



Dr. Oliver Fairfield Wadsworth.

NECROLOGY.

DR. OLIVER FAIRFIELD WADSWORTH.

MYLES STANDISH, M.D.,

Boston.

Dr. Oliver Fairfield Wadsworth, son of Alexander and Mary Elizabeth Hubbard (Fairfield) Wadsworth, was born in Boston, April 26, 1838. He was a descendant of Christopher W. Wadsworth, who came to Boston in 1632. He attended the Latin School, entered Harvard College in 1856, and was duly graduated with the A.B. degree in 1860. In 1863 he received the degree of A.M.

Upon graduation he took up the study of medicine in the Harvard Medical School, where it was early noted that he was a man of exceptional quality.

He was appointed House Pupil, as the house officers were then designated, at the Massachusetts General Hospital, and served the usual term. The degree of M.D. was conferred upon him in 1865.

In April, 1865, he was appointed assistant surgeon to the Fifth Massachusetts Cavalry, and served with that regiment in the Southwest, being stationed most of the time in Texas. When the volunteer army of the Civil War was disbanded, Dr. Wadsworth proceeded to Zurich, Switzerland, for post-graduate study in ophthalmology. He worked under Professor Hörner, and made some most excellent original investigations.

Upon his return to Boston he married, April 16, 1867, Miss Mary Chapman Goodwin of that city.

He was appointed ophthalmic surgeon in the out-patient service of the Massachusetts General Hospital in 1873, and served in the various grades at that institution until 1900, when he was made a member of the Board of Consultation.

He was appointed ophthalmic surgeon in the out-patient service of the Boston City Hospital in 1870, ophthalmic surgeon in 1881, and subsequently was appointed ophthalmic surgeon-in-chief, which position he held until his death, although he did little actual service in his later years.

In 1892 he was appointed ophthalmic surgeon at the Massachusetts Charitable Eye and Ear Infirmary without any previous service in the junior positions at that institution. This appointment was made by the Board of Managers at the Infirmary with the consent and approbation, expressed and unexpressed, of the entire junior ophthalmic staff, although such an appointment delayed the line of promotion—a striking tribute to his professional eminence and the profound esteem in which he was held by the younger ophthalmologists of Boston.

Dr. Wadsworth was appointed instructor in ophthalmoscopy in the Harvard Medical School in 1881, and continued to give instruction under that title, but not always in ophthalmoscopic subjects, until 1891, when he was appointed Professor of Ophthalmology, and given the title of Williams Professor of Ophthalmology in 1898, an endowed professorship established by his distinguished predecessor in the chair of ophthalmology in the Harvard Medical School, Dr. Henry W. Williams. Dr. Wadsworth held the professorship until 1903, when he gave up all his active hospital and teaching services.

At the head of the department of the Medical School, he was conservative, but always open to conviction in favor of any change in the management or teaching of the department which was brought forward by his juniors.

Under his administration required clinical as well as written examinations were introduced in ophthalmology, the clinical examination mark counting for 40 per cent of the total credits in the department. The department of Ophthalmology was the first in the Harvard Medical School to adopt such a system, which has since become widely established in other clinical departments.

The conscientious individual consideration which he gave to the marks awarded to the students was very unusual, kindly and just, although the students generally considered his examinations difficult to pass. Until almost the last year of his professorship he felt it his duty to teach the students who elected advanced ophthalmology, and spent hours patiently teaching the minute observation necessary for difficult ophthalmoscopic diagnosis.

Dr. Wadsworth's skill in the use of the ophthalmoscope and the accuracy of his ophthalmoscopic diagnoses were known to all his colleagues, and were universally acknowledged by all who came in contact with him professionally. The careful study and patient investigation which he gave to each case that came under his care was never abridged by any consideration of time or personal convenience. His mental attitude until his diagnosis was made was always that of the impartial scientific observer.

As an operator he was cool, confident and skilful, following the safe and well-known methods rather than new or original procedures.

His knowledge of ophthalmic literature was co-extensive with modern ophthalmology, and he was very unusual in his ability to recall the substance of all original articles on any topic, together with the names of the writers and places of publication. This quality made him a formidable antagonist in any ophthalmic discussion. Cautious in the acceptance and statement of facts, exact in thought and logical in his deductions, his conclusions were always respected and made him an authority widely acknowledged.

His many hospital and teaching positions associated nearly all the younger ophthalmologists of Boston with him at some time in his career, and his persistent and able defense of what he considered to be the truth in ophthalmic facts, his scientific accuracy of observation, and calmness of judgment left its impression upon an entire generation of ophthalmic surgeons in that city.

Dr. Wadsworth was markedly faithful to every duty he undertook, untiring in his capacity for work, kind and just to his juniors, and beloved by his contemporaries. He published forty-two original articles on ophthalmological subjects. Many of these papers have appeared in the Transactions of this Society. The Index Medicus lists fifteen of the titles of his papers under retina, choroid, and optic nerve, four upon anomalies of muscular balance, nine upon operative procedures, and four papers devoted to scientific original research. His best known original work was his description of the fovea centralis. All of his writings were, as one would expect them to be, well considered and accurate, and were written because the author had something to say which justified the recital.

He was one of the founders of the Boston Medical Library Association, and was elected Secretary at the first meeting of that organization in 1875, and continued in that office for thirty-six years. At the date of his resignation the library contained 72,000 volumes. During the last years of his term of service he was active in the efforts which made possible the beautiful new library building.

He was five years president of the American Ophthalmological Society, president of the New England Ophthalmological Society, was honored by election as an Associate Fellow of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, and died after a cheerful and uncomplaining endurance of a painful illness on November 29, 1911, respected by all his colleagues and acquaintances.