

## COUNTRY BOY, CITY MEDICINE

IRWIN RICHMAN

As a correspondent Andrew Miller was an infrequent letter writer, but an interesting one. His letters to his parents present marvelous and truly significant insights into the life of a young man from the country studying medicine in Philadelphia, and of an almost-physician preparing to return home.

Born in 1823, Andrew Miller, who died of consumption in 1851,<sup>1</sup> made no mark on medical history. His life was brief and his talent remains an unknown quantity. The son of an apparently prosperous Harrisburger, also named Andrew, he studied medicine first under a local preceptor then at Jefferson Medical College where he also was a private pupil of Thomas Dent Mütter, M.D.<sup>2</sup>

Miller enrolled at Jefferson for the 1844-1845 and 1845-1846 sessions, receiving his M.D. in 1846 with a thesis "Anatomy and Physiology of Reflex System of Nerves."<sup>3</sup> Returning from Philadelphia he established himself in practice at 6 South Third Street in Harrisburg, and, as a trained physician from a good family, he no doubt was prominent in medical affairs in Dauphin County. He was probably the "Dr. A. Miller" who represented the "Medical Faculty of Dauphin County" at the Lancaster meeting in April 1848 which created the Medical Society of the State of Pennsylvania, ancestor of the present Pennsylvania Medical Society.<sup>4</sup>

The quality of medical education in the 1840's was radically different from what it is today and at variance from that which John Morgan had foreseen for this country when he had founded America's

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1 Miller family genealogy in the possession of Dr. Richard J. Miller, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

2 1811-1859. Born in Richmond, Virginia, he received his M.D. from the University of Pennsylvania and continued his medical studies in France. He became a professor of surgery at Jefferson Medical College in 1841. His anatomical museum, which he bequeathed to the College of Physicians of Philadelphia is the basis of the present Mütter Museum at that institution.

3 Records of Jefferson Medical College; Robert T. Lentz, Philadelphia, letter, Apr. 10, 1968, to Dr. Richard J. Miller, Harrisburg.

4 Howard K. Petry, ed., *A Century of Medicine* (Harrisburg: Medical Society of the State of Pennsylvania, c. 1952), 8.

first medical school in 1765. There were no pre-medical requirements and school terms were short. Instruction was didactic with little laboratory work and uneven clinical experience. It was facets of this world of medical education which Andrew Miller described in his letters home.

Philadelphia Nov. 7th 1844

Dear Parents

I would just inform you that I [am] here in Philadelphia healthy, full of physical vigour & mental energy. I left Harrisburg last Friday at 2:00 P.M., arrived in the city at 10:00 at night.

I have nothing important to say, we have 5 Lectures per day this week next week regular lectures commence, we will then have 7 per day during the winter. Yesterday we had several operations performed by Proff. Mütter when there was more than usual fainting & dragging out done by the students.

I have been in 3 different dissecting rooms where dissections were going on. I shall be happy to try my luck at that job when my turn comes.

Our professors receive us with a cordial welcome and treat us with the greatest respect. My money matters are all correct.

Tell mother to throw aside all trouble concerning me I have good boarding, feather bed, Negro waiters and anything else to render me comfortable.

I have to pay \$3.00 per week for boarding lights and fuel found [?], the lectures are very interesting to me and I would scarcely exchange situations with Gov. Porter.<sup>5</sup> No more but remain

Your Dutiful Son,  
Andrew Miller

In writing to me address

Andrew Miller  
No. 435 Chestnut Street  
Above thirteenth  
Philadelphia<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> David Rittenhouse Porter (1788-1867), Governor from Jan. 15, 1839, to Jan. 21, 1845.

<sup>6</sup> This letter, as subsequent ones, are in the Richard J. Miller collection of the Pennsylvania State Archives, William Penn Memorial Museum and Archives Building, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

Philadelphia Jan. 2nd 1845

I received yours of date Dec. 28, enclosing a check for \$50.00 the direction on it was 405 instead of 435 however I received it.

As I intend to move boarding I wish you to back [*sic*] my letters to college [as] I can get them there it makes no difference where I board direct thus!

Andrew Miller

Jefferson Medical College

Philadelphia

Matters and things with me are as usual. We had vacation from Christmas till New Year. I think I should have spent my time during this interval very lonesome had it not been my good fortune to procure a subject a day or 2 before Christmas which I feasted on during that time in becoming acquainted with the wonderful structure of man.<sup>7</sup> I can affirm there is not a more interesting topic in all the study of medicine than to be provided with a sharp scalpel and a good subject and trace the complicated mechanism of the human body. This may seem to you fictitious though an indisputable fact.

