BENJAMIN RUSH

A DISCOURSE DELIVERED BEFORE THE COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS OF PHILADELPHIA FEB. 6TH, 1787 ON THE OBJECTS OF THEIR INSTITUTION

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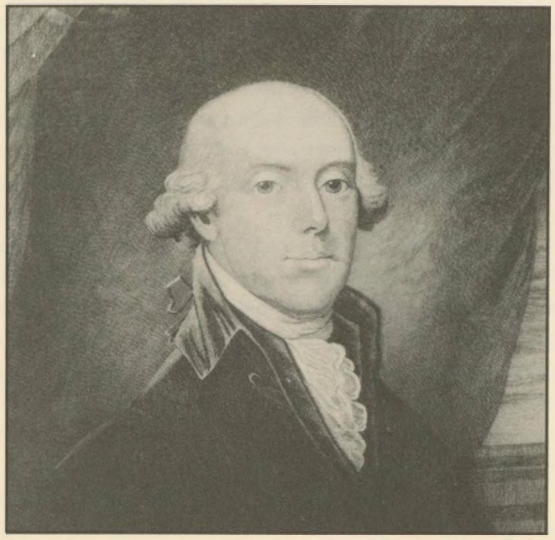
A Facsimile of the 1787 Address
with an introduction by

Thomas A. Horrocks



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1987

INTRODUCTION

Founded by twenty-four of the most prominent physicians in Philadelphia, the College of Physicians was created not as an academic institution as its name suggests, but as an association of concerned physicians whose purpose was to advance the science of medicine, promote high ethical standards in the profession, exchange medical information, and act as a guardian of the public welfare. The first recorded meeting of the College took place on 2 January 1787. There had been at least three meetings held prior to this date, however, with the earliest occurring sometime during the summer of 1786. By the time of the first recorded meeting, the Fellows had elected the first officers, including John Redman as President.

The 65-year-old Redman (1722-1808) was an appropriate choice, for he was the most eminent physician in Philadelphia at that time. After receiving his medical degree from the University of Leyden in 1748, Redman returned to Philadelphia and soon acquired a large practice. Elected a member of the first medical staff of the Pennsylvania Hospital, he was for many years a trustee of the College of Philadelphia (now the University of Pennsylvania) and of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton). A preceptor of many of his younger colleagues, Redman was trusted and respected by all in the profession.

Although Redman was a man on whom all the Fellows could agree for the office of President, his leadership was neither visionary nor active. He did not define the duties of the Fellowship nor did he offer a set of objectives for the institution. In fact, his first presidential address was nothing more than an apology for his physical infirmities and a humble admission of his incapacity to carry out the responsibilities conferred upon him. The enunciation of the aims of the College and its Fellows was thus left to a younger, more energetic Fellow—a man of many ideas, and one who was not afraid to voice them—Redman's former apprentice, Benjamin Rush.

A graduate of the medical school of the University of Edinburgh, signer of the Declaration of Independence, popular teacher, prolific author, and a tireless advocate of humanitarian reforms, Rush (1746-1813) was the most celebrated physician in the United States at the time of his death. Familiar with a number of medical societies in America and abroad, Rush had entertained hopes and plans for a society in Philadelphia for a number of years prior to

prior to the founding of the College of Physicians. In a 1783 letter to his friend, Dr. John Coakley Lettsom (1744-1815) in London, Rush responded to the latter's encouragement to establish a medical society:

> I approve of your plan for instituting a medical society in Philadelphia, and am not without hopes of seeing it carried into execution as soon as the minds of our literati are more perfectly detached from the political subjects that have swallowed up all the ingenuity and industry of our country.[1]

When the time came for establishing the College of Physicians four years later, Rush played a dominant role. He was not only one of the founders, but he assisted in drafting its constitution and, more importantly, he was asked by the Fellows to deliver an address on the objectives of the institution.

Rush's discourse on the aims of the College was the principal business of the second recorded meeting, held on 6 February 1787. Repeating and expanding on the purposes set forth in the College's constitution, Rush tried in his address to distinguish between a *college* of physicians and a medical *society*, claiming that the College would embody both functions. While Rush's paper reveals his uncertainty about the character of the institution, it shows that Rush expected the College to be an active organization, with its Fellows energetically and aggressively assuming the guardianship over the health and safety of the community.

