

WILLIAM READ AND HIS BOOKS*

A Bibliographic Research Pattern in 1861

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WE meet tonight to honor John B. Rhoads, who died as a third-year medical student in 1959. He did not live long enough to become a good doctor, but he was a very good medical student, recognized as such by those best able to judge — his own classmates. As a college student at Haverford, moreover, Rhoads had shown a submissive interest in history, and the scant time granted to him in medical school indicates that the story of medicine might, in addition to his regular medical studies, have engaged his attention.

For a topic I have chosen to describe a Boston doctor of one hundred years ago, a little known physician named William Read. Rhoads would have had much in common, as we shall see, with Read. Each would have understood the other, for both were explorers, men of precise thought, students of literature and observers of nature. Perhaps they even “read God directly,” to use Emerson’s phrase. Certainly, Read did, and I have no doubt Rhoads did also. Both were given to searching the minds of the past, especially by means of books. Both engaged their total strength in fit actions, with intuitions fortified by convictions. In the portraiture of Read we may glimpse the unfulfilled promises of Rhoads’s brief career.

WILLIAM READ — HIS EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION

William Read (Fig. 1), a Boston obstetrician, city physician, sanitarian, author of a remarkable study on placenta previa, collector of books, music critic and a generous and public-spirited citizen, exemplifies many of the best characteristics of sound scholarship and progressive medicine of his time.

Born in the pleasant Hillsborough County town of Amherst, New Hampshire, in 1820, he came from a prosperous family of local merchants. His father, Robert Read, succeeded his brother, another William Read, in business and served as town clerk for thirteen years. Read’s grandfather was Colonel Robert Read, of Westford, Massachusetts, who had settled in Amherst about 1760.¹

In 1835, when William Read, the future physician, was fifteen, his father sold the store in Amherst and moved to Nashua. This was about the time young Read went to Dartmouth College, for he graduated four years later in the class of 1839. It was a natural step for this New Hampshire boy, since Nathan Lord, who became president of Dartmouth College in 1828, had been minister of the Congregational church in Amherst during Read’s boyhood. Little is known of

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Read’s mother, Rebecca, daughter of Frederick French, Esq. She was married in 1818, and William Read was her first child.

After four years at Dartmouth Read turned to medicine and entered Harvard Medical School, where he graduated three years later in 1842. The school had moved to Boston from Cambridge in 1810. By 1816, helped by the Commonwealth, Harvard had erected its own building on Mason Street. Here, Read attended the Massachusetts Medical College, as



FIGURE 1 *William Read, M.D., 1820-1889 (Courtesy of the Boston Medical Library).*

it was then called. The lectures, beginning in November, lasted for only three months, so that students had ample time during the rest of the year to assist a physician at the Almshouse, Dispensary, Marine Hospital or the Massachusetts General. Each of these was staffed by the same physicians who taught at the Medical College. Supplementary to the regular courses of lectures at Harvard were numerous private schools offering evening classes, summer courses or graduate instruction. Even Walter Channing, dean of the College, gave lectures on midwifery during the summer months. These were undoubtedly taken by Read, who was interested in obstetrics, and he probably heard Channing describe, for the first time in medical history, the pernicious anemia of pregnancy (1842). He may also have taken advantage of the fine courses, the best of their time, offered by the Tremont Street Medical School, with Jacob Bigelow, Edward Reynolds and Oliver Wendell Holmes

on the staff. But a degree from Harvard was the important thing for an aspiring doctor, and this Read earned in 1842. His education in medicine, although spotty, was sound, for he was taught by able men of wide clinical experience. As we shall see, Read was shortly to be accepted by the same leaders of Boston medicine as a practitioner. He was, moreover, made a member of the two most exclusive medicosocial clubs of his day: the Society for Medical Improvement and the Society for Medical Observation.² Later, he was to found in 1861 the oldest special society in American medicine: the Obstetrical Society of Boston.³

PRACTICE AND RECREATION

William Read began his practice in Lynn, Massachusetts, soon after graduation but a few years later moved to Boston, where he remained until his death in his seventieth year in 1889. By 1857, after becoming well established in obstetric practice, he read his first paper, before the Boston Society for Medical Improvement,⁴ on the relation of the placenta to the uterus, a subject later to be expanded in his famous monograph on placenta previa, published in 1861.

