DR. BENJAMIN RUSH

THE REPUTATION OF BENJAMIN RUSH*

BY L. H. BUTTERFIELD

I

INSTEAD of pointing out that Benjamin Rush was by 1800 the leading citizen of Philadelphia (which he was), or that he was a more famous and influential physician than any who have followed him in America (which is equally demonstrable), it will, I think, be more rewarding to hear exactly what some of his contemporaries said of him.

The earliest impressions of Rush by contemporaries were recorded while he was on his travels in Europe. In Scotland John Witherspoon, whom Rush wheedled into accepting the presidency of Princeton College, wrote that Rush was "a most agreeable young man" but that his addiction to "Strong and Superlative Expressions," particularly on Witherspoon's qualifications for the post in question, gave the writer no little "uneasiness."1 Fresh from Edinburgh, the young doctor of medicine quite delighted Benjamin Franklin, who rendered him important services in London and introduced him to friends there and in France. On his return to Philadelphia Rush bore letters commending his conduct and attainments from various persons of influence which led to his appointment as first professor of chemistry in the College of Philadelphia. The most meaningful passage in any of these is in a letter from the great Quaker physician John Fothergill. Rush, he wrote,
has behaved himself in such a manner here, and pursued his studies with so much diligence and success, as entitles him to the approbation of his acquaintance here, and claims this testimonial of his worth from me. If he is not spoiled by too early an introduction to public favours, I hope he will long continue to deserve it. Difficultys at first setting out are often more instructive than a smoother progress. Not that I want to have difficuitys thrown in his way, but let him acquire reputation by his own conduct, rather than by the too hasty suffrage of his Friends.²

Writing in a reminiscent tone many years later, Dr. Benjamin Waterhouse said that Fothergill had often spoken of Rush "with approbation... He said he sometimes attempted to moderate the sanguine temperament of the young American, but too ardent a politician."³

At the outset of his long career, then, we can think of Rush as a talented, energetic, self-confident, perhaps even pushing young man and an ardent defender of American rights. Sober John Adams, whose acquaintance Rush had made in 1774 when the Continental Congress first met, provided in his "Diary" an unsympathetic but lifelike sketch of Rush in action:

Dr. Rush came in. He is an elegant, ingenious body, a sprightly, pretty fellow. He is a republican; he has been much in London; acquainted with Sawbridge, Macaulay, Burgh, and others of that stamp... He complains of D. [John Dickinson]... He mentions many particular instances in which Dickinson has blundered; he thinks him warped by the Quaker interest and the church interest too; thinks his reputation past the meridian, and that avarice is growing upon him. Says that Henry and Mifflin both complained to him very much about him. But Rush, I think, is too much of a talker to be a deep thinker; elegant, not great.⁴

Rush's freedom of expression, a trait that makes his letters unfailingly lively, became notorious early. His friends, including John Adams, encouraged him to write to them because of it. Mrs. Adams reported to a friend in 1781:

² Fothergill to James Pemberton, 16 May 1769; MS., Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Etting Collection.
³ Waterhouse to Joseph Willard, 20 August 1822; Massachusetts Historical Society, Proceedings, XLIII (1910), 644-645.
I saw by the last pensilvania paper under York News, that [the British] had got a Letter of Dr. Rush's which they have promised to print in the Next paper in which they say, he treats the Rebel Senate with great freedom. that both you and I can believe from former Specimens. Rush will care as little as any body.  

All the same, it was a trait that made cooler heads mistrust him. "You know the man and can make proper allowances," Charles Thomson observed to Richard Peters in transmitting an alarming bit of political news received from Rush in 1783.  

A few years later Ebenezer Hazard, who had been Rush's Princeton classmate and his intimate correspondent until they quarreled for some unknown reason, warned Jeremy Belknap: "Take care how you commit yourself to your new correspondent [i.e., Benjamin Rush]. Neither his stability nor prudence are to be depended upon."  

It was a trait, furthermore, that got Rush repeatedly into difficulties. The capital instance is of course his letter to Patrick Henry about Washington's deficiencies as a military leader—a monumental indiscretion which Rush regretted to his dying day. Being informed of Rush's comments, Washington made some comments on his part which have stained Rush's reputation indelibly from that time until this.  

Scarred as he was from his long fight with colleagues and superiors in the Continental hospital service, Rush emerged from the Revolution as Philadelphia's leading physician. The Reverend Manasseh Cutler of Massachusetts, one of a long line of distinguished visitors to Philadelphia who bore letters of introduction to Rush, set down in 1787 the best account we have of the physician at work. Rush had invited Cutler to attend him on his regular round of duty at the Pennsylvania Hospital.  