As a *college*, Rush saw the Fellows creating and maintaining order in the profession, addressing principally matters of public concern, such as undertaking a national dispensatory and offering advice to legislative bodies "in matters that relate to the health and happiness of our fellow citizens," and promoting inquiries and observations "upon the prevailing diseases of the city." As a medical *society*, Rush continued, the Fellows would collect and publish these inquiries and observations, hold meetings, cultivate a botanical garden, and create a library.

Rush's address ended as it had begun—with unbridled confidence and patriotic fervor. He had opened his address by proudly announcing that "the late revolution, which has given such a spring to the mind in objects of philosophical and moral enquiry, has at last extended itself to medicine." As his optimistic conclusion shows, Rush expected American physicians in general, and the Fellows of the College in particular, to play a significant role in this continuing revolution.

> Many disorders, once deemed incurable, now yield to medicine. No wonder then that a general expectation prevails—that a revolution is soon to take place in favour of human happiness . . . And when I consider the influence of liberty and republican forms of government upon science, and the vigour which the American mind has acquired by the events of the late revolution, I am led to hope that a great portion of the honor and happiness of discovering and applying these antidotes may be reserved for the physicians of America.

Inspired by Rush's lofty vision of the future, the Fellows commenced working toward the goals outlined in his wide-ranging program. In fact, during its first decade, the College addressed, with varying degrees of success, virtually all of the objectives defined by Rush.

As with every medical society, Rush hoped that the presentation and exchange of scientific information would be a major activity of the College—and indeed it was. The meetings of the College were devoted, in part, to the presentation of papers and communications from Fellows and other physicians, both American and foreign. The first paper read before the College (besides Rush's) was a communication on 4 September 1787 from Dr. Thomas Dolbeare of London to Rush describing "a Singular Case of the Curvature of the Spine." In the ensuing five years over forty papers were presented to the College on such topics as tetanus, influenza, measles, hydrocephalus, and an account from a Maryland physician of a "Headache cured by the discharge of a worm from the nose." Following the suggestion of Rush, the College published a number of these papers in its first volume of *Transactions*, which appeared in 1793.[2]

Rush also proposed that the College create a botanical garden to "furnish us with an opportunity of cultivating that part of the Materia Medica, which is derived from the vegetable kingdom." In April 1787 the College organized a committee for this purpose, and in March of the following year petitioned the General Assembly for a piece of land in the city for the garden. The Assembly, however, failed to act on the measure.

The Fellows were more successful with another of Rush's proposals, that of creating a library to "help diffuse knowledge among us upon easy terms." During the spring of 1788 a committee was formed to draft a plan, though the committee's plan was nothing more than a request of the Fellows to present volumes from their libraries. Not until December of that year were the first volumes received, when John Morgan (1735-1789), one of the founders of the College and the founder of the first medical school in America (what is now the Medical School of the University of Pennsylvania), donated sixteen volumes. Other Fellows soon followed Morgan's example and, before long, the College allocated funds to purchase and bind books,

and to erect a bookcase to hold them. Meanwhile, more books came to the College as a bequest from Morgan, among them a handsome copy of Morgagni's *De Sedibus et Causis Morborum* (Venice, 1761), which the great pathologist had given Morgan in Italy.

One of the chief responsibilities of the College, according to Rush, was to create and maintain order and uniformity in the profession, not through examinations and licenses, but "by establishing incentives and rewards for character." This concerned the regulation of the practice of medicine, as well as professional ethics. The Fellows involved themselves with the former issue in March 1794, when a committee of the State Legislature requested the assistance of the College on a bill it was drafting on the subject. In response, the Fellows recommended that prospective practitioners, excepting graduates of the University of Pennsylvania, should be examined in Philadelphia by a board selected by the College from its own ranks; and that apothecaries also undergo a similar test. While the committee of the Legislature approved this recommendation in principle, the bill did not pass.

Regarding the thorny issue of ethics, the College was forced to take action on charges of unprofessional conduct against two of its Fellows during its early years. Of the case against John Linn (or Lynn) (d.1793), little is known except that his name was struck from the roll, apparently without a hearing, which Linn charged as "unconstitutional, cruel, and unprecedented." Another case was that of John Foulke (1757-1796), one of the founders, who was charged with unprofessional conduct by another founder, William Currie (1754-1828). Currie claimed that Foulke had violated Article 6 of the College's by-laws, which forbade any Fellow from attending or prescribing for any patient under the care of another Fellow, except as a consultant or in a case of emergency. After hearing the evidence, the College concluded that there was no cause for action against Foulke.

