



S Weir Mitchell

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S. WEIR MITCHELL Novelist and Physician S. WEIR MITCHELL Novelist and Physician by ERNEST EARNEST Philadelphia UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA PRESS 1950 Foreword SILAS WEIR MITCHELL was almost a genius. His contemporaries believed that he was one, an opinion Mitchell came to share. The reasons for this belief were impressive his book on Gunshot Wounds and Other Injuries of the Nerves 1864 was still in use by the French in World War I his quote rest cure quote for nervous diseases was famous throughout Europe and America his discovery of the nature of rattlesnake venom was the foundation stone for later research in the fields of toxicology and immunology his Hugh Wynne was compared to Henry Emond, his Ode on a Lytton Tomb to Lycidas. He translated a fourteenth-century poem, The Pearl, into modern verse he wrote a scholarly and controversial biography of Washington, a children's story Kris-Kringle which went through twelve editions, and an excellent tragic novel about a neurotic woman. These are only highlights he also wrote thousands of letters, published hundreds of medical papers, several volumes of verse, numerous short stories, two popular books on medicine, and a dozen novels all this in addition to a medical practice which brought him nearly 70,000 in a peak year. He was equally in demand as a speaker at banquets and before learned societies, Among scores of friends he numbered Oliver Wendell Holmes, Phillips Brooks, Sir William Osier, Andrew Carnegie, William James, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, James Russell Lowell, and George Meredith. He was the patron of such different persons as Hideyo Noguchi and Walt Whitman. He sat on the boards of trust companies, of charitable institutions, and of learned societies. His Saturday evenings at home became famous for good wine **vi** FOREWORD and conversation. No wonder he was regarded as the most versatile American since Franklin, As so often happens, the generation following a man's death tends to forget or undervalue him. This is especially true of persons whose reputations were over-inflated by their contemporaries. For various reasons this process has been particularly operative upon Mitchell. His rest cure is outmoded his novels are little read. Yet, as the foregoing list of some of his achievements shows, he was important in a number of fields. For two or three decades he was probably the leading psychiatrist in America, and there are few better American novelists between 1885 and 1905. It is time for a reevaluation of the man. No full-length study of Mitchell has appeared since Anna Robeson Burr's Weir Mitchell, His Life and Letters in 1929, Although badly arranged, it is useful as a source because it contains the only published form of parts of Mitchell's Autobiography and of numerous letters. Mitchell papers and letters are widely scattered. In the possession of the family are diaries from 1894 to 1912, the manuscript Autobiography, family letters from Mitchell's student days in Paris, letters to his sons, and the Sarah Butler Wister correspondence. The Mitchell family has permitted me to use all of these. The following collections have also proved valuable correspondence with Lowell, Holmes, Henry and William James in the Houghton Library, Harvard correspondence with John Shaw Billings, New York Public Library correspondence with Howells, Gilder, James Whitcomb Riley, and Henry Charles Lea, University of Pennsylvania pamphlets and manuscripts, Philadelphia College of Physicians. In addition I have been permitted to use two extensive private collections of Mitchell papers that of Dr. Clements C Fry at the FOREWORD vii Yale School of Medicine, and that of the late Dr. Josiah Trent at Duke University. I am much indebted to the owners and custodians of these various collections. In addition, the reference librarians of Temple University have been most helpful in finding elusive items...

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