



JOHN ASHHURST, JR.
1839-1900

MASTER SURGEONS OF AMERICA

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JOHN ASHHURST, JR., M.D., LL.D., was born in Philadelphia, August 13, 1839. He was of English extraction and of a family well known in the intellectual and social life of his native city. His preliminary education was conducted at home under tutors, and finished at the University of Pennsylvania, where his record for scholarship still stands conspicuous in the annals of the College. He studied medicine in the same institution under the preceptorship of Joseph Carson, the professor of materia medica, graduating in 1860. Following this came a year's service as interne at the Pennsylvania Hospital, the oldest hospital in the United States, and then as now one of the most important hospitals of the city. Here he came under the influence of George W. Norris and Joseph Pancoast, two of the strong men of their day. Pancoast was professor of anatomy in the Jefferson Medical College, and perhaps the most brilliant operator Philadelphia has ever seen.

When Ashhurst entered practice, the Civil War was beginning, and like most of the young medical men of the day who afterward attained eminence, he entered the service and served until the end of the war as a contract surgeon in the hospitals in and near Philadelphia. It was probably this experience in military surgery which early centered his interests on lesions of the bones and joints and blood vessels.

During the same period, in 1863, he was elected surgeon to the Episcopal Hospital. Although this hospital was situated in what was then a remote locality, and rather inaccessible by reason of poor transportation facilities, the supply of clinical material was abundant. It was here that Ashhurst built up his reputation as diagnostician and operator, as de Nancrede did later.

At the same time his literary ability was demonstrated in a number of important contributions which familiarized his name to the surgical world at home and abroad. During this period he wrote his classical articles on shock, cerebral concussion and hæmorrhage, and on surgery of the spine, edited the American edition of Erichsen's *Surgery*, and produced the first editions of his very successful and widely quoted textbook on surgery. Most of his special articles during this period appeared in the *American Journal of the Medical Sciences*, or Hays' journal, as the older generation often called it. In the same journal appeared many discriminating book reviews over his initials.

He was called to the chair of clinical surgery at the University of Pennsylvania in 1877. Agnew was then the professor of surgery. At that time the pre-eminence of Philadelphia as a medical teaching center was unchallenged, as Cushing has recently emphasized. The faculty of the University in the seventies and eighties was probably the strongest body of teachers in its history. It was an age of individualists, and the list included besides Agnew and Ashhurst such names as Leidy, Pepper, Duhring, Wormley, H. C. Wood, Tyson, Goodell, R. A. F. Penrose, and Wm. F. Norris. In 1877 the great Gross was still teaching at the Jefferson with Brinton as his associate, while T. G. Morton and John H. Packard were at the Pennsylvania Hospital and the younger Gross and Keen were forging to the front. Agnew was in his zenith as brilliant operator and popular practitioner, while Ashhurst typified the scholar in surgery, a fortunate combination for the students of the school.

To his teaching duties and his position as surgeon to the University Hospital Ashhurst added those of surgeon to the old Children's Hospital and later the Pennsylvania Hospital. His surgical reputation was greatly enhanced by his editorship of the *International Encyclopedia of Surgery* (1880-1886) the contributors to which included the best known surgeons of the United States and Europe. A French edition of this work, with introduction by Gosselin, appeared shortly afterward. Ashhurst's contributions included the articles on amputations, excisions and resections, and intestinal obstruction. This great system made Ashhurst's name as familiar in Europe as it already was in America, and he became generally recognized as the greatest authority in the world on surgical bibliography. Brinton called him the most learned surgeon of his day. He was the friend and correspondent of Ollier and Esmarch, and of Adams, Gant, and Estlander. By reason of his contributions to surgery of the bones and joints, Otis ranked him with Billroth and Volkmann, and Gurlt and Legouest. F. R. Packard says he was the most learned man he ever knew.

Ashhurst succeeded Agnew as John Rhea Barton professor of surgery in 1888, when the latter retired from practice, and held the chair until his death. J. William White succeeded to the chair of clinical surgery, but Ashhurst continued his clinical teaching along with his didactic teaching. He was a firm believer in the value of didactic teaching. As a lecturer he was systematic, thorough, scholarly, always master of his theme and of himself, and while closely following the written page, his knowledge of surgical history and literature, and his wide clinical experience enabled him to illuminate his subject with a wealth of interesting comments. He had a fine gift of sarcasm when he chose to exercise it, which was but rarely in his public utterances.

As an operator he was deliberate, painstaking, and unruffled. He paid great attention to the after-treatment of his operative cases. He was a good gross pathologist. His great diagnostic ability and fine surgical judgment outshone his

reputation as a craftsman. But he was the best of plastic surgeons. Harte, his close friend and biographer, and himself a fine surgeon in this difficult field, ascribed Ashhurst's success in the complicated procedures of facial surgery to his taste for mathematics, which was one of his recreations.

The students feared him somewhat as an examiner, as he was a strict but very just and conscientious marker. They respected him greatly as teacher and man, and at a time when medical students were a rather turbulent body he remarked in his quiet way that he was never troubled with disorder in his classroom. To his assistants and internes he was dignified, but considerate and friendly, and often laid aside his natural Anglo-Saxon reserve with those he liked and trusted, and then revealed a keen if quiet humor which they greatly appreciated. As assistants, our devotion to him was unmeasured. He was entirely lacking in the smallness which sometimes impedes the upward progress of juniors in the profession. He was deeply interested in young men and their progress. Many there are of us who owe our start in surgery to his encouragement and influence.

Among his assistants who have passed were Harte, Wharton, Le Conte and G. G. Davis, while Deaver, Neilson, Howard Kelly, John G. Clark, Bloodgood, J. P. Hutchison, Girvin and Henry Norris are among those who were associated with him as assistants, or internes.

Steeped in the best traditions of the profession, he was an authority on the ethics of medical practice. While habitually reserved in manner he had withal a vivid human side, and a temper which, usually under firm control, could flame to a white heat at acts which he considered unprofessional, unjust, or dishonorable. The best revelation of his character is perhaps afforded by a perusal of the memoirs of his friends, James H. Hutchinson the internist, Wormley the chemist, and others, prepared for the College of Physicians, and in his addresses to students at opening exercises, commencements, and similar occasions. These are models of style, taste, and sympathetic insight.

With Ashhurst's training, position and tastes, it was natural that he should early assume a leadership in the councils of the College of Physicians, that unique medical society in Philadelphia whose traditions, methods of procedure, and control have been compared with those of the Royal College of Surgeons. One of the oldest medical societies in the country, and a very conservative body, it also possesses one of the largest medical libraries in the world, rich in incunabula, and other valuable editions, and a wealth of memorabilia besides. Osler took a deep and lasting interest in the College and its library, and said, while tracing its influence, "The social force and influence which physicians have always exercised in Philadelphia is not a little peculiar, and there is much truth in the statement that 'he is, and always has been, relatively a more important person here than elsewhere.'" To this influence the College has contributed in large measure. Ashhurst naturally turned to the College as one of his greatest interests. Long