You request me in your lines to inquire of our professors the effect of Galvanism On Neuralgia.<sup>8</sup> I therefore lost no time this evening after lectures But consulted our Eminent Professor, Doctor Dunglison.<sup>9</sup> But he does not speak confidently of the Galvanic Battery in Neuralgias, he says he never saw much benefit arising from it. And as he is the most celebrated Phisiologist [*sic*] in this city I was particular to enquire of him whether the dispersion of the pain over the system is an unfavorable or favorable result, he says it is unfavorable.

He thinks he could cure you with some of our strong narcotics or poisons [*sic*].<sup>10</sup> He says the disease must be treated with active remedies that make a decided impression upon the nervous system.

Such is the opinion of Dunglison. But if you think you are

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7 During this period, students had little opportunity to dissect unless they acquired their own cadaver, often under suspect conditions.

8 The use of direct electric current as a therapeutic device was a medical and quack rage from about 1840 to 1900.

9 Robley Dunglison (1798-1869) was English born and educated. Thomas Jefferson had him brought to America to teach at the University of Virginia. From 1836 until his retirement he was professor of the institutes of medicine at Jefferson Medical College.

10 No doubt "potion." Dunglison's therapeutic suggestions for neuralgia include a whole range of treatments from bleeding to narcotics and carbonate of iron, but no poisons; Robley Dunglison, *Medical Lexicon: A Dictionary of Medical Science* (7th ed., Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1848), 581-582.

benefited by it I should not hesitate to try it again. Every case of Neuralgia has its own way of cure and no man can lay down a particular plan of treatment.

The health of this city is pretty good in general the number of deaths last week was 135 which is a small number proportionally.

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I was near meeting an accident the other day on our return from the Hospital the lines of our 2 front horses broke they ran directly round but we all made our escape before the coach was broken unhurt — save blue skins I received in the hurry of our escape.

Tell my friends to write to me, I should like to hear of them all.

Your Dutiful Son  
Andrew Miller

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Philadelphia Jan 23rd 1845

Dear Father

I wish by these lines to present to you a topic which I think of some importance it has been a caption of consideration for some time with me.

It is to pursue my medical studies next summer in this city. I am so fully convinced of the advantages possessed here that I can scarcely entertain the idea of again going to Mechanicsburg where I am sure I can gain no more than theory from books which of itself will not fit the student for the bedside. I am satisfied that Dr. Day<sup>11</sup> would do all for me he could in showing me diseases and pointing out the treatment requisite to their care, but his treatment does widely differ from our Professors. And I suspect him rather behind hand as regards the advancement of medical science himself.

The advantages resulting from a summer's study here would be — 1st I am satisfied I could prepare myself to graduate next spring, that is in the spring of 1846. And 2nd that my medical Education would be from observation and under the best instruction not consisting of a mere knowledge to administer. The Lancet. Calomel and Blue pill,<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Ira Day (1799-1868), born in Royalton, Vermont, became a teacher in the Harrisburg select school and then an apprentice of Harrisburg's first trained physician, Dr. John Luther. He returned to New England for his M.D. (University of Vermont) and then came back to the Harrisburg area settling in Mechanicsburg in nearby Cumberland County. He was active in local medical societies and was a trustee of Dickinson College.

<sup>12</sup> "Pills of Mercury" or Mercurial Pills made of mercury, "confection of rose" and licorice root. Used as a general cure-all, especially for gastric upsets.

I would see cases treated every day of almost every disease. And my books of reference would be of the latest publication and best kind. This is a great advantage. Dr. Day has a good library of books but they are chiefly of old publications and the best works on medicine are not in his hands, they come high and a country practitioner who has but a few students would not be compensated to purchase them.

The additional expenses would not be so great as might be imagined the Tuition fee to the Professor would be \$50. Dr. Day's fee for next summer is \$25 you will perceive therefore that the difference would be but \$25. I can obtain summer boarding at \$2.50 the additional expense may be stated to wit

Professor's fee	\$50.00
24 Weeks boarding \$1.00 more than at Mech.	24.00
Expenses going & coming say high enough	26.00
	<hr/>
	\$100.00

This would be liberal allowances taken in highest manner. It would not be so high as stated above, I think.

The reason why I state to you this at present is that you may think it over before I return home and have your decision fixed whether or no.

But I should exceedingly like to study here and learn [t]he profession right [w]hile at it.

