

# MASTER SURGEONS OF AMERICA

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ANDREW JAMES McCOSH

**D**R. ANDREW JAMES McCOSH was one of the best loved surgeons who has ever honored the medical profession of New York. He made a very deep impression upon the thoughts and hearts of his contemporaries, and he died without an enemy. He was a Man! No one was born with a more compelling personality than Dr. McCosh. His Scotch ancestry dominated in that he inherited those sterling qualities of perseverance, and noble ideals; he never lost his "canniness" nor his broad Scotch accent.

On his mother's side he was the grandson of Dr. Alexander Guthrie, for many years a prominent surgeon of Edinburgh. His mother was the saintly Isabella Guthrie McCosh, who, long after her husband's death, was the Angel to many a Princeton lad in illness and distress. His father was Dr. James McCosh, the president of Princeton University, who, though a conspicuous Scotch divine, fought valiently for the doctrine of evolution.

Dr. Andrew McCosh was born in Belfast in 1858 and came to this country in 1868, when his father was called to Princeton as president of the University, then the College of New Jersey. Here he grew up and prepared for college, from which he was graduated with honor in 1877, receiving an A.B. degree. That he was an active, mischievous undergraduate is instanced by the fact that he, together with some sophomores, robbed his august father's hen roost, for which he was soundly thrashed. He was very athletic, being on the football teams of 1874, 1875, and 1876, and captain the last year. His superb physical development stood him in great stead later, for he was tireless in the exertions incident upon a large hospital and private, surgical practice. He was an honor man in junior year and delivered the Modern Language Honorary Oration at Commencement. In 1880 he received an A.M. degree at Princeton.

He studied medicine at the College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York, receiving his M.D. degree in 1880, being one of the ten honor men of his class of 160 members. During his internship of one and a-half years in the Chambers Street Hospital, he was afforded unusual opportunities for active, accident, and surgical service. After a year in post-graduate study at the University of Vienna under Billroth, at that time the greatest surgeon in Europe, he started practice in New York City, in 1883, associating himself with Dr. T. Gaillard Thomas, at

that time the most prominent gynecologist in New York. This association lasted for 11 years. The temptation for him to specialize in gynecology must have been very strong, but Dr. McCosh's training on broad, general surgical lines had been too great to cause him to limit himself to any specialty. His best work was done in gynecology, yet he is not known as a gynecologist; his activities concerned themselves with all the problems of general surgery.

In 1887 he was made an attending surgeon to the Presbyterian Hospital, New York City, which position he held until his death. There he held his clinics, first, as professor of clinical surgery in the New York Polyclinic until 1895, after which he became clinical professor of surgery at the College of Physicians and Surgeons. From 1903 until his death, he was president of the Medical Board of the Presbyterian Hospital. For 2 years he was president of the New York Surgical Society. In 1904, in recognition of his work, Columbia University conferred upon him the honorary degree of doctor of laws, and in 1906 Princeton gave him the same degree. In the American Surgical Association, in the New York Academy of Medicine, and in the Clinical and Practitioners Societies, his papers and discussions were listened to with great interest and respect.

In appraising a man like Dr. McCosh, two characteristics must be considered; first, personality, and second, professional ability. His personality was characterized by charm to the highest degree, and his rugged, outspoken opinions, which won for him lifelong friends, were given in so tactful a way that offense was never created. He was a man of decided opinions, yet he never had an enemy. This was due in a large measure to his inherent honesty and straightforwardness. He never became entangled in medical politics.

Dr. McCosh spent his summers in travelling in Europe; in consequence, he was an intelligent, well-rounded, thoughtful man of affairs. Perhaps his noblest quality was his kindness. The last thing he thought of was money and his benefactions were innumerable. Frequently a patient, who had met with reverses, would be sent into a private room with the understanding that it was free, while Dr. McCosh would himself pay for the room and the special nurses.

His intuitions were extraordinary, and this, combined with perfect poise and entire absence of irritability, made him master of all trying situations. Doctors associated for years with Dr. McCosh never saw him angry nor ever heard him use a profane word even in the most trying circumstances.

His modesty was phenomenal and very unusual. He never pushed himself forward. When he made an address at a surgical meeting, his remarks were brief, concise, and pregnant, and his admirers felt that he rarely did himself full justice in public. To the poor he was always a dear friend; no one in any kind of trouble ever appealed to him in vain. He avoided heated arguments and discussions, and was conciliatory without any trace of weakness. He was saved from embarrassing entanglements by his superlative intuitions.

His interest in the young men of the hospital staff was very keen. During the last year of his life, he made a practice of having the entire staff of the hospital, both medical and surgical, gather at his house, one evening a month, for social intercourse and an informal conference on medical topics.

In his surgical judgment he was unsurpassed. As a result of his large experience, he intuitively arrived at a quick decision without going through the conscious deductions and reasonings which most surgeons employ. For this reason he was not a very good instructor. His decisions often seemed uncanny. As an operator he was speedy, skillful, and precise. His cordial appreciation of the work and merits of those about him won for him the love and devotion of all. He was always encouraging, and never spoke harshly to anyone who he thought was really doing his best.

From 1889 to 1908, he published many important articles in the surgical journals. In collaboration with Professor M. Allen Starr, he became an expert brain and spinal cord surgeon, and he wrote a number of papers on these subjects. His address before the Congress of American Physicians and Surgeons in Washington in 1897, and that before the International Congress of Surgery in Brussels in 1905, both on the subject of "Peritonitis," won for him world-wide fame. In the surgery of the female pelvis, he was unsurpassed, and his early papers advocated the advisability of performing a myomectomy instead of a hysterectomy in women in the child-bearing period, and he cited numerous patients who had borne full term, living babies after myomectomy. He always left healthy ovaries and tubes after hysterectomy for fibroids. He did not remove a healthy uterus after ablating the adnexa for purulent infections. The present day gynecologist has not improved upon the procedures of Dr. McCosh. His papers upon appendicitis, gall-stones, epilepsy, brain tumors, spinal surgery, exophthalmic goiter attracted wide attention and were translated into several foreign languages. He was a very versatile surgeon, as were all the "Master Surgeons" of those days.

Two of Dr. McCosh's aphorisms have remained unforgotten by his protégés:

1. Teach your patients to get along without medicines.
2. Never divide a fee with a doctor.

On December 2, 1908, at the age of fifty, in the fullness of his skill and development, Dr. McCosh died from a fracture of the base of the skull sustained in a runaway accident, and thus to his reward passed one of America's greatest surgeons. In the words of Professor M. Allen Starr: "If it is the greatest reward of a surgeon to advance his science, to secure the admiration, respect and love of his associates, to win the devotion of his grateful patients, poor and rich, and to be cherished in the hearts of all who knew him, Dr. McCosh certainly received his reward."

CLARENCE A. McWILLIAMS.