

MASTER SURGEONS OF AMERICA

WILLIAM ELIAS BROWNLEE DAVIS

WILLIAM ELIAS BROWNLEE DAVIS, great original investigator, teacher, organizer, leader, and surgeon, was one of the South's greatest contributions to the advancement of medicine and surgery. He was a man of rare charm, culture, and skill. On any occasion he would instinctively attract attention as a man of pleasing and commanding appearance, and as one whose knowledge entitled him to recognition and leadership. His ancestors were for several generations physicians. His grandfather, Daniel Davis, was one of the early settlers of Alabama. His father, Elias Davis, a distinguished officer of the Army of the Confederacy, was killed while commanding sharpshooters at Petersburg, Virginia, leaving a young widow and two sons, J. D. S. Davis, age five, and William Elias B. Davis, age one. The death of the father and the devastation of the war left the heroic mother in most adverse circumstances. Land she had, but no means to cultivate it. The whole space allotted to this sketch could justly and profitably be given to relating the early struggles of these two brothers and their mother which enabled the sons to become pioneers and leaders in surgery.

Elias Davis recognized no bounds in his search for knowledge. This was his life work, to secure knowledge and truth and to develop himself into the most useful, generous, and serviceable human being that it was possible for an aspiring mind to become. His early education was secured in the community school at Trussville, Alabama, and later at the University of Alabama. He studied medicine at Vanderbilt University, the University of Louisville, and Bellevue Medical College, New York, graduating in 1884. He immediately associated himself with his brother, Dr. J. D. S. Davis, in Birmingham, Alabama.

In 1887 Dr. Davis visited foreign clinics, and did special work in England and Germany. He spent quite a time with Sir Lawson Tate in Birmingham, England, after which he returned to his duties and association with his brother in Birmingham, Alabama. "Thus was initiated a career, marvelous in its brilliancy, glorious in its achievements, and utterly sad in its sudden ending" by a railroad crossing accident in which Dr. Davis was killed February 24, 1903.

Dr. Davis needed not the eloquence of an Osler to teach him the master word in surgery; work he had always done, work of a masterful kind he was destined

to do. On returning to his practice he improved every available moment. By close observation, experimentation, and diligent research—amid inconceivable difficulties—he pursued his own original investigations. He perfected his operative technique by work on cadavers, and proved his technique by operations on dogs. This he did throughout his professional career. An operation that he conceived as being possible and serviceable to the human being was established as being such by an original operation on dogs before he adopted it as a safe procedure in his surgical work. Dr. Davis never grew weary in his study, investigation, and discussion of operative technique. He was often dramatic in emphasizing the absolute essentials in successful operative work. Among these were: asepsis and antisepsis, the proper incision, use of retractors, abdominal packs, least trauma to tissue and viscera, identifying structures—the normal and the abnormal, the safest operative procedure, the intestinal anastomosis that was aseptic if possible, did not leak, with good blood supply and a large or adequate lumen; drainage or not, and if drainage, the proper method and material to be used; the doing of that which should be done, and the removal of that which should be removed and nothing more, leaving no necrotic tissue, and no normal tissue with the blood supply destroyed. He regarded the pre-operative preparation of the patient, the operation, and the postoperative treatment with a suitable period of convalescence, as being a part of the operation. He considered that possibly the greatest lessons were learned in the autopsy room. It was there that the hopeless effort, or possibly an error in diagnosis, or defective technique, would be indelibly impressed on the mind. He was not satisfied in case of a surgical mortality unless he could know by an autopsy that he had done everything possible to prevent it. If his diagnosis was wrong or his technique at fault, he considered it of the greatest importance to his surgical progress that he know the real truth as revealed by the autopsy.

In 1892 he experimented upon 200 dogs for the purpose of determining the safest treatment of common duct obstruction. The principles established by his conclusions are that sterile bile is inoffensive to the peritoneum; that after removal of calculi from the common duct, suture of the duct is unnecessary, and indeed, harmful. These observations of Dr. Davis have lessened the dangers and simplified the technique of choledochotomy. It is gratifying to note that all surgeons in this country accord to Dr. Davis full credit for this distinct advance in this field of surgery.

Dr. William J. Mayo says: "Dr. Davis' original experimental and clinical work on the infection of the common duct, one of his many notable contributions to surgical literature, gave him an international reputation."

Recognizing the educational value of medical associations, he allied himself at the beginning of his career with the principal general and special medical and surgical societies of this country. He and his brother recognized the need of a

special surgical and gynæcic society and organized the Alabama Surgical and Gynecological Society. At this time he conceived the possibility of an organization of wider scope. To the accomplishment of this purpose he bent all of the energies of his enthusiastic nature, and as the result the Southern Surgical and Gynecological Association, now the Southern Surgical Association, was organized in 1888. Dr. W. E. B. Davis was elected secretary and active executive officer. His conception of the usefulness and possibilities of such a society was grand in its comprehensiveness. By personal appeals, by tireless correspondence, and by frequent public addresses, he elicited the co-operation of surgeons of the entire country.