You request me to state whether I have a sufficiency of funds — I think I have enough to do me.

I shall be home on saturday [*sic*] morning March 1st or Wednesday March 5th.

I would however beg you to consider the preceeding matter. I am now in the prime of life for study which will however soon terminate & if it be not advantageously made use of, may in future prompt the motto — My prime of study is gone by neglected and I am deficient in my profession.

So much from your

Most Dutiful Son  
Andrew Miller

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Philadelphia March 28th 1845

Dear Parents

By these lines you will learn that I am well at my place of destiny and engaged again at study.

I arrived here on the following day I left you and procured boarding the same day at No. 8 South 10th Street, the following morning I called upon Proffessor Mütter, He told me he would at once introduce me to his operations and accordingly at 12:00 I witnessed the excision of the entire right breast of a lady who was the unfortunate subject of Cancer. — On Thursday following the public commencement of Jefferson College was held. In which I acted as a substitute for [a] student who was sick and could not attend, I received his Diploma for hi[m]. In the evening the graduating party came off in style at Proff. Mitchell[’s].<sup>13</sup> Proff. Mütter is absent in Washington City at present on professional duty and consequ[ent]ly I can not ask him regarding the seton<sup>14</sup> in your neck. I will state [his?] opinion when I write again.

Send my 2 books viz. Dung, medical dictionary and Hare’s Chemistry to Samuel by the first opportunity & tell him to send them with Alleman<sup>15</sup> . . . to the city. Alleman will then address a note to me in care of Dr. Mütter, 244 Walnut St. stating at what house he stops and I will call and get them. They are in my chest, — I need them.

I find that I ought to have a sett [*sic*] of books of my own — the reason is that I can never study in the evening as late as I would wish to in Mütter’s office. The rest of his students do not study late and some not at all in the evening & in the morning can not get to study till 9:00 in consequence of not having breakfast till 9, and Mütter’s office not being open early enough to go there before breakfast, they are a lazy set here & sleep late in the morning. This is a great loss of time which could be improved if I had a set of books at my boarding house. I find the rest of the students have them, — I could read at

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13 Samuel Kearsley Mitchell (1793-1858) was professor of the theory and practice of medicine at Jefferson Medical College after 1841. He is best remembered as the father of S. Weir Mitchell.

14 “A small canal . . . made under the skin . . . with a number of threads of linen, silk, or cotton, which are daily moved forwards or backwards, in order to keep up a constant irritation and discharge”; J. Thomas, *A Comprehensive Medical Dictionary* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott and Co., 1867), 503.

15 Robley Dunglison, *Medical Lexicon: A Dictionary of Medical Science*; Robert Hare, *A Compendium of the Course of Chemical Instruction*; Alleman is a common Harrisburg family name.

least 3 hours in the morning & 2 in the evening which I have to spend talking [?] on the streets without a set of books.

The books are those I would want in the fall to tend lectures and the same I must have to commence practice of medicine next spring if I live. The cost of them is \$30.00.

I therefore propose to you to send me \$30.00. And I will engage to expend it in books & study them diligently day and night.

Proff. Mütter also advised me to have a set, the books I read in his office are extraordinary works which I could not afford to purchase, but the books I want are the *regular* medical works.

Perhaps you could send it with my books along with Houser or Lochman<sup>16</sup> when they come to the city, if so they can first address a note to me in care of Dr. Mutter 244 Walnut Pl. stating where they stop and I will call in any part of the city and see them.

I think the books would prove beneficial in 2 ways — 1st they w[ould] facilitate my study very much and 2nd they would keep me within doors, [out of reach] of vicious [*sic*] society and many other [illeg.] which a large city offers into which [illeg.] young are so apt to fall if not industrious and engaged at their business.

Your Obedient Son  
Andrew Miller

Enclosed you will find a list of the books, I want ammounting to \$33.00 he offered the lot for \$31.00 and I think I can get them for \$30.00.

A. Miller

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Philadelphia June 14th 1845

Dear Parents

I was gratified on my return from the Hospital<sup>17</sup> this afternoon to find a letter for me. I was reduced to 61 cents besides in debt for boarding . . .

I am at present very much engaged in experimenting and practising auscultation (chest examining), I bought myself a stethoscope and am examining every diseased chest or heart that falls under my observation. I have been examining this morning at Blockley Hospital, a man in the last stage of consumption. He was the most emaciated

<sup>16</sup> Like Alleman, Lochman and Houser are common local names — probably neighbors.