Rush hoped that the preparation of an American dispensatory would be one of the first accomplishments of the College, but it was not until 1833 that the College was in any way involved in such a project. In that year, George Bacon Wood (1797-1879) and Franklin Bache (1792-1864), two Fellows of the College, published their *Dispensatory of the United States of America*.[3] This superb work of scholarship was designed especially to illustrate *The Pharmacopoeia of the United States of America* (Philadelphia, 1831),[4] which was largely the work of the College. The creation of a national

pharmacopoeia had been a project of the College since its founding.

In his discourse Rush exhorted the Fellows to take an active role "in matters that relate to the health and happiness of our fellow citizens," and it was in the area of public health that the College was most active during its early years. On 4 September 1787 the College appointed a committee to prepare a memorial to the Pennsylvania State Legislature, "setting forth the pernicious effects of spirituous liquors upon the human body," and urging the adoption of a law "to diminish their consumption." The memorial, pronouncing distilled liquors as a cause of dropsy, palsy, apoplexy and madness, was sent to the Legislature that November. Although nothing came of its petition at the state level, the College continued in its quest for temperance legislation, appealing to Congress in 1790 to levy heavy duties to discourage consumption. The Fellows were no more successful in Washington, D.C. than they had been in Pennsylvania.

Besides temperance, the College expressed its views on other matters of public health, calling for the establishment of hot and cold baths in the city and the erection of a hospital for contagious diseases. The College also recommended measures to prevent contagious diseases from being brought into the city by incoming vessels, and offered advice to both the city and the state during the yellow fever epidemics of the 1790s.

Rush resigned from the College of Physicians in November 1793 as a result of a bitter dispute with the Fellowship over his controversial treatment of the yellow fever during the tragic epidemic of that year. Although Rush had departed from the institution he helped create, his ideal of what the College should be continued to be held not only by his former colleagues, but by the generations of Fellows that have followed. Rush's discourse advanced a vigorous plan for addressing the challenges confronting the eighteenth-century medical community. While the challenges of 1787 are no longer relevant to today's medical community, the manner and the spirit in which Rush hoped to meet these challenges are. Rush envisioned the College as an active and energetic organization, dedicated to serving both the community and the profession. For the past two centuries the leaders of the College have not lost sight of this vision.

Today, the College is a distinguished medical not-for-profit educational institution that promotes discussions and debates concerning the pertinent issues facing the profession and the community through its meetings and conferences, collects and disseminates bio-medical information through its

Library, educates through its Mütter Museum, publishes through it *Transactions & Studies*, and since 1976 has supported historical research through its Francis C. Wood Institute. In celebrating its bicentennial, the College looks forward to beginning its third century of service in the spirit so eloquently enunciated by Rush two hundred years ago.

Thomas A. Horrocks
Curator,
Historical Collections of the Library

NOTES

1. Benjamin Rush, *Letters of Benjamin Rush*, Edited by L.H. Butterfield, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951):1, pp. 312-313.

2. *Transactions of the College of Physicians, of Philadelphia*, Volume 1, Part 1 (Philadelphia: Dobson, 1793).

3. George B. Wood and Franklin Bache, *The Dispensatory of the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Grigg & Elliot, 1833).

4. *The Pharmacopoeia of the United States of America. By authority of the National Medical Convention held at Washington, A.D. 1830* (Philadelphia: Grigg, 1831).

A DISCOURSE

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS

OF PHILADELPHIA, FEB. 6th, 1787.

ON THE OBJECTS OF THEIR INSTITUTION.

BY BENJAMIN RUSH, M.D. &c. &c.

MR. PRESIDENT AND GENTLEMEN,

I FEEL peculiar pleaſure in reflecting, that the late revolution, which has given ſuch a ſpring to the mind in objects of philoſophical and moral enquiry, has at laſt extended itſelf to medicine, and in leſs than five years after the peace, before the human faculties had contracted to their former dimenſions, a college of phyſicians, formed upon principles accommodated to the preſent ſtate of ſociety and government in America, has been eſtabliſhed in the capital of the United States.

THE deſign of the preſent eſſay is to point out, in a few words, the advantages which, may be de-

rived from this inſtitution, and to ſuggeſt the many reſources, which our country offers for the improvement of medicine.

