ample were his resources, and so felicitous his talent for the communication of knowledge.

Such was Dr. Rush. The more fully to evince our sincerity in setting forth his merits, we have not forbore to speak of his faults. For nearly three thousand years past, but few physicians equal in greatness have appeared in the world; nor is it probable that the number will be materially increased for ages to come. A great physician is as rare a personage as a great monarch.

But it ought not to be forgotten that every thing conspired to render the subject of this notice illustrious. If he was peculiarly endowed with genius, he was no less favoured with all that could tend to rouse it into action—education and example, opportunity and excitement. The conspicuous station to which he was called so early in life served as a hotbed to foster and force both his talents and his ambition. Had he been placed in the cheerless vale of obscurity, or destined to struggle under a want of patronage, his genius might have withered and his ambition forsaken him beneath the influence of disappointment and neglect.





