
“There were giants in the earth in those days” in Colonial America, and Dr. Benjamin Rush of Philadelphia, signer of the Declaration of Independence, was one of them.

Dr. Rush is fortunate in his sympathetic biographer, Dr. Carl Binger, since they both were interested in epidemic diseases and psychosomatic medicine. Dr. Binger has rare historical perspective and objectivity, which permit him to judge his subject against the background of colonial medical practice, instead of modern medical findings. His research is thorough. He lets Dr. Rush tell his own story through letters, journals, articles, treatises, lectures and textbooks, for Rush used his pen as habitually as his medical instruments.

Writing a review of Revolutionary Doctor, however, has been difficult. Have you ever tried to examine a drop of quicksilver, only to have it escape in many different directions? Sometimes as an eighteenth century practitioner Dr. Rush touched medieval medical practices, but most frequently displayed the inquiring intellect of his century. Often he was on the threshold of the twentieth century in his ideas about psychiatry, epidemic fevers, hospitals and treatment of the insane. He eludes classification.

At heart he was a reformer in all things political, from the time of the Stamp Act through the Constitutional Convention. In his respect for minority groups, he instigated the founding of Carlisle College for the education of the Scotch-Irish, and Franklin and Marshall for the Germans. He wanted education for the poor, and special attention to the education of girls. He helped Negroes. But his genius for making enemies among ultra-conservative Philadelphians and his gadfly pen often goaded men into senseless opposition to his ideas, just because they belonged to Dr. Benjamin Rush.

Being countercurrent to the thinking of his neighbors was natural for a Rush. The first American Rush, once a commander of a horse troop in Cromwell’s Army and later a convert to the Quaker faith, came to Pennsylvania during the second year of Penn’s “Holy Experiment.” Benjamin was the proud inheritor of the old man’s watch and sword.

Few medical men in Philadelphia could match Dr. Benjamin Rush’s educational background. (The majority had been trained as doctor’s apprentices.) He had been graduated from West Nottingham
Academy, the College of New Jersey (eventually Princeton), had served a five-year apprenticeship to Dr. John Redman who had studied at the best British medical schools, and had himself studied under internationally famous teachers in Edinburgh and London. These were Dr. Rush’s halcyon years.

Then, lacking a rich, patrician family or the patronage of the great, he had a dreadful time getting started in Philadelphia, where Anglicans went to Anglican doctors, Quakers to Quakers, and where he, alas, was a wobbly member of a minor group, the Presbyterians. So he tramped all over Philadelphia to the homes of the poor, and added to his income by becoming a professor of chemistry at the College of Philadelphia. Teaching would be a part of his entire life. He loved it, had much to impart, was a spellbinding speaker, and was interested in his students.

After he became interested in politics, he wrote anonymous pamphlets on the making of gunpowder, now forbidden shipment from Great Britain to the colonies. As a member of the First Continental Congress, he frequently entertained delegates in his own home. He formed a lifelong friendship with John Adams, “valuing him a little less than Franklin.” It was during this period that he met a man named Tom Paine in a bookstore, and became the first reader of the manuscript of “Common Sense.” He also found time in this period to court his beloved Julia Stockton, marrying her in 1776.

During the Revolutionary War, Rush as an Army doctor, to help the multitudes of sick and wounded of Washington’s Army, fought mismanagement and blackmarketing in high places. He witnessed the bringing to Philadelphia in open wagons of a thousand or more wounded, who perished from hunger and exposure and were buried in Potters Field. This is only one tragic example that he recorded.

His pamphlet, Directions for Preserving the Health of Soldiers, became a hardy perennial, since it was printed in 1778, 1808, at least twice during the Civil War, and a fifth time in The Military Surgeon in 1908.

Dr. Rush’s next significant contribution to medicine was made through his observations on fever epidemics: weather, physical conditions of Philadelphia, point of origin of the fever, the presence of mosquitoes, the disappearance of the epidemic after frost. He even recommended the pouring of oil over the water of stagnant rain barrels to kill mosquito larvae!

Medical Inquiry and Observations Upon the Diseases of the Mind, his magnum opus which gave him an international reputation,
was filled with his observations of mental patients in the wards of Pennsylvania Hospital. Through his interest in the effects of the tensions of life upon the health of both normal and unbalanced patients he became a pioneer in psychosomatic medicine. One of his studies concerned the influence on soldiers of the military and political events of the Revolution.

His interest in minorities mentioned briefly at the beginning of the review included attending the religious ceremonies of his Jewish friends. It was a Jew, Mr. Moses Levy, who won Dr. Rush's libel suit against William Cobbett, a vitriolic English pamphleteer working in Philadelphia. Revolutionary Doctor would be worth reading if only for this trial, almost as much a cause célèbre as that of the printer, Peter Zenger, in New York City.

Dr. Rush was also in the forefront of Philadelphia's anti-slavery movement with his pamphlet, Address to the Inhabitants of the British Settlements in America Upon Slave-Keeping. In his Commonplace Book, 1792, he wrote: "This day I attended the funeral of Wm. Gray's wife, a black woman, with about 50 or more white persons and two Episcopal Clergymen . . . . The sight was a new one in Philadelphia . . . . By this event it is to be hoped the partition wall which divided the Blacks from the Whites will be still further broken down and a way prepared for their union as brethren and members of one great family." In another place he wrote about a dinner to celebrate the raising of the roof of the African church, when one hundred white guests, chiefly carpenters, were waited on by the Negro church members, then served table while the Negroes ate. Three courageous Negroes, Billy Grey, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, helped Dr. Rush to nurse the sick and bury the dead in 1793, one of the worst of the yellow fever years.

In this time of error, Dr. Rush never refused a call — even helped patients when he was at meals. But his enemies cited his strenuous bloodletting and purging of patients in an attempt to destroy him professionally, drastically reducing his income. John Adams, who came to the rescue by having Rush appointed Treasurer of the Mint, considered this nomination one of the acts of his life which he recollected with the "most entire satisfaction, even though it had made him about thirty-nine enemies." Gradually Dr. Rush regained his reputation. To his friend Jefferson he wrote, "The few sands that remain in my glass urge me constantly to quicken my labors." Late in life he became new Dean of the Medical School, with lectures
to prepare for three hundred students, and donated his service to a Dispensary for the Poor.

He died on April 19, 1813, and lies in the family plot in Christ Church Burial Ground, near Benjamin Franklin.

A new interest in Dr. Rush was shown in the summer issue, 1968, of Pennsylvania Heritage, which reprinted a column from Colonel James Smart of the Philadelphia Record, mentioning the projected restoration and moving of Rush's birthplace to the grounds of the Philadelphia State Hospital at Byberry: "The house is now a ruin, ready to be restored . . . . The human race is funny that way; it likes to restore ruins, not preserve buildings." Dr. Rush would agree.

Pittsburgh

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