But his marginal enjoyments were wide, and he by no means limited himself to the practice of medicine. For instance, he showed an interest in public affairs, as disclosed by a fragment of his *Diary* for one month in 1851.⁵ Always a supporter of group singing, he served on a special committee that initiated choral singing in the Public Schools. After making an extensive survey of the practice of teaching music in other cities he advised the use of regular, paid teachers. His plans were adopted, and the children sang at the School Festival in 1858, with great success.⁶ He was also closely associated with other leading amateur musical men in the city. Always gifted with his pen, Read wrote the musical criticisms for the *Boston Evening Transcript* and contributed many other articles to its columns.^{7,8} He served in 1856 for one year in the State House of Representatives, but he did not continue his political activities, except for his work on the City School Board and later as city physician.

Read was active in Masonry, being a member and past master of the Massachusetts Lodge and the Consistory. Other interests connected him with the Veteran Corps of Cadets, the Massachusetts Medical Society and Emmanuel Church. He married the daughter of Isaac McLellan, a merchant of Boston, and had three sons. His funeral, on May 8, 1889, at Emmanuel Church was largely attended by physicians and civic leaders. Burial was at Mount Auburn Cemetery.

At the time of his death he was characterized as a generous and public-spirited citizen, actively interested in many good objects. "His benevolence," wrote one observer, "will be remembered by many who have been recipients of his kind and delicate attentions."

Another described him as "one of Boston's distinguished physicians," as indeed he was.

READ ON PLACENTA PREVIA

In 1861, Read's extensive monograph on placenta previa, the result of three or four years of literary research, was published. The essay won for him the Massachusetts Medical Society prize and was published by the Society as one of a series of books known as the *Library of Practical Medicine*.⁹ Books made up of prize compositions were not uncommon in Read's time, for the Boylston Medical Society had a long list of similar publications to its credit. But Read's work was different from the others, and it initiated a new pattern in bibliographic research.

He set himself a high standard, as he explains in the Preface: "Desirous of avoiding the errors which arise from vague reports of cases, and believing also that the reader has a right to verify, if he choose, every quotation taken from any author or source, it was determined at the outset to make use of no cases, and to quote no opinions at second hand, or through intermediate channels of communication, and to point out the source of every fact or statement quoted." When one realizes that Read abstracted and quoted accurately the reports of over 1000 cases from the medical literature of his day and from personal correspondence with other physicians, the size of his task before the days of medical indexes seems colossal. How he accomplished his survey, between 1857 and 1861, in Boston, is chiefly of interest today because of his successful efforts to overcome bibliographic hazards that would have stopped a man of lesser stature and smaller vision.

Because there were no guides to the printed records Read had to make his own investigations. For a library he used the Boston Athenaeum, the only place where any large number of medical books and current periodicals were available. The old Boston Medical Library had turned over its books and journals to the Athenaeum thirty years before, in 1826, and there they were carefully kept and added to by a succession of discriminating librarians. A new Athenaeum building, moreover, had been opened in 1849, and the progressive librarian of the day, Charles Folsom, had made the contents available to students, like Read, who were not proprietors but were able to become members, with full use of the library. Here, Read worked for three or four years, digging out the case records on placenta previa from books and periodicals. He was most exact. No report was cited unless he had it before him, and the list of journals used in those years was carefully recorded in the Athenaeum ledger of *Books Borrowed*, kept each year under the borrower's name. Thus for 1857 we find him using the *London Medical Gazette*, the *Lancet*, the *Dublin Journal* and many others. He must have relied heavily on the *American Journal of the Medical Sciences*, that famous Philadelphia publication containing at the time many abstracts and notices of foreign works,

with summaries of the most important articles in the major French, English and German medical journals. It would have been almost his only source for many references.

His reading was not limited, however, to periodicals, for he digested all the standard texts as well. Mauriceau, Lamotte, Giffard, Levret, Chapman, Rigby, Madame Lachapelle and others were scanned and the case histories abstracted in detail. When he could not find a book in the Athenaeum or elsewhere in Boston he bought it from abroad, thus building up an extensive library of his own on the classical literature on obstetrics.