After we had taken a view of the Museum [wrote Cutler], we returned to the upper Hall, where several Physicians and all the young students in Physic in the City were waiting. Dr. Rush then began his examination of the sick, attended by these gentlemen, which I judged  

5 Abigail Adams to Mercy Warren, 8 January 1781; Massachusetts Historical Society, Collections, LXXI (1925), 164.  
7 Hazard to Belknap, 3 February 1788; Massachusetts Historical Society, Collections, 5th series, III (1877), 15.
to be between twenty and thirty. We entered the upper chamber of the sick. . . . The room was exceedingly clean and nice, the beds and bedding appeared to be of a good quality, and the most profound silence and order were preserved upon the Doctor's entering the room. There were only women, and about forty in number. Dr. Rush makes his visits with a great deal of formality. He is attended by the attending Physician, who gives him an account of every thing material since he saw them last, and by the Apothecary of the Hospital, who minutes the Prescriptions. In every case worthy of notice, he addresses the young Physicians, points out its nature, the probable tendency, and the reason for the mode of treatment which he pursues. On this occasion, the Doctor was particularly attentive and complaisant to me, and seemed to consider me as a Physician.

From this room we went to the next below it, which is in every respect similar. It is appropriated to the men. . . . Most of the cases were chronic, many of them swellings and ulcerations, and some of them very singular. . . . Their dressings were all ready to be taken off and exposed to view the instant the Doctor came to them. These he imputed to their drinking spirituous liquors, and did not fail to remind them of it.  

Rush achieved his greatest fame, or notoriety, in the successive epidemics of yellow fever that devastated Philadelphia in the 1790's. Soon after the outbreak of the first and most serious of these, in 1793, Rush worked out a treatment that he was satisfied was effective, and he clung to his post in the stricken city in order to administer it. The treatment consisted of an heroic combination of purgatives and bloodletting. Ebenezer Hazard, who declined these ministrations from his former friend, wrote a vivid account of the epidemic and of Rush's conduct during it.

Rush [he wrote] has published a Nostrum. . . . He prescribes that, and bleeding in all Cases, and boasts lustily of his success. At the same time, it is a fact, that he has lost three of his apprentices and his sister out of his own family. He is a perfect Sangrado, and would order blood enough to be drawn to fill Mambrino's helmet, with as little ceremony as a Musquito would fill himself upon your Leg.

He was called to a friend of mine, and directed 12 or 15 ounces of blood to be drawn, and one of his powders to be taken; it was done. The next day, 8 or 10 ounces & another powder; it was done. The 3d day more bleeding & purging; the patient having felt his own pulse, objected against bleeding as unnecessary. The DR pronounced “this opinion, one of the most dangerous symptoms in the Case; the disorder was extremely insidious; the Case extremely critical; not a moment to be lost; send for the bleeder directly;—In the mean time, take this pill, and if that does not operate in one hour, take this; you must be glystered to day; but if you are not bled to day, I shall not be surprized to hear that you are dead tomorrow.” The patient declared he would lose no more blood; the DR declared he would no longer consider him as his patient; left him to die, and the man got well.⁹

This is the Rush who, according to William Cobbett, invented the system of depletion in order “to place himself at the head of something or other” and who bawled out to the suppliant crowds who surrounded his chair in the public streets, “Purge and bleed! Purge and bleed!”¹⁰

On the other hand, those who survived Rush’s intrepid therapy spoke of him in the most exalted terms and thereby created the counter-legend of Rush as saint and hero, faithful to his post of duty and danger while others ran away. In distant Hannover, as early as May 1794, the learned Dr. Zimmerman wrote his friend Lettsom in London: “La conduite du Dr. Rush a merite, que non seulement la ville de Philadelphie, mais l’humanité entiere lui eleve une Statue.”¹¹

Thanks in large part to Rush’s celebrity, the medical school of the University of Pennsylvania grew by leaps and bounds in the last years of the century. During these years Rush perfected his methods as a lecturer, developed his system of pathology, and published a succession of volumes and pamphlets that carried his name

⁹ Hazard to Samuel A. Otis, 12 October 1793; Massachusetts Historical Society, Collections, 5th series, III (1877), 336.


and ideas throughout the world. Attendance at his lectures became a regular feature of a visit to Philadelphia. Judge Davis of Massachusetts gave the following description of one of Rush’s performances in 1795:

It was an essay avowedly phisiological, but partly metaphysical and theological, on Man, the principles of life and means of its support. It was ingenious and interesting, and delivered in a style and manner peculiarly his own, and which commanded the unremitted attention of a numerous audience.12