I SHALL conſider the objects and advantages of our inſtitution. 1ſt. as a College, and 2ndly, as a Medical Society.

I. BY aſſuming the name of a College, we ſhall 1ſt. be able to introduce order and dignity into the practice of phyſic, by eſtabliſhing incentives and rewards for character. Men are generally anxious to preſerve the good opinion of thoſe with whom they are obliged to aſſociate. The reception we ſhall meet with from each other in our meetings will ſerve to correct or to improve our conduct. And if we are as chaſte as we ſhould be, in the admiſſion of members, a fellowſhip in our college will become in time, not only the ſign of ability, but an introduction to buſineſs and reputation in phyſic.

2ndly. BY aſſuming the name of a College we may give a ſanction to an American Diſpenſatory —for I take it for granted, this will be one of the firſt objects of our attention.——

—THE

—THE variety in the degrees, and perhaps nature of our diſeaſes, and the many remedies which are peculiar to our country, which have as yet no place in foreign diſpenſatories, render this undertaking a matter of abſolute neceſſity.

3dly. BY means of our aſſociation, under the title of a College, we ſhall be better able to attract the attention of the government of our country, in matters that relate to the health and happineſs of our fellow citizens. In the year 1725, the College of Phyſicians of London, preſented an addreſs to the Britiſh Houſe of Commons, in which they bore ſuch a teſtimony againſt the pernicious effects of diſtilled ſpirituous liquors, as laid the foundation of ſeveral excellent laws, that were calculated to leſſen the conſumption, and of courſe, the fatal conſequences of thoſe liquors. The diſintereſtedneſs of ſuch interpoſitions of a medical faculty, in favour of the health and morals of their fellow citizens, cannot fail of enſuring their ſucceſs with a legiſlature.

4thly. BY ſtated meetings as a College, we may promote enquiries and obſervations upon the prevailing diſeaſes of the city. Here the timid may be encouraged, and the ſanguine may be taught to doubt. Here the young practitioner may profit by the experience of the old, and the old by the boldneſs

boldneſs of enquiry, and modern improvements of the young. Here, uniformity in principle, and practice in medicine, will gradually inſinuate themſelves. Nor will the advantages of our conferrences end in the acquiſition of knowledge. The heart will naturally intereſt itſelf in the purſuits of the head. Here friendſhips will be contracted and cemented, and occaſional and unavoidable ſuſpicions or diſputes may here be accommodated by explanation or mediation. By theſe means we ſhall become, not only the guardians of the honor of the profeſſion, but likewiſe of each other's character.

II. As a MEDICAL SOCIETY aſſociated for the purpoſes of collecting and publiſhing medical obſervations and enquiries, an ample field lies open before us.

THE human body ſtill contains ſecrets which have eluded the enquiries of the anatomiſts and phyſiologiſts of the *old* world. Who knows but they may be reſerved by Heaven, to give immortality to the name of an American phyſician.

OUR country abounds with objects for the improvement of Chemiſtry, Botany, and Materia Medica. How few of the foſſil and vegetable ſubſtances peculiar to America, have been examined

mined by men capable of applying them to the purpoſes of medicine!

THE winds, the local ſituations of the different parts of America, and the particular diet—dreſs—cuſtoms--manners—occupations—and buildings of our country, furniſh immenſe opportunities for the improvement of pathology.

IT remains yet to be diſcovered and recorded, whether the extent of human life has been encreaſed or diminiſhed in America.

THE effects of agriculture, horticulture, manufactures, commerce and civilization, in their progreſs from their firſt to their laſt ſtages, upon the health and life of man, can at preſent be aſcertained with preciſion in America. Here, too, we may diſcover the ſymptoms which gradually accompany the change of natural into artificial diſeaſes.

THE comparative effects of the different articles of agriculture upon health, ſuch as wheat, Indian corn, rice, tobacco and indigo, remain yet to be explored in this country.

THE cutting down of our woods has had a ſenſible effect upon our climate, and upon the health of our inhabitants. It remains yet to be determined

ed whether the increaſe of fevers from this cauſe, is produced by the encreaſe of exhalation, or by the progreſs of eaſterly winds weſtward, as has been ſuppoſed by Mr. Jefferſon, in his notes on Virginia.

It yet remains to aſcertain the full influence of cultivation upon our bodies. The higheſt degrees of it known in America, have had a viſible effect upon health. In Connecticut, one of the oldeſt and beſt cultivated ſtates in the union, remitting and intermitting fevers are ſeldom known.