Read's personal library, indeed, formed the cornerstone of the reactivated Boston Medical Library in 1875, when rooms were opened at 5 Hamilton Place and James R. Chadwick, the librarian, arranged for special cases to be placed just inside the main entrance for "Dr. Read's Library." The books assembled by Read and left to the Library form one of the most complete obstetric collections known.

By pursuing the subject of placenta previa so carefully, with added notes on his own cases and those of other doctors in Boston and its vicinity, Read not only set a new bibliographic pattern for research but also changed the current thinking on the treatment of this often fatal condition (in his own compilation of 1026 cases more than 20 per cent were reported as fatal). He advocated version and delivery by the feet, without disturbing the connections of the placenta any more than was necessary for this maneuver. In 1861 transfusion was just being revived, but few examples could be reported. Cesarean section had not come into vogue, and Simpson's operation to detach the placenta artificially was not favored. He did advocate early version, and every effort was made to protect the mother from exhausting hemorrhage.

Unfortunately, Braxton Hicks's method of bipolar version, described in the *Lancet* in July, 1860, did not reach him, for it was in the treatment of placenta previa that combined internal and external version proved most valuable.

CHOLERA AND THE CITY PHYSICIAN

In 1864, toward the close of the Civil War, Read was appointed city physician of Boston at a salary of \$1,500 a year. One of his chief concerns during his first year was smallpox, for he had to face 113 deaths in twelve months. He vaccinated over 3000 persons.¹⁰

But there was a more serious problem in public health in 1866. Cholera broke out again as it had done so many times in the past. Through the control measures initiated by him, the epidemic was limited to 11 cases. With his customary efficiency, augmented by his well developed historical sense, Read made a study of the previous occurrences of the disease in Boston: 78 cases in 1832; 611 in 1849; and 261 in 1854. In addition to this analysis he abstracted many clinical reports from the medical literature, even in-

cluding a complete translation by S. L. Abbott, a medical friend, of the proceedings of the 1866 Constantinople conference on cholera. Read could not attend the meeting, but he sensed its importance and was energetic enough to seek the report and make it available to others.¹¹

He reviewed with particular care the history of the epidemic of 1849. A cholera hospital was set up on Fort Hill, then near the waterfront, as a municipal adventure. There 166 deaths occurred out of 262 patients admitted. Henry G. Clark, who was city physician at the time, wrote an excellent report of the hospital and the epidemic.¹² At the end of the four and a half months during which the disease raged the hospital was not abandoned and proved useful in later epidemics. John C. Dalton, Jr., a graduate of Harvard Medical School in 1847 and a former house surgeon at the Massachusetts General Hospital, did the autopsies, and 33 are reported in detail in Clark's report. Charles T. Hildreth, also a graduate of Harvard (1851), who served as a surgical house pupil at the Massachusetts General Hospital, interrupted his studies to serve as a student assistant in 1849.

A milder epidemic of cholera occurred in Boston in 1854. Clark was still city physician, for he did not give way to Read until 1864. The cholera hospital was again used, and 2 physicians and 3 resident medical students were sufficient to run the hospital. No autopsies were reported.

Since none of the hospital personnel, including 4 physicians, 4 medical students and about 25 attendants, came down with cholera in 1849, the board of consulting physicians decided that the disease was neither contagious nor infectious. But Read was not happy about these conclusions, although they were the popular belief of the day not only in Boston but also in New York and elsewhere in the United States.¹³ Characteristically, he went to the literature for other opinions and at once ran into John Snow's account of the Broad Street epidemic in London in 1854. Snow had found that cholera was a communicable disease, spread in this instance by a contaminated water supply. When he took the handle off the famous Broad Street pump, the epidemic was quickly checked.¹⁴