Davis' report, which is much longer, shows how Rush employed his lecture platform for far broader purposes than teaching physic. He was a lay philosopher, psychologist, and theologian as well as a teacher of medicine. Scores of letters written by his pupils attest the intellectual stimulus they derived from his learned and polished lectures. Samuel Miller was perfectly correct in declaring, in 1803, that Rush had done "more in his capacity as teacher than all the other physicians in the United States, collectively, to diffuse a taste for medical inquiries, and to excite a spirit of observation, and of laudable ambition, among the students of medicine in our country."13

In brief, his students idolized him, and their idolatry had mixed effects upon the progress of medical science in the United States. How he shaped them in his own image is engagingly illustrated in the following passage from a letter written by one of his pupils to a recent graduate in 1795:

We have this year quite a new set of medical pupils. Dr. Rush you know who is so indefatigable in theoretical pursuits tells us this season, that there is but one fever in the World. That Fevers may arise from direct or indirect Debility; from Marsh or human Effluvia, but that the proximate cause is the same. That the multiplicity of fevers according to the system of many Nosologists has done immense mischief &c[..] That fever is an Unit. That all the different names of fever in the nomenclatures of Nosologists are only different modifications of one dis-

12 John Davis to Jeremy Belknap, 14 November 1795; Massachusetts Historical Society, Collections, 6th series, IV (1891), 604-605.
13 A Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century (New York, 1803), I, 530-531.
ease in the arterial System. That of this disease Plurisies & anginas are no more than symptoms; and that some symptoms occur in all fevers as Head-ach &c. That the Fevers which have been divided into continued, remittent, and intermittent, are not distinct fevers, but so many different states of fever, or so many Species of one Genus. He infers all this from many circumstances & elucidates the whole by analogical Reasoning for which you know he is remarkably famous.

The more you ponder on this the more you will find it to savour of reality & of the Simplicity of Nature.14

II

Benjamin Rush died in 1813, at the very apogee of his fame. John Adams, admittedly a too partial judge, wrote Rush’s son Richard upon hearing the news:

There is not another Person, out of my own Family, who can die, in whom my personal Happiness can be so deeply affected. The World would pronounce me extravagant and no Man would apologize for me if I should say that in the Estimation of unprejudiced Philosophy, he has done more Good in this World than Franklin or Washington.15

On the other hand, Dr. Charles Caldwell was a none too friendly observer, and he said: “Since the death of Washington no man, perhaps, in America was better known, more sincerely beloved, or held in higher admiration and esteem.”16

How are we to explain the fact that this great American was to wait a hundred and twenty years for an adequate biography? At first Rush's family felt that the proper thing to do was to publish his own memoirs, which he had left in manuscript under the title of “Travels through Life.” Richard and James Rush prepared a copy for the printer, let it be known that the memoirs were to be published, and thereby aroused the highest expectations, for, as a

14 Samuel Cooper to William Bache, 9 January 1795; M.S., Princeton University Library, Bache Family Papers.
15 Adams to Richard Rush, 5 May 1813; M.S., Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Gratz Collection.
16 Anonymous essay on Rush in Delaplaine’s Repository of the Lives and Portraits of Distinguished American Characters (Philadelphia, 1815-1816), I, 42. (Caldwell acknowledged the authorship of this essay in his Autobiography, p. 274.)
writer in *The Port Folio* said, "There is reason to believe that Rush's history of his own life, will be as strikingly pre-eminent over every thing else that could be given on the subject, as Caesar's Commentaries are over all other histories written in relation to the wars he conducted." After a short time, however, Richard and James reconsidered. The work was not published; access to it was later denied to historians; and it did not reach print until the present century. An appeal from a former pupil of Dr. Rush's, Dr. James Mease, for permission to collect and edit a volume of Rush's letters, was likewise refused. The family had decided to rest content with the fairly extended biographical sketch in David Ramsay's *Eulogium upon Benjamin Rush, M.D.* (Philadelphia, 1813), which was in some slight degree based on Rush's papers, and to decline further offers and inquiries.

