

Le Roy Crummer

1872-1934

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LE ROY CRUMMER (1872-1934)

THE death of Dr. Le Roy Crummer of Omaha, Nebraska, which occurred in Los Angeles, January 2nd of this year, removes from the field of medicine and medical history a figure of importance. A paternal ancestor, who came from the northern part of Ireland and was a strict Protestant, emigrated to America in 1819, first going to Delaware and later moving into the West, about 1835. He was an artisan, who worked in the mills as a blacksmith and mechanic. His son, John Crummer (1816-1890),¹ born in Ireland, prepared himself, without any schooling, for the Methodist Episcopal church and started as a circuit preacher in 1836, through the states of Illinois and Wisconsin. He went from place to place holding meetings wherever he could find room and became one of the most popular men of his day in this pioneer locality. Many of his parishioners were extremely poor farmers and there is a story about him that he was once paid for his services in wheat. He carried this wheat by wagon to Chicago and sold it, in order to provide the necessities for his family. This energetic, strict but lovable character built the first church in Milwaukee in 1841. A few years later he had to give up his arduous duties on account of his health, but in 1849, inspired by the gold rush to California, he worked his way across the country, in the spring of that year. Returning to Illinois in 1851, he started a farm and spent a good deal of his time as an itinerant preacher of the gospel. The name of the Reverend John Crummer became a household word in the cabins

of Illinois and Wisconsin. From this pioneer stock of the best character came the subject of this biography.

Le Roy Crummer was born in Elizabeth, Illinois, April 15, 1872. His father, who was also a physician, Benjamin F. Crummer (1848-1907), later moved to Omaha, where he became an important figure in the medical world and one of the most successful practitioners of his time. The son, who was graduated by the University of Michigan in 1893 with a bachelor degree and M.D. from Northwestern University in 1896, became associated with his father in Omaha and an instructor in the University of Nebraska. In 1919, just after the war period, he was made professor of medicine, a position which he held until 1925, when he became emeritus. When his health began to fail from serious heart disease, he moved to Los Angeles, California, and there associated himself with the University of California and the University of Southern California as professor of medical history, a subject which was of the greatest possible interest to him. His death occurred January 2, 1934, after a long illness.

Crummer was greatly interested in cardiology and he found stimulation in this branch of medicine in his work during the World War. In spite of his well-known disability, he entered the Army in 1917, but was refused overseas duty. He did, however, go to Fort Oglethorpe in Georgia, where he became an instructor in cardiology for medical officers. He was a popular teacher and much admired by his associates and the students who gathered around him. As the result of this work, he wrote a book on heart disease, published in 1925². As a basis for this volume he used Circular No. 21 from the Office of the Surgeon General, issued in 1917, a copy of which he published as an appendix to his book. This important Army

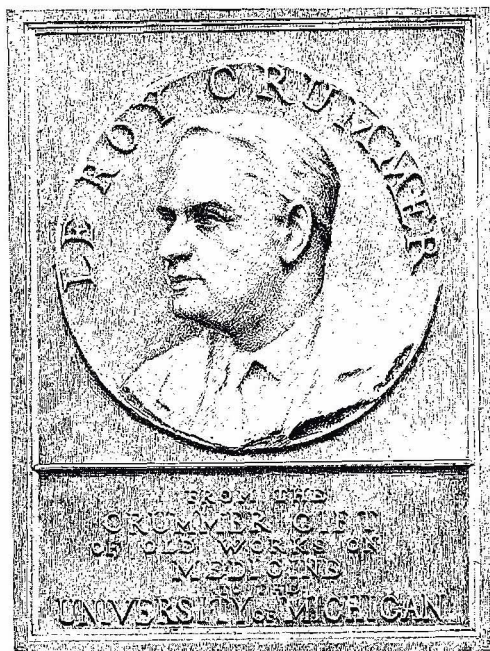
order was compiled with great care and proved to be an exceptionally valuable medical contribution from the War Department. Crummer's volume, in general, was somewhat revolutionary in type and brought out his distinct individualism, for which he was well known. It was based, however, on long personal experience and many of the points that he made have later been confirmed by other workers. Far from a routine textbook, it caused considerable discussion at the time it was issued. He probably knew European clinics and their work on the heart better than anyone in this country and this knowledge plus his long contact with patients formed the basis for a practical and useful book, perhaps with greater significance than many critics realized at the time of its publication.

