HENRY PICKERING BOWDITCH

An Intimate Memoir

MANFRED BOWDITCH

In a biographical sketch by C. S. Minot, Henry P. Bowditch is credited with having created and equipped "the first modern laboratory for instruction and research in the medical sciences to be founded in America." Though no book-length biography has been written, this and similar memoirs by W. B. Cannon, F. W. Ellis and others adequately portray the scientific activities and achievements of a pioneer in physiology. When, as a son of Dr. Bowditch, I was invited to write of him in a more intimate vein, I had hoped to be able to do so without recourse to the first person singular. But this has proved a task beyond my limited powers of composition, and I must unashamedly cast the purpose aside. Supplementing this introduction, let me ask further indulgence in that, fifty years my father's junior and his youngest child, I came to really know him only in his later years.

Dr. Bowditch's demeanor has been described as stern, even as austere. He most certainly had an innate dignity, but he was essentially a friendly and kindly man, and to his intimates displayed a warmth and jollity quite the reverse of austerity. Free rein to these engaging facets of his character could be given, first, in the family home in the Boston suburb of Jamaica Plain, and secondly at the Adirondack camp to which he found his way year after year. I shall try to picture some part of his contribution to the atmosphere of both.

Let us start with the camp. More than eighty years ago, a group of young men from Boston, on a walking trip in the Adirondacks, came to the head of Keene Valley, beautifully situated among the region's highest peaks, and, since the road went no further, availed themselves of the hospitality of a primitive boarding house providentially awaiting them there. Enamoured of their surroundings, four of their number, William James, Charles and James Putnam and my father, returned to buy the property and to establish the camp which, in the tradition of easy hospitality they initiated, still beckons to many of us who knew and loved it in our childhood.

Here, in the well-equipped workshop brought into being by him and our saintly 'Cousin Charley,' my father could and did exercise the ingenuity, the inventiveness and the manual skill for which his laboratory work was noted, and the end product ranged from the remarkably comfortable 'Bowditch chair' to a device which, propelled by a water-driven paddle wheel, drew endless yards of silk from a large and good-natured species of spider to be found thereabouts. Much of the camp's early equipment came from this shop, and, as may be imagined, it was a busy place. But its two chief craftsmen were never too preoccupied to give advice, or lend a hand if need be, to the youngster bent on fashioning a boat to sail the waters of the nearby brook, or some other bit of juvenile carpentry.

And at the camp, no less than elsewhere, was displayed the catholicity of Dr. Bowditch's interests. Here, as at his home, emerged from the darkroom the products of his photographic skill, including some pioneering and successful examples of telephotography, and later generations are in his debt for a wealth of pictorial records of the doings of his day. Keenly alive to the implications of aviation, he built and flew in the mountains a series of huge kites, one of which was said to have lifted him momentarily from the ground; and while he never flew himself, he followed with great interest the exploits of Lillienthal and other pioneers, and lived to be taken in his last year to an aviation meet at Squantum, near Boston, my chief memory of which is the Roe triplane, a sort of aerial club sandwich which started bravely down the field, only to turn over on its nose. An active woodsman and climber in his day, Dr. Bowditch combined these pursuits with surveying expeditions over the mountain property, using the instruments of that calling with all but professional skill.

Those were the days before the movies and other forms of canned entertainment had robbed us of the capacity to amuse ourselves, and the camp was thus the scene of an endless variety of doings of a histrionic nature, entered into with an enthusiasm seldom evinced by young or old today. Two such events, in which my father participated, come to mind.

Each of the several structures comprising the camp bore a name. When a small single-room house was erected at a point somewhat higher than the rest, it was decided to christen it 'The Ark.' This obviously called for some ceremony, and a procession was formed, led by my parents as Mr. and Mrs. Noah, who were followed, two by two, by the rest of us, dressed as animals, and with two of the smallest tots impersonating browntail moths, then the object of some concern, bringing up the rear.

