

# MASTER SURGEONS OF AMERICA

## PHINEAS SANBORN CONNER

MY INTRODUCTION to Phineas Sanborn Conner II occurred at 6 years of age when I was awaking from that deepest sleep which comes from a tumble over the banisters and landing on one's head. Even then, the man's personality made a lasting impression. He appeared as a giant with a beak of a nose and a great long bristling moustache. He was holding my arm but he did not hurt. His big hands were firm and tender. His voice was gruff and big, but kind. Out of his eyes came the look of a friend. He was a giant but not the story-book kind, and in my child's mind I quickly sensed the something in this personality that took from the beak nose, the firm set mouth, the bristling moustache, those story-book attributes.

Phineas Sanborn Conner, Jr., A.B., A.M., M.D., LL.D., was born in Westchester, Pennsylvania, August 23, 1839. His father was a practicing physician of modest, retiring disposition, well informed but loath to display publicly his ability. The mother, Elizabeth Angelina Fair Prichard Hook Sanborn Conner, was an energetic scholarly woman who greatly influenced the molding of her son's character. Doctor Conner's ancestral tree is an illustrious one and contains the names of "Father" Bachiler, who landed in Boston Harbor in 1632, Daniel Webster, Justine Smith Morill, Seth Low, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and John Greenleaf Whittier. The last describes the "Bachiler eye" as brilliant, keen, piercing, penetrating. Such eyes had Doctor Conner.

The Conner family moved to Cincinnati in 1844. In 1859, after an education obtained in the Cincinnati schools, he was graduated from Dartmouth College. Returning to Cincinnati, he attended lectures at the Medical College of Ohio, session 1859-1860, then at Jefferson Medical College, from which he was graduated in March, 1861. During these college years, he spent some time as apothecary and acting physician in a Connecticut hospital for the insane, and about six months in doing what was then termed "walking the hospitals" in New York City. In November, 1861, he responded to the Union call. In August, 1866, the war over, he resigned and came home, having been brevetted major for "gallant actions and meritorious services." His teaching career began at once, with the professorship of surgery in the Cincinnati College of Medicine and Surgery, at the age of 27. This was followed, in rapid succession, by other professional appointments in the Medical College of Ohio, culminating in the professorship of surgery

in 1887. For 24 years he was professor of surgery in the Dartmouth Medical School.

It was nearly 15 years before Doctor Conner had a remunerative private practice. These were years of character building. In the library of his old home in Cincinnati, he surrounded himself with his heroes, Vesalius, Harvey, Paré, and Sir John Hunter. These he studied and their ideas became his, thus crystallizing his character.

The early opportunities presented to Doctor Conner so broadened his experience and clarified his vision that he was enabled to find the solution of many problems. He belonged to a generation of men who, of necessity, developed keen powers of observation. With a history of the case, and their highly trained special senses, they accomplished wonders in arriving at a correct opinion. He was often heard to say that the X-ray machine was beginning to have a bad effect because its "short cut methods" undermined one's ability to observe. Probably the essence of his power lay in his ability to concentrate on the vital factors of any problem and to disregard unessential details. As a diagnostician, he was of the best, and many times showed an intuition that appeared fairly uncanny. On one occasion, when talking to him of this faculty, he said: "Intuition, sir, is subconscious reasoning based on previous experience."

Next to his family and friends, the medical college, medical education, and teaching were his greatest interests. As a teacher, all agree regarding his unusual ability; but one criticism might be made, that he lectured on a plane above the capacity of his students. He used the didactic method with little of demonstration to illustrate. This method, perhaps, was a fault of the times, as the then customary two short school years to an M.D. degree gave but little opportunity for practical laboratory or bedside work. He was most stimulating as a teacher, not only because of his knowledge of his specialty, but because in his lectures the students had the advantage of his broad education in all the collateral branches of learning. Perhaps his best work as a teacher of surgery was done in the amphitheaters of the old Cincinnati General and Good Samaritan Hospitals.

Doctor Conner, in an address at the opening of the New Medical Hall of Jefferson Medical College, Philadelphia, in 1899, gave his idea of medical teaching as follows:

"The logical, condensed, lucid presentation, in lecture form, of the summation of the wisdom of the past, the science of the present, as they have become a part of the accomplished scholar, the dextrous experimenter, the experienced practitioner, given in language, terse, lucid, graceful, if it may be, is far more impressive, far more instructive, far more effective than the study of any textbook."

From the "Historical Address" made at the Centennial exercises of the Medical Department of Dartmouth College, in 1897, these sentences are taken: "But the knowing is only one side, and that the lesser of medicine; there is also

the doing, and the art must be cultivated, even more than the science. The great end and aim of medical education is to make not scholars, not scientists, but healers of the sick."

Surgically, Doctor Conner's greatest contribution to the sum total of world accomplishment was his demonstration, in 1883, at the Good Samaritan Hospital, Cincinnati, that the complete removal of the human stomach was feasible. A great deal of his work was original, and of a daring pioneer type; much of it showed a recognition of the advances made by others, and the choosing of the good points from their work. As a surgeon, he was alert, cool, practical. Whenever he appeared in the operating arena it was as the central figure. Precise in touch, supple in movement, he added the polish of the finished artist to the non-chalance of the experienced operator. Doctor Conner had an individuality that stood out at all times in bold relief, neither conventional nor stencil made. His was an intense nature with the supremely confident air of the born chieftain.

