Historical Review

Thomas Addis Emmet, the Vesicovaginal Fistula, and the Origins of Reconstructive Gynecologic Surgery

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Abstract: Thomas Addis Emmet (1828–1919), the foremost pupil of J. Marion Sims and his successor as chief surgeon at The Woman's Hospital in New York City, was probably the pre-eminent American gynecological surgeon of the last quarter of the 19th century. Among his many achievements were the first critical study of vesico-vaginal fistula repair, authorship of the first modern scientific textbook of gynecology, the invention of numerous special surgical instruments, pioneering the use of surgical scissors in vaginal operations, and the development of 'staged' procedures for surgical reconstruction of the vagina. He was an active writer, a renowned collector of American historical documents and memorabilia, a devout Catholic and a steadfast Irish patriot. This article reviews his life and contributions to gynecologic surgery.

Keywords: Gynecologic surgery; History of gynecology; Reconstructive pelvic surgery; Thomas Addis Emmet; Vesicovaginal fistula

On 8 March 1919, the New York Medical Journal noted: ‘The death of Dr. Thomas Addis Emmet, which occurred on Saturday, March 1st, removes one of the most interesting and romantic figures from the field of medicine in New York’ [1]. Emmet was one of the most influential gynecologic surgeons of his age (Fig. 1). He was as prominent as J. Marion Sims, with whom he was so closely associated that Howard Kelly could write: ‘In the history of gynecology, they abide serene like Castor and Pollux in the starry firmament of the midnight sky, well-known and welcome beacon lights destined to shine long after thousands of lesser luminaries have palled into oblivion’ [2].

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Fig. 1. Portrait of Thomas Addis Emmett at the age of 81. (T.A. Emmett, Incidents of my life. New York, 1911).
Today, most residents-in-training as well as most gynecologists in practice have no idea who Emmet was or what he contributed to the development of gynecologic surgery, yet it was really through his efforts (even more than those of Sims, his mentor) that reconstructive gynecologic surgery became established as a field of specialization. As Kelly noted, ‘Emmet in a measure grew out of Sims as we have grown out of Emmet’ [2]. Emmet’s contributions to gynecology were numerous and substantial. He wrote one of the first thoroughly scientific, comprehensive textbooks of gynecology in English in 1879, *The Principles and Practice of Gynecology* [3], which went through three editions within 5 years and was translated into French and German. This book was a condensation of his own vast personal experience, which he documented meticulously with tables and statistics drawn from his cases at the Woman’s Hospital in New York – the first hospital in the world dedicated solely to gynecologic disorders – where he succeeded Sims as Chief Surgeon upon the latter’s move to Europe with the outbreak of the American Civil War. By the time of his retirement from active practice, Emmet estimated that he had taken care of close to 100,000 women [4].

Thomas Addis Emmet was born on 28 May 1828 in Charlottesville, Virginia, where his father, Dr John Patten Emmet, was Professor of Chemistry and Materia Medica, having been appointed to the position by Thomas Jefferson as one of the first professors at the University of Virginia. His mother, Mary Byrd Farely Tucker, was of English descent but had been raised in Bermuda. This English heritage on his mother’s side notwithstanding, Emmet was a thoroughly Irishman, descended through his father from a long line of patriotic Irish Emmets. His grandfather, the first Thomas Addis Emmet, was a Dublin physician and fervent Irish nationalist who was arrested and imprisoned, along with several other members of his family, by the British during the Irish revolt of 1798. Not surprisingly, Emmet became a lifelong Irish patriot and devoted much of his life to Irish causes, both social and political.

The young Thomas Emmet had a pleasant childhood, living with his parents on a small farm near Charlottesville. He was eventually sent to Long Island to study at St Thomas’s Hall, there being no suitable schools in northern Virginia at that time. Unfortunately, his father’s health began to deteriorate, forcing the family to move to the better climate of Florida. Then tragedy struck. His father died suddenly, leaving his young son, ‘at the age of fourteen [with] little more than his example and good name’ [4]. The death of Emmet’s father left the family poverty-stricken, and his mother could not afford to put Thomas back in school. Instead, he spent several hours a day in the library of his uncle, Mr George Tucker, who was the Professor of Political Economy and Belles-Lettres at the university. The rest of the day he ‘lived in the open air and my existence was one of unalloyed happiness, with but one check. I keenly felt the death of my father and his loss seemed irreparable, as I could see no future for myself, and my life became an aimless drift until I would be old enough to enter the University as a student’ [4].

Without his father’s guidance, Thomas Emmet drifted aimlessly from one occupation to another, without much success. In the spring of 1843 he left for New York to work for an uncle, but he hated this arrangement with a passion and, predictably, the venture failed. He returned to the University of Virginia but couldn’t keep his mind on his studies, preferring to hunt, fish, and roam the countryside instead. He was given an appointment to West Point as an army cadet, but did not take it up. Nothing seemed to work, nothing seemed to fit his personality and interests.

In a moment of inspiration, he wrote a letter to Dr Dunglison of the Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia, an old family friend who had, in fact, assisted at his birth. It was a fortunate occurrence. As Emmet wrote later in his memoirs [4]:

I wrote, telling him that I had been suddenly stranded, stating the circumstances which had severed my connection with the University, and asking, as a friend of my father, his opinion as to the advisability of trying to study medicine. I received a prompt and generous response. The doctor fully understood my difficulty and his advice was to make no effort to study but to attend the medical lectures regularly, and try to remember what I could. The first medical lecture I ever heard was delivered in October, 1846, by Dr. J. K. Mitchell, Professor of the Theory and Practice of Medicine, in the Jefferson, and from that hour I felt my life’s work was laid out for me. The interest with which I heard that lecture encouraged me to hope that there was something in reserve for me in the future from inheritance. I had come of a family of physicians who for four consecutive generations at least before me had been distinguished beyond the average, and were in every respect successful men in their profession. Another circumstance surprised me – that I seemed to understand everything stated, and to be some degree familiar with the subject, and yet I had never heard anything relating to it before.

I was interested in my work from the beginning and retained a clear recollection of what I heard from day to day, and I found I could do so to a greater degree than many of my associates were able to after the training of a college course. My course of study was an eventful one in every respect with the exception of an attack of small-pox and one of pneumonia, for which I was immediately bled, got a dose of calomel, and convalesced promptly . . .

I attended strictly to my work and in time I was able to study to the best advantage. I kept my living expenses and extravagances within three hundred dollars a year, and at the end of four years I graduated.’

Following his graduation from medical school, he was offered a lucrative job as physician to an expedition being outfitted to build a railroad in Chile. He was to be paid the princely sum of $3,000 per year in gold, with all