The whole course of Rush's reputation, from the time of his death until very recently, has been gravely affected by this decision. Dr. Corner has shown that the suppression of the autobiographical memoirs and the concerted family silence thereafter were prompted by a desire to keep from public attention the old, unhappy quarrel that Dr. Rush had had with General Washington. The cult of Washington worship flowered luxuriantly in the early nineteenth century: any critic of Washington's infallibility, especially one who had criticized him during the winter of Valley Forge, could be esteemed little better than Judas Iscariot or Benedict Arnold. Memoirs and correspondence of other Revolutionary leaders were meanwhile being given to the world, and so the Rush brothers' withholding of their father's papers could not possibly have the hoped-for effect. In 1834 there appeared in an appendix to Sparks' fifth volume of Washington's *Writings* full texts of Rush's letter to Henry of March 12, 1778, and the correspondence between Henry and Washington that followed, in which the latter questioned Rush's veracity and sincerity in no doubtful terms. These charges were naturally taken up and thrown about in the pamphlet controversy, known as "the War of the Grandfathers," that raged for several decades in mid-century. While the family sat tight, the history of the Revolution was being written,

"A Tribute to the Memory of Dr. Rush," signed "C," in *The Port Folio*, 3d series, II (1813), 357.

with Rush in the role of a dark conspirator. The existence of his manuscript memoirs had by the end of the century become almost forgotten, but the resourceful Paul Leicester Ford learned of this document and tried vainly to get access to it. In an article on Rush and Washington published in 1895, he wrote: “There exists to-day in Philadelphia a biography in his own handwriting, in which frequent comparisons are drawn between himself and Washington, usually to the latter’s disadvantage. Unfortunately, the publication or sight of it is prohibited, or still further light on the matter might be possible.” Rush’s Autobiography contains no such thing as Ford supposed, but what little was known of it, and of Rush’s part in the Revolutionary struggle, encouraged those historians who required villains to play opposite their heroes to impugn Rush’s patriotism.

In another important respect Rush’s reputation waned in the decades following his death. His effectiveness as practitioner and teacher had depended so largely on the inspirational force of his personality (“No man,” said Charles Caldwell, “knew better than he how important it is to unite the characters of the physician and the friend”), that after his disappearance from sickroom and classroom people wondered why he had been so long called “the great Dr. Rush.” His purely medical writings were outdated before he died, for medical science was moving during his later years towards developments of which he knew nothing. As the last of the great theoretical pathologists, Rush had nothing useful to offer the statistically-minded clinicians who founded modern medicine. In the middle and southern states his numerous students continued to defend his theories, but the undermining of his celebrated system had begun in New England even before his death. In 1807, Dr. Nathan Smith wrote from New Hampshire to one of Rush’s pupils in Philadelphia a thoroughly sound critique of the doctrine of the “unity of disease,” concluding: “You know it is my opinion that we have in medical science of late generalized too much and that the progress of medicine has been checked by it. This mode

19 Atlantic Monthly, LXXV, 640.
20 E.g., George Otto Trevelyan in his The American Revolution, and Albert J. Beveridge in his Life of John Marshall; there have been many others. In an appendix to my forthcoming edition of Rush’s letters I have attempted to explain the relations of Rush and Washington in the light of all the evidence.
21 Delaplaine’s Repository, I, 33.
of proceeding tends to substitute idleness for industry and dogmatism for patient inquiry." Elisha Bartlett, another New Englander who had no particular reason to reverence the memory of Dr. Rush, declared roundly of Rush's published writings: "It may be safely said that in the whole vast compass of medical literature, there cannot be found an equal number of pages containing a greater amount of utter nonsense and unqualified absurdity." Oliver Wendell Holmes’ estimate of Rush’s contribution is more searching and more unanswerable.

Dr. Rush [said Holmes in 1860] must have been a charming teacher, as he was an admirable man. He was observing, rather than a sound observer; eminently observing, curious, even, about all manner of things. But he could not help feeling as if Nature had been a good deal shaken by the Declaration of Independence, and that American art was getting to be rather too much for her, —especially as illustrated in his own practice. He taught thousands of American students, he gave a direction to the medical mind of the country more than any other one man; perhaps he typifies it better than any other. It has clearly tended to extravagance in remedies and trust in remedies, as in everything else. How could a people which has a revolution once in four years, which has contrived the Bowie-knife and the revolver, which has chewed the juice out of all the superlatives in the language in Fourth of July orations, and so used up its epithets in the rhetoric of abuse that it takes two great quarto dictionaries to supply the demand; which insists in sending out yachts and horses and boys to out-sail, out-run, out-fight, and checkmate all the rest of creation; how could such a people be content with any but "heroic" practice? What wonder that the stars and stripes wave over doses of ninety grains of sulphate of quinine, and that the American eagle screams with delight to see three drachms of calomel given at a single mouthful?