Among the many colleagues brought to the camp as his guests was my father's friend Angelo Mosso of Turin, physiologist and early investigator of the effects of high altitudes on the human metabolism. Climbing one day on a nearby mountainside, a group from the camp came upon a ledge of rock commanding a wide view of the valley and its surrounding peaks. What was the name of this lovely spot, Mosso asked. Told that it was nameless, he expressed surprise, and assured his companions that, in Italy, any such outlook would bear an appropriate name. Some days later, there was a second expedition to the ledge, to christen it, with due ceremony, 'Mosso's Ledge,' by which designation it is known today. Dr. Mosso, quite overcome, obviously felt himself highly honored, and impulsively kissed my quite embarrassed father on both cheeks.

Important to life at the Adirondack camp have always been the evening campfires, featured by group singing and, in the old days, solo performances by many of the participants. Dr. Bowditch's, called for and enthusiastically applauded year after year, was the impersonation of an organ grinder, in which he hopped about on one foot, holding the other in one hand, ground out 'tunes' (he was quite tone-deaf) and, with a tattered felt hat held out to his listeners, demanded 'baksheesh.' Austere ?

Dr. Pappenheimer, in the first of the Bowditch lectures, ventured the thought that Sir Michael Foster, in leisurely conversations at the

camp, probably learned more about American physiology than he would have from a series of rapid visits to widely separated laboratories. This may well have been so, for he and Mosso were by no means the only ones of their ilk to come there as guests. Other physiologists were Gaskell and Waller of England, and Kronecker of Switzerland, while Osler, Brunton of England, as well as Charles Minot and Oliver Wadsworth of Boston, were among the many other medical visitors. Yet all of these were welcomed as friends and companions, quite as much as for their professional attributes, and it would be a mistake to think that the callings of the four original owners (William James, who later withdrew, to continue as a frequent visitor, was both medical man and philosopher) imparted any noticeable Aesculapian flavor to the camp. Such diverse spirits as Professor Edward S. Morse, leading American authority on Japanese pottery, and Sir James Bryce, also found their way there, and the debates on psychical research, with James Putnam, William James and my father in warm yet friendly dispute, probably outnumbered those on topics of purely medical interest.

So much for the camp. Of the family home, and of their father as a parent, the five survivors of his seven children cherish the warmest memories. Always ready to help us with our studies, as with our personal problems, he took an interest in the details of our upbringing quite remarkable in a man so busied with outside concerns. Lest undue leisure lead to mischief, reading assignments were meted out during summer holidays, with such old stand-bys as 'Horatius at the Bridge' to be learned by heart. Promptness was a virtue to be stressed. Our interest in nature was stimulated in Sunday walks through the nearby woods, with the characteristics of trees and of rock formations, of land snails and of pollywogs, patiently explained. To tell us something of the circulation of the blood, my father invented the story of 'Globby' and his travels through the body, of how he changed in color, how he rushed through the heart, and how, when Tommy cut his finger, Globby came out in a drop of blood, shrank onto a handkerchief, expanded in the laundry and burst.

Less didactic, but highly stimulative of the risibilities of the very young, still small enough to climb into bed with him of a Sunday morning, were a song, rendered quite off key, about Toodle-de-Doo, a cock robin whose vain glory brought him to an untimely end, and the designation of the five toes, each tweeked in turn, as Peedy Weedy, Pally Ludy, Lady Whistle, Lody Whostle and Great Odomondod. The origins of these two gems appear lost in antiquity. In letters to his older children, my father occasionally used to append to his signature the degrees of M.D., D.Sc., LL.D. and P.O.D., the latter to be interpreted as 'Poor Old Dad.' Even with well-deserved verbal chastisement was there sometimes an admixture of humor. To the young miscreant who was his youngest he once exploded, "You are either a knave or a fool, and I would hate to think that you are a fool."

A founder of the triennial international physiological congresses, Dr. Bowditch attended them regularly thereafter, throughout his active life, and as invariably took my mother and some of us children with him on these trips to Europe. I was fortunate in being one of those to accompany him to Brussels, I believe in 1903, where the Belgian industrialist Ernest Solvay gave an elaborate evening reception to the visiting physiologists. A feature of this occasion, in a huge tent erected on the lawn,

was a lantern-slide lecture delivered by Dr. Mosso, in the course of which he threw on the screen the picture of a little mountain lake near his laboratory on Monte Rosa, announcing that it had been named "Lago di Bowditch." Mosso's Ledge had been repaid in kind.