It is, however, with his career as a student of medical history and a collector of books that this short biography is particularly concerned. Crummer's father was broadminded enough to see that his son, as a young man studying medicine, was thoroughly educated not only in the classics but in modern languages. He could read both Greek and Latin and spoke French, Italian and German. Many visits to Europe during the summer vacations stimulated his interest in the older aspects of medicine and he began to collect a few books about the time he went into practice with his father. After his father's death in 1907, he was able to visit Europe even more frequently. His library grew slowly, however, and it was not until after the war period that he began to collect books assiduously. In this he was greatly helped by his wife, an authority on Elizabethan literature. They, naturally, had many interests in common and spent a good deal of their time in the decade from 1920 to 1930 traveling through Europe buying books and manuscripts. At one time

they spent nearly a whole year touring through Italy with three matchless companions: an Italian nobleman, a learned priest, and an anti-quarian bookseller. All the small libraries and bookshops in Italy were investigated and the Crummers bought many choice items for their own collection. He, also, at the same time, made purchases for the library of the University of Nebraska.

His personal library had grown to such an extent that on April 15, 1927, Crummer's fifty-fifth birthday, Mrs. Crummer was able to present to her husband a printed catalogue of the books which he owned, issued before 1640^s. Only one hundred copies were issued. This was an expansion of a similar catalogue published in 1925, circulated in multigraph form. The catalogue of 1927 lists four hundred and forty-two manuscripts and books, most of which have now been deposited in the library of the University of Michigan. Each is to carry the book-plate reproduced in this paper. Crummer's library, although comparatively small, contains some very choice items. Naturally, the cornerstones of medical history are represented in a very fine copy of the *Fabrica* of Vesalius (1543) and Harvey's *de Motu Cordis* (1628). His interest in anatomy led him to collect books printed before the time of Vesalius' work as well as those that followed directly after 1543. Although not by any means complete, there are important books in this collection of anatomical texts which serve as a basis for the understanding of the developing knowledge of anatomy during the sixteenth century. In addition to these anatomical works, of particular importance are: a fine copy of the rare work by Ambroise Paré, *Anatomie Universelle du Corps humain*, the publication of Fracastoro on syphilis (first edition, 1530), rare editions of Alexis

of Piedmont, many issues of the poem, *Regimen Sanitatis*, from the School of Salerno, and books by Ryff, Von Hutten, and many others. The catalogue, unfortunately, shows evidence of



Book-plate for the Crummer Collection, now in the Library of the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

hurried compilation and many minor errors crept into it. Nevertheless, from it we can obtain an idea of the worth of Crummer's collection.

Crummer's writings on medical history are, unfortunately, very few. He published in 1929 a manuscript by William Heberden entitled, "An Introduction to the Study of Physic".⁴ This manuscript, which he found in a London bookshop, had not previously been printed. In

a pleasant prefatory essay to this book Crummer tells of his finding the manuscript and his investigations in regard to it. An interesting and valuable contribution to a method of historical research, it reflects the keen interest of the man in everything that came to him. He wanted not only to own the manuscript but to find its place in relation to the other works of Heberden and to explain its value as a contribution to modern medicine. This he did in his own particular style in an essay which shows the breadth and depth of the man perhaps better than almost anything else that he wrote.

Another aspect of the history of medicine, which will always be associated with Crummer's name, is his work on early anatomical fugitive sheets. His collection, which was certainly unrivaled in this country, contained many rare items. He made an effort to check all the known fugitive sheets and this list was published in the *Annals of Medical History* in 1923⁵, followed by additional notes in the same journal in 1925. Some of the more important plates were reproduced in these papers. The sheets were arranged in five classes, as follows: 1, the skeleton sheets; 2, the *Tabulae* of Vesalius and its imitations; 3, the Adam and Eve plates; 4, the female figure alone; and, 5, the male figure alone. Many residents of Boston will remember with great pleasure his informal talk on this subject at the Harvard Medical Society, April 3, 1923. Photostat reproductions of these rare sheets were presented by Crummer to the Boston Medical Library. Other studies, all started by the acquisition of some rare item, were published from time to time, but his failing health made extensive work impossible and, unfortunately, only a few of his notes found their way into print⁶. He became an associate editor of the *Annals of Medical History* in 1927.