It is certain that more rain and leſs ſnow have fallen in our winters, within theſe few years, than formerly. It becomes us to enquire, whether the change in the moiſture of our atmoſphere, from this cauſe, has added to the number or altered the ſymptoms of our diſeaſes.

The comparative influence of the moon on diſeaſes in this country, is a ſubject worthy of cloſe inveſtigation, though unfortunately hitherto but little attended to.

America furniſhes almoſt the only ſpot on the ſurface of the globe, to determine whether different forms of government have any influence upon health and life. In countries where power is confined, by hereditary ſucceſſion, to a few hands the effects of political paſſions are much limited. But even in theſe countries, we often read or hear of their

their baneful operation upon the human body. The abbe Richard tells us, it has more than once happened, that cardinals have died in twenty-four hours after the election of a pope—and I have heard a well-atteſted anecdote of a Swediſh officer, who was ſeized with a bilious colic, which terminated in a palſy, from a rebuke which he met with from the preſent King of Sweden. In a country, where the ſafety, power, and offices of government are the objects of attention or deſire of every man, it is a matter highly intereſting to know what are the effects of the paſſions, which are excited by thoſe objects, upon the human body. Are madneſs, melancholy, the hyſteria and hypochondriaſis, more frequent in republics than in monarchies? I think we are poſſeſſed of a ſufficient number of facts to determine this queſtion.

It remains yet to determine the comparative effects of *labour* and *learning* upon health and life. At preſent the former, compared with the latter, in the middle and ſouthern ſtates, is in the ratio of four to one. From the number and growth of the colleges and ſchools lately eſtabliſhed in theſe ſtates, it will be in our power to determine, in a few years, whether we have increaſed or diminiſhed, with knowledge, the health of our fellow citizens.

The

THE influence of religious opinions upon health and life may be diſcovered in America; for, by the principles and forms of our conſtitutions, a boldneſs and freedom of enquiry upon religious ſubjects have been introduced among us, which have been hitherto unknown in the world.

THE effects of emigration upon life and health, have as yet been the ſubject of no enquiry. Is the *maladié de pays*, or homeſickneſs, ſo diſtreſſing and fatal to the Swiſs, common to all the emigrants from Europe on their firſt arrival among us? Are they moſt ſubject to our epidemic diſeaſes, the *firſt* or *ſecond* year after they arrive in our country? Is there any mode of preventing theſe diſeaſes? And laſtly, do theſe perſons exceed in health or life the natives of America? We have many facts which will enable us to determine each of theſe queſtions.

THE effects of the mixture of the human ſpecies of different nations and countries upon health and life, may here be determined by accurate obſervations. It is certain, that the inferior ſpecies of animals are improved in ſtrength by the mixture. But further; the mulatto poſſeſſes ſtronger ſtamina than belonged to his father or mother. The ſize, ſtrength, health and longevity of Engliſhmen have been aſcribed to the intimate mixture of the blood of half the nations of Europe, from which they are

are deſcended. To the effects of this mixture, likewiſe, may be aſcribed that elevation and perfection which the human underſtanſting has acquired in Great Britain. I take pleaſure in ſacrificing national prejudice to truth and philoſophy by introducing this obſervation, eſpecially as I anticipate the ſame national character from the operation of ſimilar cauſes upon the citizens of America.

THERE are ſeveral diſeaſes peculiar to our country which have never been deſcribed.

THE *vomiting* and *purging*, which are ſo frequent and fatal in the ſummer months, in all the cities of America, would furniſh an excellent ſubject for medical enquiry.

THE cauſe of the *decay of the teeth*, which is ſo frequent in the middle and eaſtern ſtates of America, will admit of much curious and uſeful ſpeculation.

THE ſudden and often fatal effects of a draught of cold water upon the human body in this city, and the remedies proper to remove them, will furniſh another ſubject for a medical communication*.

THE

* This ſubject has ſince been examined by the author, in a Volume of Medical Inquiries and Obſervations, publiſhed in 1788.

THE qualities of our pump water, and the influence of building upon it, are proper ſubjects for chemical inveſtigation.

THE reaſon why the ſuburbs and ſouth end of our city are more ſubject to autumnal fevers than its centre and north end, and why theſe fevers are leſs frequent within theſe three years than formerly, deſerve our attention.

