



MEDICAL HISTORY

Ephraim McDowell

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ON the 30th of December, 1959, a stamp in the *Famous Americans* series was placed on sale at the postoffice in Danville, Kentucky, to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the first ovariectomy to be performed in the United States, probably the first to be performed in the world. Dr. Ephraim McDowell on Christmas Eve, 1809, removed a 22 pound ovarian tumor from a Mrs. Crawford who lived in Green County, Kentucky. She was 47 years of age at the time of operation and lived to be 78. It must be remembered that this was long before anesthesia, or asepsis, and that surgical entry of the abdomen was almost certain to be followed by infection and death from peritonitis. Furthermore, the operation was in a farmhouse on the frontier and without skilled assistance or professional aid.

Dr. McDowell had been in practice in the small Kentucky town of Danville for 14 years when, because of his local reputation as a surgeon, he was called to Mrs. Crawford's home 60 miles

away. She was too ill to be brought to the doctor's office. He, of course, made the trip by horseback with the instruments and drugs of the country doctor in the saddlebags. After he had made his diagnosis, he explained to Mrs. Crawford the hazards of the operation, that he had never performed one like it, and, as far as he knew, no one else had done so. At the end of the discussion with her the patient said that she was suffering and had suffered greatly; she was dying by inches; and that she was ready to risk anything for relief. The success of the operation brought that relief and gave her 31 years more of life.

The "Father of Ovariectomy," as he is justly called, was born in Rockbridge County, Virginia, November 11, 1771, so the year 1959 is the 188th anniversary of his birth. He came of good stock and his father was a member of the Virginia Legislature. He moved to Kentucky on being appointed a land commissioner in that state and settled in Danville. Ephraim, after attending local schools,

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studied medicine in Staunton, Virginia, under Dr. Humphreys and then went to the University of Edinburgh for one year, 1793-94. He took surgery under John Bell, one of the greatest of the Scottish surgeons of the day. It was a lecture by Bell on diseases of the ovaries and the hopeless outlook in tumors of the ovary that directed McDowell's attention to the subject. Indeed it was the inspiration he received from Bell that led to his interest in surgery. In his practice he did most of the operative surgery in the area, including tracheotomies,

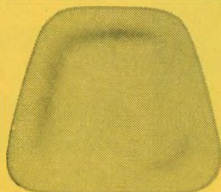
strangulated hernia, lithotomy, and amputations. He operated for stone in the bladder 28 times without a death, a truly remarkable record for that time.

McDowell did not publish the result of his successful operation on Mrs. Crawford in 1809 until 7 years later. The report appeared in the October, 1816, number of the *Eclectic Repertory and Analytical Review*. He had written a letter to his old teacher at Edinburgh, Dr. John Bell, but it had gone astray. He reported 2 more cases in the *Review* in October, 1819. His nephew, Dr. William A. McDowell whom he had taken into his office as a pupil and later as a partner, stated that by 1820

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his uncle had done 7 ovariectomies, 6 of which were successful. The younger McDowell remained with his uncle as a partner for 2 years. He was succeeded by Dr. Alban G. Smith who also operated on 2 cases of ovarian tumor and published the results in the January number of the *North American Medical and Surgical Journal*. Dr. Nathan Smith, the professor of surgery at Yale, performed an ovariectomy in July 1821 unaware of McDowell's work, so he also deserves recognition as a pioneer in gynecological surgery. The exact number of ovariectomies done by Dr. McDowell is not known. A notable case was that of a Mrs. Overton who lived in central Tennessee near the Hermitage, the home of Andrew Jackson. In fact it is stated that General Jackson and a woman friend of Mrs. Overton were Dr. McDowell's assistants, and that the doctor was a guest at the Hermitage. This was 6 years before Jackson was elected to the Presidency in the campaign of 1828.

In 1802 Dr. McDowell married the daughter of General Isaac Shelby, a soldier in the Revolution, who became governor of Kentucky during the War of 1812, and was in command of the militia of the state at the battle of the Thames in the latter war. They had 6 children, 2 sons and 4

daughters. Only 3 of the children survived their father. He died on June 20, 1830.

In appearance Dr. McDowell was rather tall and slender, with good looking and pleasing features. Without being anything of a dandy, he was very neat and careful in his dress, and every morning had a fresh neckcloth of snowy whiteness. He was a good classical scholar and his library was the largest in the little town. Aside from medicine, his favorite reading was history and the volumes of Tacitus and Gibbon were well worn.

It is most fitting that in a stamp series to honor great Americans, the name of Ephraim McDowell is included. He was not only a pioneer of Kentucky when that state was on our western frontier, but he was a pioneer in gynecological surgery.

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