

MASTER SURGEONS OF AMERICA

NICHOLAS SENN

I N the earlier and middle part of the nineteenth century, America was still far behind Europe in medical and surgical sciences; but the progress of modern transportation and particularly the settlement of our country with pioneers in arts and sciences have caused rapid strides of advancement, and today we excel in many respects. Without being immodest we may say that the American surgeon ranks very high among his confrères. Progress, however, always rests upon a small number of men of genius. Thus we have in the science of surgery in every epoch and every country, a certain number of renowned men who are the carriers and pillars of this advancement.

Nicholas Senn was one of those men who helped to build up the reputation of American surgery. His name is well known to almost every physician of our times.

What did he do for American surgery? How did he develop to be a pioneer and a leader? He was born in 1842 in Switzerland and came as a child to America, with his parents who settled in Wisconsin. He had all the characteristics of his ancestry, a sturdy, robust body, a clear eye, great courage, and most of all unbounded energy and ambition for work. Work represented to him the stepping stone for success. He was a genuine toiler in the field of science. His education was to a great extent that of an autodidact; at first he prepared himself for a school teacher but soon he found his way into medicine. Dr. Munk, a German doctor of the vicinity where he lived, had a great influence upon the young man: from him he imbibed the desire for study. He began to read industriously and absorbed almost voraciously medical literature; very soon he knew of the classical works of his time, and this knowledge of literature was a great help to him through the rest of his life. Particularly the experiment on animals which celebrated its triumph in those days, was a great attraction for Senn.

After graduation from Northwestern University in 1868 and an internship in the Cook County Hospital, though he lived in primitive surroundings and had only very simple means at his disposal, he plunged into the field of scientific research and became known as the bold experimenter—on every important question of surgical technique: but feeling the necessity of more and better knowledge, like hundreds of others, he travelled abroad to study in foreign

clinics. In Munich where he acquired the title of doctor, it was Nussbaum, and in Vienna, Billroth, who attracted him most, and he bent all of his energies to emulate them. When he returned to Milwaukee in 1874, a larger field for activity awaited him. He became a lecturer and teacher.

Microscopy and surgical pathology were new then—he was an expert in both—and he made daily observations. He became a very active and skilful surgeon whose fame spread beyond the State of Wisconsin. In 1891, the faculty of Rush Medical College called him to Chicago as a professor, and here he came in contact with a great number of students and progressive minds of the faculty. The medical men looked upon him as a great man in the field of scientific surgery and his clinic grew famous and was the attraction of his day.

Fenger, the old Danish surgeon who had an immense knowledge of pathology, was Senn's friend and adviser, and these two men with John B. Murphy, formed the celebrated triumvirate of scientific genius of the Western field of American Surgery. The merits of Senn as a surgeon were in calling particular attention to animal experimentation, to the importance of microscopic diagnosis, and to the progress in surgical technique, particularly in intestinal and bone surgery. Senn's bone plates and decalcified bone chips are well known devices of surgical technique of those days.

Dr. Senn was a tireless worker. I lived next door to him for many years, and often returning at 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning from some patient, I saw him at his desk writing on some medical subject or consulting his extensive library. I would often step into that library at that time of night and I enjoyed listening to his discussion of those very interesting phases of our science or some late advancement and discovery.

He was somewhat of a retiring character, so that only few enjoyed the privilege of being close to him. The amphitheater of his clinic was his Eldorado. One could see how he enjoyed his lecture. In stentorian voice, oratorically and with pathos, he described some pathological condition or disease, and relished the fact that students listened with rapture and admiration.

He also was fond of military surgery. This may have been brought about by his great admiration of those celebrated surgeons of his time who were at the same time great army surgeons. He often spoke on the great Ambroise Paré, of Larrey, of Pirogoff, of Langenbeck, Billroth, and Esmarch, who were his great heroes.

Dr. Senn also loved travel and enjoyed roaming about, going north to Labrador, to South America, and circling the globe by the way of Siberia or Africa, always observing and studying conditions, particularly those of hygiene and medicine. His observations and experiences he wrote down and embellished them with verse and quotations, and personally wrote in long hand many volumes. These manuscripts fill a large wall case in the present Nicholas Senn Library in Chicago, a gift for the profession by him to the Crerar Library.

He left a genuine impression on pupils to perpetuate his work.

In summing up this great man's life, who died at the age of 64 years, and the effect of his life's work upon the American Surgery of today, we must say that he was a stimulus to the younger generation to take up research work and to study pathology. His works (150 volumes), showing what a prolific writer he was, set forth a great many important observations and many great suggestions. Even if some of them did not survive him very long, the name of Nicholas Senn will stand, however, as one of the milestones and pillars in connection with the progress and high standards of American scientific medical work, particularly surgery.

CARL BECK.