Rush's reputation as a medical scientist has never recovered from Holmes' deft destruction of it in this paragraph. But note

22 Smith to George C. Shattuck, 22 January [1807?]; typewritten copy in Massachusetts Historical Society, Shattuck Papers.
24 Currents and Counter-Currents in Medical Science (Boston, 1861), p. 26-27.
that Holmes grasped not only Rush’s limitations as a physician but his significance as a cultural leader. In attempting to establish an American system of medicine and an American therapeutics, Rush strove to accomplish in medicine what Jefferson was striving for in statecraft, Webster in language, Peale in painting, and Freneau and Barlow in literature. He did not think of himself merely as a physician but as the advanced guard of a cultural revolution along national lines. It was for this reason that he labored in so many fields, wrote so many tracts and volumes, and devoted his immense energies to so many public causes.

Dismissing Rush as a medical scientist, then, by no means dismisses Rush as a great American. We have only recently come to recognize this fact. During the nineteenth century, for reasons already noted, there were only minor intimations of it. For example, Rush’s pioneering work as a psychiatrist was steadily influential throughout the century. His treatise on Diseases of the Mind was reprinted many times, translated, and widely used here and abroad. When the first general history of the care of the insane in the United States was prepared, a chapter in it was devoted to Rush as “the Father of American Psychiatry,” and his severely scholarly visage still embellishes the stationery of the American Psychiatric Association.

Furthermore, Rush was the first of a distinguished line of American literary physicians, and some of his non-medical and quasi-medical writings have always been read and occasionally reprinted. Among them are Diseases of the Mind, his tract on military health (reprinted widely during the Civil War), his lecture on veterinary science, one or two of his biographical sketches, and especially one of his essays on Pennsylvania ethnology, the classic “Account of the Manners of the German Inhabitants of Pennsylvania.” His Account of the Yellow Fever in 1793 has long been accepted as a standard piece of medical description and narrative, however wrong-headed Rush’s therapeutics may have been. The earlier historians of American letters, like the Duyckincks, accorded the “benevolent and ingenious” Dr. Rush respectful notices; and his literary reputation reached a climax in 1871, when the Philadelphia compiler S. Austin Allibone, remarking that Rush had “made frequent and most val-

Albert Deutsch, The Mentally Ill in America: A History of Their Care and Treatment from Colonial Times (Garden City, N. Y.), 1937, ch. V.
uable contributions to the Republic of Letters" over a period of half a century, classified these contributions under twenty-six subject headings and warmly recommended them all. As a writer, Rush has fared rather shabbily in more recent times for the standard literary histories have passed over him with bare mentions.

Two tributes very different from each other were offered to Rush in the year 1885. The Centennial Temperance Conference, held in Philadelphia in the supposed hundredth anniversary year of his celebrated tract against spirituous liquors, officially recognized him as "instaurator of the American temperance reform" and placed a tablet at his grave in testimony thereof. Professor Krout in his excellent monograph on The Origins of Prohibition was later to confirm Rush's claim to this dignity. In the same year (1885), Richard Eddy, historian of Universalism, discussed in an important article Rush's religious outlook and his role in founding the Universalist Church in the United States. The first serious attention given to Rush's philosophical ideas, as distinguished from his religious views and influence, came in 1907 with the publication of I. W. Riley's essay on "Benjamin Rush as Materialist and Realist." Since then numerous scholars have touched on phases of Rush's thought and on his varied activities as a social reformer. On only one phase—his work as a promoter of education—has a comprehensive study been published.

III

Looking backward, one may discern a major turning point in the course of Rush's reputation in the year 1887. The centennial proceedings of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, a society that Rush had helped to found but from which he had resigned as the result of a quarrel not long afterward, were held in that year.

27 See the proceedings of the Conference as printed in One Hundred Years of Temperance (New York, 1886); also Nathan G. Goodman, Benjamin Rush, Physician and Citizen, 1746-1813 (Philadelphia, 1934), p. 277.
28 (New York, 1925), ch. IV.
29 "Dr. Benjamin Rush," The Christian Leader, 1 October 1885.
31 Harry G. Good, Benjamin Rush and His Services to American Education, Berne, Ind., 1918 (originally a University of Pennsylvania doctoral dissertation).
In the course of them Rush's shade was welcomed back to membership, and in one of the principal addresses Dr. S. Weir Mitchell—Philadelphia's next great literary physician—sketched Rush's character with a rare mingling of sympathy and candor. Mitchell, whose authority in these matters was scarcely challengeable, pronounced Rush "the greatest physician this country has produced" and "next to Franklin, the greatest citizen of Pennsylvania." In a note to the address as published, Mitchell added:

Rush left letters, diaries, and also biographic memoirs of his contemporaries, without which, no man can fitly judge him or them. Friends, relatives, and executors have been chary of publishing these records. Some of them I have read, and I think it only just to a great man that we should know all that there is to know of him. He was too great, too productive, too various to lose esteem on account of anything he may have said or written of Washington.32