<sup>17</sup> Blockley Hospital. Present Philadelphia General Hospital.

individual I ever saw, I do not suppose that he can have 50 lbs. of flesh upon his whole body, the sounds in this case are very loud & conclusive it seemed to me on applying the instrument that I knew just as well what was going on in his chest as if it was before my eyes exposed to view.

This confirms me the more of the deficiency of the medical profession in the country where among most doctors the stethoscope is viewed as a humbug. It seems to me as erroneous to trust to a physician who has no knowledge of the use of the stethoscope a consumption patient as to get a deaf man to cry the hour of the night.<sup>18</sup>

Our lectures close on July 15th and I think I will be home about July 20th — perhaps a few days sooner. I am very anxious to get a breeze of fresh air, I did not taste pure spring water since I left you, we use river water from Fair Mount to drink which is very stale these warm days.

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On my return I will bring mother a little medicine which if she has half as much faith in [it] as in the sugar pillulies [?] — will I have no doubt improve her health much.

I Remain Your Dutiful Son  
Andrew Miller

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Philadelphia Jan. 19th 1846

Dear Parents:

I received your lines of date Jan. 11th containing a check for \$50.00. You wish to know when I want money in time, so I will inform you now that I will want further funds about the 10th of next month. The amount necessary to defray my expenses in case I graduate will be \$50 or very little short of it. As I shall have to remain in the city till late in March if not till the beginning of April.

As regards my stock of books I have as many as will be indispensable to make a *small* beginning — But as to instruments I have had no spare funds to buy any as yet, save a case of pocket instruments that I bought at auction. I have quite a snug little library of books that I have purchased from time to time as I had opportunity and loose funds. My books are of the choicest kind so far as they go and would compare with any library in Harrisburg not in quantity but in selection.

<sup>18</sup> The stethoscope was developed by French physician Theophile Laennec about 1819.



My medicines would better be bought in the city from what I learnt from Dr. Day they can be bought from 20 to 40 per cent cheaper here than in the country, besides they are often weakened and adulterated by retail druggists in country towns.

You tell me you was told I was going to sea in the spring. I did never express myself to such an effect that I recollect. If I did I have since forgotten at all events I have no such idea or ever had. My intention is to go to dry land and commence practice on a small scale.

When you write to me again do not direct to 207 Market St. but to

Andrew Miller  
Jefferson Medical College  
Philadelphia

I may change boarding soon and if directed to the college it is much surer than if directed to any boarding house.

Your Dutiful Son,  
Andrew Miller

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Philadelphia Feb. 18th 1846

Dear Parents

In this day received your lines of 16. Inst. moneyless in arrears. and almost in despair. The check for \$30.00 came safe, but this will not quite reach. I have a fee to pay if I get my diploma — boarding till the latter part of March, and my fare home. I will yet require \$10 at least to pay my current expenses exclusive of any instruments or medicines.

I am at present unable to tell you the day when I shall be home, but suppose between March 22 and April 1st. And in regard to getting my diploma I can tell you nothing, the final examination is held in March before which time it is a secret, as much as if you had a lottery ticket.

I take this early opportunity to write because if I shall buy my medicines here, I should like to have the funds for so doing as early in March as possible. Lectures close the last of February and if I have the funds then I can select and purchase at ease, ascertaining the price and quality at different places. I will therefore annex the amount of the bills (which I have had made by the druggist of the smallest quantity of such articles that will be requisite including glassware &c)

The amount of medicines including glassware amounts to	\$58.70
Instruments	20.00

I cannot say with accuracy what instruments I want. My mind is devoid of reflection just now, in consequence of the many catechistical exercises we have to undergo by the sub faculties to prepare us for the final examination, but some of the leading instruments are

Cupping full set price	\$8.00
Pocket & Eye instruments in case	5.00
Teeth extractors do	5.00 <sup>19</sup>

Besides a few others of less value.

The bill for medicines I made out a month or more since, the price affixed by the druggist and is correct.

Hence if you wish me to purchase my medicines and instruments in this city send me \$78.00 for that purpose and \$10.00 to pay my way till I come home.

Our exercises at present are rather much for a mind of common activity. We have just time to sleep and eat. All or nearly all the rest is occupied by examinations and lectures. We have 6 Lectures per day and 3 examinations each lasting one hour.

Your Dutiful Son,  
Andrew Miller

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<sup>19</sup> Full cupping set probably included a scarificator, 3 cups, and a suction pump. Eye instruments were probably a cataract set. Teeth extractors meant a tooth key with interchangeable hooks.