Dr. L. G. Woodson, in the welcome address to the Southern Surgical and Gynecological Association, when the statute of Dr. Davis was unveiled, said: "This magnificent association is a greater and more lasting monument to the memory of William Elias Brownlee Davis than the statue of bronze which you will tomorrow unveil. The old aphorism, 'A man is not without honor save in his own country' does not apply to our distinguished dead. He did not have to seek fame and fortune in a foreign land; but in this city, within a stone's throw of the place of his birth, we find him stepping, almost without an interval, from comparative obscurity to the most honored and exalted positions which the greatest and most scientific of all professions could bestow."

Success attended every undertaking of Dr. Davis. He had been active in the medical councils of his state and the nation for more than fifteen years. In 1887, at the age of 24, he was president of the Tri-State Medical Association of Alabama, Georgia, and Tennessee (now Southern Medical Association); in 1893, age 30, he was chairman of the surgical section on abdominal surgery and gynecology in the first Pan-American Medical Congress, vice-president of the second Congress, and vice-president of the American Medical Association and chairman of the section of obstetrics and gynecology; in 1900, president of the American Association of Obstetricians and Gynecologists; and in 1901 president of the Southern Surgical and Gynecological Association. He was honorary fellow of the state societies of New York, Louisiana, and of the British Gynecological Society. A man so conspicuously and constantly in the foreground of his profession must possess unusual traits of character and transcendent elements of success.

The intense interest of Dr. Davis in medicine and surgery, his great interest in young men, and his indomitable spirit as a teacher, caused him and his brother, and a group of learned and distinguished members of the medical profession, to organize in the City of Birmingham a medical college in 1894, now a part of the University of Alabama. The reputation of Dr. Davis as a great surgeon of national and international reputation and the reputation of the able and distinguished men who were associated with him, caused young men to come to the institution in which he taught abdominal surgery and gynecology. These young

men imbibed the spirit of the great teacher, and many of them are today distinguished surgeons throughout the South and other sections of the country. It is not too much to say that the influence of Elias Davis on the lives of these young men caused them to grasp a vision—the possibilities of the highest attainments and the greatest service in the cause of humanity. These men today sing the praise of their ideal man and surgeon, Elias Davis, and of his lasting influence on their lives.

Under the guidance of his mother, Dr. Davis had been trained and brought up in the Baptist church. No man was more devout in his worship and sincere in his belief in the Almighty as the source of all life, all blessings, and true happiness. Surely this is a wholesome lesson in this day of argument as to how man came into existence and his destiny. In the state and county medical societies and his public addresses he never failed to emphasize the importance of the prevention of disease. He gave individual communion cups to his own church years before his untimely death. In this way he taught a lesson and set the example for all Baptist churches. This is but an example of his interest in the public health, and his method of accomplishing what he knew to be right and proper. While he stood fearlessly for what he knew was right, in the presence of opposition, he acted with such consideration for others as to command their respect and esteem.

While Dr. Davis was unsurpassed as a southern gentleman of rare attainments and greatly beloved and highly honored by the profession and the people of the South, and while he never lost an opportunity to praise the southern people and to point out the shining lights among her great men in the various professions and vocations whose names and achievements he revered and honored, and while he was devoted to every sentiment and principle which were held dear to the people of the South, his great mind was national and international. For him, our profession knew no sectional limitations or national boundaries. His mind was so brilliant and his purposes so lofty and pursued with an enthusiasm and energy so untiring as to attract the humble and the great to him. These friends respected, admired, and loved him for his attainments, his nobility of character and his great unselfish services in the interest of humanity and the advancement of science and surgery. The prevention of disease, the cure of disease, the amelioration of suffering, and the application of scientific facts in surgical procedure were to him the very essence of joy and happiness. Life, to him, was synonymous with service and achievement. He was happy in the thought that through his efforts some one might be made stronger and better, and that life itself might be saved and prolonged. He was one of God's noblemen whose presence inspired confidence and trust. The fragrance and influence of his life now live in his native community, city, state, and, indeed, throughout the Southland. His achievements and teachings in surgery are recognized by the greatest surgeons.

Dr. Davis married Miss Gertrude Mustin in 1898. Mrs. Davis still lives in Birmingham. Two lovely daughters blessed this union. They are Mrs. Edward Day Harris of Birmingham and Mrs. David Batchelder who resides in Chicago.

William Elias Brownlee Davis, the master surgeon, was a great exemplar of truth, righteousness, and service. He lives in the lives of thousands who knew him and loved him and through them his life principles will be perpetuated throughout eternity. What he wrought cannot be destroyed by time. Truly to have lived such a life, and to have wrought as he did, though the span of his years was less than forty, should be sufficient, and equal to all requirements of God and man, and should satisfy the aspirations of the noblest soul.

E. P. HOGAN.