In view of his interest and his qualifications, it is strange that Mitchell himself did not undertake a biography of Rush. Of course he may have proposed to do so and been rebuffed by those who held papers essential to the work. The bulk of Rush's papers had by that time, however, become available. By the terms of his will, his library and archives had come into the possession of his third son, James Rush. James married Phoebe Ridgway, who inherited one of Philadelphia's great mercantile fortunes and who predeceased her husband. Being a bookish man, James determined to build a library to his wife's memory, and when he died, in 1869, he left his estate to the Library Company of Philadelphia for that purpose. His purpose was realized in the great granite building on South Broad Street known as the Ridgway Branch of the Library Company of Philadelphia, which was occupied in 1879 and in which were deposited, in further accord with the terms of James' will, his own books and papers "and also those of my father, Dr. Benjamin Rush (in my possession)."33 Though the manuscripts thus deposited included full documentation for Benjamin Rush's most unseemly quarrels, there is no indication in James' will or

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in the archives of the Library Company that any restriction was placed upon their use.

James Rush and his executor, Henry J. Williams, a brother-in-law, seem to have done the preliminary arranging of the great Rush archive before it came to the Library Company, though the actual mounting and binding of the papers may have been done later. The collection comprises perhaps 10,000 pieces, and its arrangement resembles the capitalization and punctuation of the parchment copy of the Declaration of Independence, of which Carl Becker remarked that it follows neither reason nor the custom of any previous age and is "one of the irremediable evils of life to be accepted with becoming resignation." There are forty-six volumes of mounted manuscripts, entitled "Rush Correspondence," partly in a rough alphabetical sequence according to the names of the writers of the letters, and partly in a classified series: letters from eminent physicians, clergymen, authors, and so on, and letters relating to the yellow fever, to Dickinson College, and so on, not to mention one volume labeled simply "Controversial"—a rubric appropriate for large portions of the collection. There are twenty boxes of loose manuscripts, called "Rush MSS.," seven containing Rush's medical lectures and the others a great variety of printed and manuscript matter: diplomas, medical theses, calling cards, more letters to Rush, some written by him, a fragment of his "Travels through Life," and so on. A small but extremely important part of the collection consists of Rush's journals and notebooks, kept at various times and for various purposes. Some are diaries; some contain copies of outgoing letters and notes and drafts for his essays; one of the most diverting Rush called his "Quack Recipe Book." Dismissing lesser items, there is, finally, a noble series of folio ledgers containing the daily records of Rush's practice and his accounts with thousands of patients from 1769, when he began practice, to about 1800.

For all this, the great Rush archive at the Ridgway is not complete. At an undisclosed time and by undisclosed means, an important segment was carved out of the papers left by Dr. Rush and descended through a niece of James Rush (Julia Williams Rush Biddle) into the possession of a branch of the Biddle family. From time to time members of the Biddle family printed and privately distributed select materials from this rich mass of manuscripts, though the originals seem to have been kept well out of
At length, however, the whole body of these papers went on the block in a series of sales in 1943. Among them were about a hundred of Rush's own letters and manuscripts, including the incomparable series of daily letters addressed to his wife during the epidemic of '93, the autobiographical "Travels through Life," and a commonplace book kept by Rush from 1792 to 1813. Several hundred letters to Rush, of the highest possible historical importance, also were dispersed; among the writers were: John and Abigail Adams, Jefferson, Franklin, Dickinson, Madison, Paine, Morris, Monroe, Jay, Kosciuszko, Wayne, Greene, the Muhlenbergs, Maclay, Witherspoon, and many others. Occurring shortly before the two-hundredth anniversary of Rush's birth, the Biddle sales did much to heighten interest in a republican hero and founder whom historians had customarily disregarded or defamed. Even if his archives could be reconstructed as Rush left them, they would not embrace all the materials essential for the study of Rush's many-sided career. Unlike other great letter-writers of his time, he did not as a rule retain drafts or copies of his outgoing letters. The unique originals must therefore be sought in the great and small public repositories of manuscripts here and abroad, in the hands of those who have inherited them, and in privately owned autograph collections—for Rush was a "Signer." Most of the great research libraries in the United States own substantial numbers of Rush letters, and in Philadelphia one is likely to encounter a "new" one, if he looks sharp, in the next bookseller's window he passes or framed on the wall of the next bank he enters. Texts of others that may never be found in manuscript are scattered through the newspapers and periodicals of Rush's time and the documentary collections and historical journals of the nineteenth century.