THE high price of fire-wood, makes it neceſſary to examine the effects of foſſil coal, and ſtove rooms, upon health and life.

THE ſymptoms and degrees in which our acute and chronic diſeaſes agree and diſagree with the deſcriptions of the ſame diſeaſes publiſhed in Europe, will furniſh ample matter for obſervation.

AN enquiry into the cauſes why the Dyſentery is equally the conſequence of a dry and wet ſummer, and why it appears on the ſummit of high grounds, while the vallies below them are viſited with remitting and bilious fevers, may lead us to determine, whether that diſorder be idiopathic, or whether it be the *febris introverſa* of Dr. Sydenham.

FOR the ſake of obtaining full information and accurate obſervations of the ſtate of the air and weather

weather (ſo eſſential to obtaining a hiſtory of diſeaſes), I would recommend to the College, to appoint one of their body for the following purpoſes.

1ſt. To record and communicate to the College an exact account of the temperature of the weather as meaſured by Fahrenheit's Thermometer.

2ndly. To record the variations in the weight and moiſture of the air, by the Barometer and Hydrometer.

3dly, To record the ſtate of the winds.

4thly. To meaſure exactly the the quantity of water that falls in our city. Theſe obſervations will be more uſeful, if we can obtain from the ſextons of the different churches in the city, ſuch a return of the deaths, as will enable us to aſcertain the increaſe or decreaſe of mortal diſeaſes by the bills of mortality. To render theſe bills more uſeful, let the ſexton be directed, in every caſe of death, to apply to the phyſician who has attended the patient for the name of the mortal diſtemper.

LET the obſervations on each of theſe ſubjects, be delivered every month to the College.

To obtain an accurate knowledge of the epidemics of the city, I would recommend the preſer-

preſervation of the accounts of the diſeaſes that are kept in the *Diſpenſary*. If theſe diſeaſes be recorded by the names that are given to them by Dr. Cullen, in the laſt edition of his Noſologia Methodica, the account of them cannot fail of being highly uſeful and beneficial to the public.* To derive the utmoſt poſſible advantage from this hiſtory of our epidemics, let us endeavour to procure ſimilar obſervations from different parts of the ſtate, and from every ſtate in the union.

To render our city as celebrated for medical advantages, as it has long been for other things, it will be neceſſary to erect in it *warm* and *cold baths*. The advantages of both theſe remedies in a country where the diſeaſes from heat and cold are ſo predominant, need not be mentioned.

A MEDICAL Library †, will help to diffuſe knowledge among us upon eaſy terms, while a botanical garden will furniſh us with an opportunity of cultivating that part of the Materia Medica, which is derived from the vegetable kingdom.

SHOULD

* The Tables, with which this volume commences, will ſhew that this propoſal has been fully adopted.

† It has been eſtabliſhed by the College, and now conſiſts of a number of ſcarce and valuable books.

SHOULD an application be made to the legiſlature, there can be no doubt of our obtaining a ſuitable piece of ground for that purpoſe.

THUS, Mr. Preſident and Gentlemen, have I pointed out in a few words, the great objects and advantages of our College of Phyſicians.

I SHALL conclude with the following remarks. It is a general opinion that the condition of man in our world is mending. The conveniences and pleaſures of life, are daily multiplying by the inventions of philoſophy. Many diſorders, once deemed incurable, now yield to medicine. No wonder then that a general expectation prevails—that a revolution is ſoon to take place in favour of human happineſs. Natural means appear to be the inſtruments deſigned by heaven to fulfil its purpoſes of mercy and benevolence to mankind. I am fully perſuaded there does not exiſt a diſeaſe in nature, that has not an antidote to it. And when I conſider the influence of liberty and republican forms of government upon ſcience, and the vigour which the American mind has acquired by the events of the late revolution, I am led to hope that a great portion of the honor and happineſs of diſcovering and applying theſe antidotes may be reſerved for the phyſicians of America.

Rush's discourse appeared in Volume I of the *Transactions* of the College of Physicians, which was published in 1793. We at the Historical Collections of the Library, on behalf of the College of Physicians, take pleasure in offering this facsimile as a memento of the 1987 meeting of the American Association for the History of Medicine and of the bicentennial of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia. The College wishes to convey special thanks to David Y. Cooper, M.D., for his generous contribution toward the printing cost of this pamphlet.