Crummer's interest in medical history was constantly stimulated by his association with the John Crerar Library in Chicago. It was there that he first made a definite contact with medical books of importance, particularly the series of anatomical texts. His magnificent copy of Vesalius, first seen in this library, was purchased by him about 1920 and this led him into the wide field of medical bibliography. He was stimulated also by his close association in Omaha with Dr. Irving S. Cutter and Dr. Alfred G. Brown. Another friend⁷, long associated with him, for whom Crummer had the greatest admiration, writes as follows: "He had a decided *ingenium* for quickly perceiving essential facts and important traits in any field. His success as a diagnostician long ago had become assured. He had a peculiar light and almost whimsical method in anything he undertook, almost as if he were playing with his work, but this was only a manner by which he tried to conceal a certain diffidence which he never quite overcame. He was no scholar, nor did he pretend scholarship, but he had the peculiar American knack of penetrating directly into the core of any subject close to his sympathy, and using his native ability in an inductive way as he went along. I imagine that the direct and independent spirit of Vesalius appealed strongly to him; at any rate, he made himself master of Vesalian anatomy before very long, even to the bibliographical details and the historical and biographical side-lights open to the student. He analyzed his copy of the book—the finest which either he or I had ever seen—and presently found inserted in it a curious plate with flaps, which at the time he could not identify or connect with the book.

"This was followed by a thorough study of

Mortimer Frank's expanded edition of Choulant, and a swift yet searching survey of the whole field of medical history, with visits to important collections and a study of copies of such books as he rapidly began to acquire. Almost by intuition he was led to take an interest in the fugitive sheets of medical illustration, his study being fed by the almost miraculous acquisition of about a dozen of these rare pieces bound together, some until then undescribed. The plate which he had found in his Vesalius proved another example. Dr. Crummer then made a careful bibliographical survey of this form of illustration, without neglecting his study of the general field, and then began his visits to European scholars, museums, libraries, and antiquarian booksellers, in search of material to satisfy his rapidly growing collective energy.

“Crummer was fortunate enough to obtain the more important part of his great collection before early and historically valuable medical books became an object of international speculation. The rapidity with which he acquired the knowledge requisite for discussing historical and bibliographic problems with such men as Garrison, Packard, Cushing, Klebs, Welch, et al., or with De Lint, Sudhoff, and many others, in Europe, was very remarkable. I am somewhat familiar with the researches which were recorded in the mimeographed catalogue of a portion of his library distributed some years ago—much being tentative and unhappily left unfinished by his illness, but some of them being of permanent bibliological value. His talent of combining facts in historical medicine quite equaled his anticipation of some seemingly remote factors influencing the physiological status of the heart. He was a quick man, one of a few that I would call brilliant, with that

enlightenment of spirit and mind to which a plodding scholarship is subservient.

“He married late, but happily, and at a time when the enthusiasm and the bibliographical help which his wife could give, came to mean much to him. Neither of the two could have supported an academic study of the history of medicine; neither would take the place of an Osler, but together they found what they wanted, recognized its importance as by instinct, and secured it for their library. They also recognized the value of an organized search for material related to what they already possessed, and their repeated visits in Europe resulted in finds that probably never will be equaled in importance by any one collector, even though they knew quite well that in later years, when they were known by every dealer of note, preparations were made for their reception, rarities adduced, recesses diligently searched.

“A collecting energy as fruitful as was that of Dr. and Mrs. Crummer does not depend entirely upon ‘luck’. Every collector in any field has some luck. In this case the felicitous result was due to an instinctive feeling for essential values, dependent upon a fundamental sense of valid authentic source material. One may be born with this feeling, but the specific sense is acquired only by the penetration of subjects, fields of research, organic groups of material, by means of an intelligent estimate of that which is centrally significant—in contradistinction to what merely may be peripheral and intermediate.”

To this delightful and penetrating summary of Crummer one can add little. The books, after all, are his monument and they, fortunately, find a final resting place in his old college library, where he wished them to be. They are worthy

of a high position in American medicine as the man was worthy of his strong and steadfast family inheritance.

H. R. V.

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