It is for this reason among others that I have proposed establishing a union catalogue of Rush manuscripts in the Library of the American Philosophical Society. By means of regional and national union catalogues librarians have made immense strides in

34 The Biddles issued in small private editions the following three books: Old Family Letters: Copied from the Originals for Alexander Biddle. Series A (Philadelphia, 1892); Old Family Letters Relating to the Yellow Fever. Series B (Philadelphia, 1892); Louis A. Biddle, ed., A Memorial containing Travels through Life or Sundry Incidents in the Life of Dr. Benjamin Rush... Written by Himself (Lanoraie [Chestnut Hill, Penna.], 1905).
the last two decades in establishing controls over the book resources of the country. Control over manuscript resources—just as essential to the scholar—has lagged far in the rear. One approach to the problem, though not a final or exclusive one, is the establishment in appropriate institutions of union catalogues, together with files of photofacsimiles, of the archives of major Americans. This is already being done for Lincoln in Springfield, Illinois, for Theodore Roosevelt at Harvard, and for Jefferson at Princeton. The more projects of this kind that are undertaken, the better. I envision them as clearing houses of archival and bibliographical information with immense potential benefits for scholarly research. They will prevent waste and duplication of effort by scholars working in a given field, whether simultaneously or successively, and they will preserve vital information about fugitive documents that has hitherto been buried in individual scholars' files that ultimately go to the trash barrel. From experience in the Jefferson enterprise I can affirm that even dealers and collectors eventually become interested in such undertakings, and thus means are provided for breaking down the proprietary barriers so vexatious to scholars. But the success of these enterprises depends most heavily on co-operation among scholars themselves, including librarians and curators of manuscript collections. The proprietary spirit is not unknown in these circles too, but if scholars expect to receive information they must also freely give it.

IV

What is the present status of Rush studies? What, in view of what has been done, needs to be done?

Though so long inaccessible and then so long neglected, the main Rush archives at the Ridgway have provided the materials for three important books on Rush in the present century. H. G. Good’s monograph on Rush’s services to education, already mentioned, was a pioneering study that is still useful but needs large amplification and revision. Dr. Nathan G. Goodman’s biography, the first truly deserving the name, was the product of long and patient quarrying in a rich and unworked mine. Dr. Goodman may still be congratulated on the mere fact that he wrote and published a book rather than got lost and overwhelmed in the abundance of his materials. But he did much more, for his biography is a skilfully arranged, carefully documented, and thoroughly usable book. It
is no disparagement to say that after fifteen years the book is no longer adequate to its purpose. We need both a larger biography of Rush and a smaller one: the larger ought to aim at definitiveness; the smaller one would be an essay appraising Rush's work in his own time and his significance in ours.

The third and most recent book is a study not of Rush but of the yellow fever epidemic of 1793, in which Rush plays a central role. Dr. John H. Powell's *Bring Out Your Dead* provides the most vivid and authentic pictures of Rush in action that have been composed.

Of writings by Rush himself, we have recently (1948) been presented with the "Travels through Life" and the Commonplace Books, edited in definitive form by Dr. George W. Corner as *The Autobiography of Benjamin Rush*. No work could be more useful for understanding Rush himself, and few sources could be more useful to the student of culture and society in the early republic.

The publication of *The Selected Writings of Benjamin Rush* as a trade book in 1947 provides interesting evidence that Rush is once more, after the lapse of a century, thought worth reading. But the work has been botched and will have to be done better. Neither the selection nor the editing is adequate; and this is a gross understatement, for the book is in fact a catchpenny piece of work quite unworthy of its subject.

A large amount of new documentation on all phases of Rush's career will appear in my edition of his letters, now in the press. This will be a selective edition but will contain upwards of 650 letters in two volumes, gathered from about sixty public and private repositories and from many printed sources, principally contemporary with Rush. (All letters located but not printed—about equal in number of those chosen for publication—will be recorded in the projected Rush Union Catalogue described above.) The earliest letter to be printed was written to a college classmate in 1761, when Rush had just entered Dr. John Redman's "shop" in Philadelphia; the last was addressed to the Reverend Samuel Miller six days before Rush's death in April 1813. There is hardly any topic from

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27 Edited by Dagobert D. Runes; published by The Philosophical Library, New York.
aerostatics to zoology on which Rush did not offer some observations—sometimes important and almost always entertaining. If I were pressed to say on what specific areas of our early national history the new sources throw most light, I would mention the following:

1. **Medicine.** The life of an incredibly busy doctor and successful medical teacher; diseases and their treatment; health conditions and measures, such as inoculation, vaccination, and municipal sanitation; interstate and international exchange of medical news and ideas.