To be counted on to emerge from the parental baggage on his return from Europe was at least one example of my father's love of gadgets. Two which I particularly remember were a sort of binocular periscope, by Zeiss, by means of which one could look over a wall or from behind a tree without being exposed, and half a dozen tumblers of reputedly unbreakable glass, each of which flew into fragments when he undertook to demonstrate their toughness. Other illustrations of this flair were his keen pleasure in hearing his voice and those of his friends reproduced by an early Edison cylinder phonograph which he had secured, and the little glass swans which a skilled glass blower had produced for the amusement of the small fry. Filled with water and seemingly designed to squirt it through the beak when held in the mouth by the tail, they instead delivered it in a sharp stream between the blower's eyes.

Though he held membership in a variety of scientific organizations and was unstinting in his support of those closest to his interest, Dr. Bowditch was never a 'joiner' and was the antithesis of the clubman in the accepted sense. His few clubs were those affording intellectual stimulus or participation in an atmosphere of restrained Bohemianism, rather than any purely social prestige, among them being the Thursday Evening Club and the Grub Club, the latter a group of twelve physicians who met monthly to dine, in turn, at each other's homes; and in later life there were the Saturday Club and the Bowditch Club, formed to do him honor and since disbanded. But it was in the conviviality of the Tavern Club that he found the keenest enjoyment, and it was of the jolly doings within its walls that we children heard the most. Outstanding among these was a contest in which a number of the members, seated before mirrors, painted their own portraits. My father's product, in oils supplied by an artist friend, was notable both for its proof of his lack of skill with the brush, and for the evidences of his red-and-green color blindness. One of the most atrocious attempts at portraiture ever to be placed on canvas, it was awarded honorable mention by the Art Committee as 'chaste, tender and self-restrained.'

No memoir of Dr. Bowditch would be complete without some mention of his high sense of civic obligation. Early in life, it led him to enlist in the Union Army on graduation from college in 1861, and though he saw service throughout the war, he almost never referred to his military experience in after life, and steadfastly rejected membership in the G.A.R. Despite the burdens of his professorship and, for ten years, of directing, as dean, the destinies of the Harvard Medical School, he found time to serve as a trustee of the Boston Public Library, as a member of the Boston School Committee, as president of both the Boston Children's Aid Society and the Massachusetts Infant Asylum, and as a member of the Committee of Fifty to investigate the liquor problem. In this connection it may be noted that, though there was always a decanter of Canary Malmsey on the table at Sunday dinner, my father had no personal interest in stronger drink. Despite this, in some handwritten pages of his lecture notes which have survived, he refers to many statements of the temperance writers as 'unproved, unprovable or untrue.' The castigation accorded him by the W.C.T.U. is a matter of record.

There could hardly be a more fitting conclusion to an account such as this than the words of his lifelong friend, colleague and Adirondack companion James J. Putnam, who wrote of my father:

"Strong as was his sense of public obligation and of public trust, he had a side of gaiety and lightness, without knowing which it was impossible to know him. Whether as host at his own table or as a guest at a friend's; on every occasion (and many were found) when his hearty laugh had an excuse for making itself heard; as kite-flyer, mountain climber, inventor, photographer, furniture maker and repairer; - in all these capacities and many more, he showed a humor, kindliness and charm which made him a delightful and most genial friend and comrade, though each pleasant toil was marked with the never wanting stamp of fidelity, thoroughness and honesty.

"It was in the thoroughly free life of the Adirondack camp, to which through 30 years he looked forward with such pleasant longing from one summer to the next, that these qualities came most strongly to the front. No one could have entered with more zest than he into the varied pleasures of that enchanted spot. There reserve and formality could be laid aside, and free play allowed to the instincts of hospitality, sociability and the playfulness of boyhood at its best."