Although Read was now convinced that cholera was transmittable, he was not able to win over to his side the reluctant Boston doctors who advised the City on matters of public health. Notwithstanding, he upheld his position with vigor and initiated a quarantine on incoming passengers from infected vessels, isolated patients, controlled infection of the water supply and insisted on scrupulous personal cleanliness, with particular care of excretions. By his enforcement of this simple sanitary code he soon eliminated cholera from Boston. So vehement was the general uproar against these directions, however, that he found it necessary to defend himself in print, even against the doctors. When they took exception to his opinion and the actions he took to implement

them, he wrote his famous reply as *A Letter to the Consulting Physicians*.¹⁵ He had been severely reprimanded by them for espousing doctrines "detrimental to the health, happiness and pecuniary interests of the citizens at large." In rebuttal he gave all the evidence he had gained from Snow's report and from other experiences around the world. He even admitted a reversal of his own opinion regarding contagion. His formidable arguments were unanswerable, and he was vindicated by silent acquiescence from the powerful consulting physicians, who had no reply to such a complete account from this scholarly sanitarian.

Read remained as city physician until the reorganization of the department into a Board of Health took place in 1872, when he retired, his greatest work in public health accomplished.

READ'S COLLATERAL READING

Because the Boston Athenaeum was primarily a general library some idea of Read's interests apart from medicine may be gained if one scans the *Entry of Books Borrowed* for the years during which he was writing his *Placenta Praevia*. From 1857 to 1860, in addition to the medical journals, his reading was broad in scope and wide in interest. While digesting the contents of the British *Lancet*, he varied his intake with Philip Henry Gosse's *Aquarium; Wonders of the deep sea* (London, 1854), William Godwin's *Life of Chaucer* (London, 1803), Harriet Martineau's *Eastern Life, Present and Past* (London, 1848) and Frederick Law Olmstead's *Journey through Texas* (New York, 1857).

The book by Gosse would have a special appeal to a man of broad scientific interests, for Gosse was an informative and stimulating writer on natural history, particularly on the marine animals on the Devonshire coast. To study them and their habits, he built a tank in his house, the Marine Aquarium, supplied with artificial aeration. The book was illustrated by superb plates, drawn and colored by Gosse. But Read would have been most fascinated by *Letters from Alabama* (London, 1859), describing the life of this richly endowed English boy in rural Alabama in 1838, where Gosse taught school. Few have drawn a picture of pre-Civil War slavery more succinctly than this perceptive youthful traveler.

Olmsted, too, gave an adequate picture of the South in his account of a long saddle-trip through Texas with his younger brother, John Hull Olmsted, a physician. The diary notes were edited by the doctor for his brother, who was later to become a pioneer landscape architect. A favorite of Read's, however, was *Rural Sketches* (London, 1839) by Thomas Miller, the poet, novelist and London bookseller. With these Read mixed fairy tales by Anderson and by Grimm, the works of Pierre de Bourdeilles Brantôme in French and *Gammer Gurton's Pleasant Stories* (New York, 1846).

The listing is not by any means complete, but the sample gives us a picture of a reader with an astonish-

ing variety of tastes. These few notes on his excursions into nonmedical literature help to supply a key to his character, for a man is often best appraised by a knowledge of the books he reads. Except for his own writings, such information mirrors the man, frequently giving a clearer picture than a photograph or a painted portrait.

CONCLUSIONS

William Read's contributions to medicine were important and timely. As a sanitarian, he rendered an outstanding service to Boston in his vigorous support of a definitive concept of cholera. He could not tolerate the thin excuses of his brother physicians, when the arguments were so clear, so logical and so well founded in doctrine and experiences. He grasped at once the veracity of Snow's report from London, and his interpretation rested on a considered balance of afterthoughts. His investigations were never fumbling or conjectural, and he was never known to invent fictions unconsciously.

In bibliography he was a pioneer, and he looked on the problem of placenta previa in a fresh way, without ever liberating himself entirely from the past. He showed an elegance of bibliographic citation, hammered fine through precision of mind.

Read was also foremost in the cultural development of Boston. In music, writing and civic affairs he was always a leader, with an inspirational flair promoting good objects, particularly in relation to the public schools.

Although his name is little known in medical history this scholarly, kindly man is worthy of memory as a stalwart physician, confidant of his convictions, and an upholder of the highest standards of medicine, in both his public and his literary life. His name will long be remembered for his founding of the Obstetrical Society of Boston, his monograph on placenta previa and his labors as city physician.

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