2. **Revolutionary history.** The unrelieved record of failure on the part of the Continental hospital service; the related problem of troop morale; also civilian morale, and the tenebrous history of what is called the Conway Cabal.

3. **Politics,** especially in Pennsylvania, from the Stamp Act to the War of 1812. For a quarter of a century Rush was a vigorous partisan in local and sometimes in national politics; after 1790, he retired from the firing-line but remained an observer with a sharp eye and an even sharper pen. His letters contain important new evidence on two local movements that were national in their implications: the overthrow of the proprietary government in 1775-1776, and the call for and ratification of the federal constitution, 1786-1788.

4. **Humanitarian reforms.** The earliest abolitionist activity and attempts to improve the lot of Negroes; the beginnings of the temperance crusade; reform of the penal code; better care of the insane; organized life-saving.

5. **Science.** Developments, apart from medicine, in fields as diverse as chemistry, ethnology, and psychology.

6. **Religion.** The nationalizing of American churches after the Revolution; the growth of new sects from the Calvinist taproot.

7. **Education.** The founding of colleges; propaganda for tax-supported schools; the attack on classical languages in favor of modern languages and natural science.

8. **Social and family life** in Federalist and Republican Philadelphia. A keener observer than he was a thinker, Rush wrote many letters that have none of the kinds of significance enumerated above but which record, with a skill as unconscious as it is sure, the characters, manners, and passing events of the city he knew so well.
The letters he wrote from his own fireside, reporting the conversation of friends and distinguished visitors, the books he and his family are reading, the behavior of his servants or for that matter of his faithful cow Brindle, reveal a warmth and charm in Benjamin Rush that quite overbalance his deadly earnestness and contentiousness, which are unfortunately much better known.

All this suggests that important work remains to be done on Rush. Most important, beyond doubt, is a comprehensive study of Rush as a medical practitioner. The great masses of correspondence, daybooks, and related papers in the Library Company comprise an incomparably rich collection of sources for the exposition of this subject, for a large part of his practice was by mail-order, and it extended all over this country and even abroad. The manuscripts are supplemented by a large body of published books and pamphlets and of course by the Autobiography and letters. Little that is satisfactory has been published on medical practice and on medical life generally in Rush's time. The illuminating little book by Cecil K. Drinker, called Not So Long Ago, is a tantalizing specimen of what might be done on a much broader scale.

As a part of such a study, or as a separate project, Rush's career as a medical teacher ought to be critically investigated and amply recorded. If Rush, as Charles Caldwell wrote in 1815, "acquired over medicine in the United States a much greater influence and control than any other physician has ever possessed," he did so because he taught perhaps three-quarters of the students who were graduated from medical schools in the United States during the forty-five years that he professed medicine in the College of Philadelphia and the University of Pennsylvania. Hundreds of students annually flocked to his classes, imbibed his ideas, and were charmed by his condescension of manner. Scores among them corresponded with him in after-years, affirming in various ways that his name would be their "abracadabra in all difficulties." Their letters provide a large and illuminating medical map of the United States in the decades before and after 1800.

We need a study, on a larger scale than any yet undertaken, of Rush as "social planner" (the phrase is E. B. Greene's), compre-
hending all of his crusades to better his fellow men and their conditions of life.

We badly need a full and accurate bibliography of the vast corpus of Rush's published writings. Though it would prove a long and exacting task, it would furnish a guide highly useful to investigators in many fields. It might well be followed by a selection of the writings, in hardly less than two volumes, that would represent Rush as publicist and essayist in all his remarkable variety. "Your writings," John Adams told Rush in 1811, "are always as entertaining as The Lady of the Lake and much more instructive." One need not accept all of this judgment in order to agree that Rush is a writer of both substance and skill who has been seriously neglected.

The most difficult job of all, but one that cries out to be done, is an assessment of Rush as a cultural patriot. Dr. Holmes perceived as early as 1860 that this was the historically significant fact about Rush (apart from his considerable interest as a personality), but Holmes was concerned with an unfortunate application of Rush's creed—his insistence on a distinctively American therapeutics. "The world," wrote Rush in 1788, "seems to be upon the eve of a great change for the better. I am disposed to consider the American revolution as the seed of it. This great event has everywhere shaken the human mind to its centre." It had indeed, as the world well knew. The United States had become a nation offering its citizens unparalleled opportunities, both material and intellectual. Rush dedicated himself to the task of helping his fellow Americans make the most of these opportunities. In more ways than are generally recognized, he succeeded.

42 Letter to an unidentified correspondent, 29 May 1788; American Art Association, New York, sale catalogue, 30 April 1937, lot 433.