It has been said that his military training was a large factor in producing an outward appearance of rough severity, brusqueness, and irritability, which, to some, made him unapproachable and forbidding. Rather might not these characteristics be attributed to the long and rough road he traveled in the early years of his professional life, and an added veneer he assumed to cover a sensitive warm-heartedness not compatible with the requirements of the surgery of the pre-anæsthetic era? He was not much given to evaluating men publicly, unless aroused to anger, and then he spoke in no easily mistaken words. Someone has said: "The asperities of Doctor Conner's character were an indication of his strength." This, combined with his peculiar eagle eyes, made a personality from which the timid usually shrank. The truth, whatever it may have been, was the strongest card with which to win his friendship. His attitude toward people at large was so in contrast to his attitude toward his close friends and his family that one can almost truthfully say his was a dual personality. To the one, stern, sharp, quick, gruff, austere, and overbearing; to the latter, gentle, considerate, companionable, and devoted.

The spoken word moves at the time and influences for the season, but the written words remain. Few men have written more voluminously and better than did Doctor Conner. His contributions of written words that remain are almost innumerable, and these can be found closely scattered through the medical literature of the times. The subjects of these contributions practically cover the entire field of surgery, as then understood. He was associate editor of at least three surgical textbooks. He was honored by being called upon to give addresses at many national and local affairs.

Besides the army rank early obtained, and the later medical college positions held, Doctor Conner was president of the Cincinnati Academy of Medicine, Ohio State Medical Association, the American Academy of Medicine, and the Ameri-

can Surgical Association. At the close of the Spanish War, President McKinley appointed him to serve on the examining board investigating the conduct of the war; this service necessitated the abandonment, for months, of his private practice. He was a member of the Loyal Legion, Sons of the American Revolution and of Colonial Wars. The title of LL.D. was conferred by Dartmouth in 1884.

Doctor Conner was married in December, 1873, to Julia E. Johnston of Cincinnati, and his devotion to this woman was ideal. Three children were born to them. It was a revelation to see him in his home. Hard as it may be for his casual acquaintance to believe it, there is ample proof that Doctor Conner loved a joke, for the joke's sake, and was full of fun and quiet wit. He once said about children: "What with the plague of their living, and the fear of their dying, there's no fun in them." All day long he would go about his business like a storm cloud, but the minute he passed the threshold of his home, a smile lighted his face. He became apparently the youngest member of the family, no longer the ruler but the ruled; all this, following a day of impetuous, driving work, when assistants, internes, nurses, feared him and bowed to him as a strict disciplinarian. His love of home and family was intense, and to his wife he was the essence of chivalry. The death of Mrs. Conner, in 1899, was the beginning of a break, from which he never completely recovered. Doctor Conner died just as he wished, suddenly and without warning, March 26, 1909.

A word picture of Doctor Conner cannot be better completed than to quote a few remarks made by him over thirty years ago, in one of his valedictory addresses to the students of the old Medical College of Ohio, which undoubtedly express the rule of life by which he lived.

"Wherever you may go, whatever you may do, be earnest, be honest, be faithful and hopeful. The life of the physician demands the exercise of the highest qualities of mind and heart. If you would live it aright, be studious, be thoughtful, judicious, watchful. It carries with it grave responsibilities; it brings with it full rewards. There is in it labor and cares and anxieties; there comes from it the enduring satisfaction of beneficent work well done. It teaches us to be considerate, charitable, humane. It opens to us the brightest and the darkest chapters in a man's history. It reveals the heights of human affection; it lays bare the very depths of human depravity. There is nothing in life that it does not acquaint us with. From now on until the great change comes to each of you, it will have no beginning, it will have no end. Days and nights, and times and seasons are as if they were not, for the doctor is always on duty. In the thick of the fight or waiting orders with the reserves, guarding the outpost or leading a forlorn hope, he is ever full-armed. As the occupation is a constant one, so must the preparation for it be a constant one. Mind and body must be kept in the best possible order. Sobriety and studiousness must characterize the life. . . . In our own country, we now seem to be approaching a point at which a choice of way must be made. The commercial spirit of the age is influencing all persons, affecting every occupation. Medicine must either receive it and direct it, and secure from

it, its inherent good, or must go over to it, be absorbed in it, be lost in a mere trade, and that a degraded and degrading one. In the tricks of the charlatan there is nothing new; finding medical idols with feet of clay is nothing strange. The threatening feature of the day is the widespreading of a spirit in the air, that would infect the medical world with the germs of an all-grasping greed and uncontrolled ambition that makes the highest good of medicine the acquisition of money and the praise of the people. Do not mistake. . . . The duty of each one of us today, is as it has ever been, to work in this our vocation and art truly, rightly, and without deceit, so that it may be to the glory of God, to the common weal and our further knowledge, and finally to the health and safeguard of the people. Freely you have received, as freely give."

DUDLEY WHITE PALMER.