

Senator The Hon. Michael Sullivan, M.D.

BY

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In looking over, about the beginning of the present year, memoranda of addresses which I had delivered during the past thirty years and more, to discover if all were bad, indifferent, or if any had a modicum of value, I came across an address I had given during the College Year of 1933-1934, when the Aesculapian Society of Queen's University (which consists of the whole student body of the six years in, the medical faculty) had honoured me by electing me to the position of Honorary President. While the principle I then endeavored to impress upon the medical student body was equanimity, based on reading Osler's celebrated address "Aequanimitas," and the necessity of reading much beyond the field of medical literature, I discovered that the address was filled with references to the Honourable Senator Michael Sullivan, M.D.

How could it have been otherwise? Dr. Sullivan had delivered his last lectures to medical students of Queen's to our year, retiring from the position of Professor of Surgery at the end of 1904. From his hands I had received one of the medals (surgery) at Convocation, when he made me stand just below him while he delivered his entire address just before the presentation was finally made (much to my embarrassment at such prolonged publicity and much to the enjoyment of my fellow-students who were well aware of my self-consciousness): then followed the years before his death when I had the honour of being his personal physician and I visited him daily during those years, except for two weeks spent on a holiday. That period constituted for me a liberal education,

To quote from that address:

"I am reminded that my old professor of surgery, the late Honourable Senator Michael Sullivan, M.D., told me many times that in his opinion the proper preparation of a medical student was a through "grounding" in the classics. He strongly advised that every medical student should know Latin and Greek and the mythology inevitably associated with such a knowledge. I am quite in agreement with him in this matter. Not only does a knowledge of Latin and Greek help in a proper understanding of the nomenclature one meets in Medicine but it furnishes a cultural background that is of inestimable value to you as members of a learned profession. Possibly some of you have this

“grounding” in Greek and Latin, and if you have I am sure it has been of immeasurable help to you even in things merely medical!”¹

To quote further:

"If you have not been fortunate enough to have had such a solid basis in your preliminary education you can certainly make up for the loss, at least in part, by a study of the Latin and Greek classics, of which there are many splendid translations. This will include history, poetry, drama, oratory and literature in general, and it is along this general line of reading that I would strongly recommend you to take your principal mental recreation, when you start to practise the sometimes rather prosaic profession of medicine."

The Honourable Michael Sullivan, M.D., was born in Killarney, Ireland, February 13, 1838, and emigrated to Canada with his parents at the age of four years. Whilst at that age one could scarcely expect any great advance in his primary education, it is told, however, that on a visit to a nearby monastery the monks placed our future senator of Canada on a table and put him through an extensive examination on "Christian Doctrine." The Superior complimented his grandmother on his knowledge and declared him to be the "future man of Ireland"! This role he was not to play in the land of his birth, but that he remained loyal to his mother land, while playing a most important part in the upbuilding and development of the land of his adoption, no one can deny.

The O'Sullivan family held a high status in the county of Kerry; but Daniel Sullivan, the father of Michael, being unsuccessful in business, emigrated to Canada with his family, as already indicated, in 1842. He settled first in Montreal, but finding business prospects unfavourable moved to Chambly. From Chambly he went to Kingston in 1845, where the family settled permanently.

Educational facilities in Kingston were not comparable at that time to what they are to-day, but they were much superior to those found in other centres of equal size. It was, even in those days, a military and educational centre. It had been the seat of the Government of Canada for a considerable period. Queen's University had received from Queen Victoria a Royal Charter in 1841 under the aegis of the Presbyterian Church, which was its main bulwark for many years to

¹ I am aware that there are many educationists who measure the value of subjects to medical students by the yardstick of utility; even granting that the utilitarian idea of the value of a subject in certain courses is sound, I feel that above a strong case has been made for the intrinsic value of Latin and Greek in medicine.

come. Michael's father, Daniel, was a man of rather outstanding ability in his day, and the dominating resolve of his heart was to see that his children should have a liberal education to fit them for the task they were to play in this new country, Canada, full of great promise but undeveloped to a large degree. In those days Catholics were, as now, a minority in Ontario, and the facilities for a Catholic education were few. Hence the early training of Michael Sullivan was in private schools, and later in Regiopolis College, which was lodged in the central part of what is now the Hotel Dieu Hospital. Among the private schools which Michael attended was one conducted by a Mr. Ward. Like most schools of those days, there was one principle thoroughly followed by the "master" viz: "Licking and learning go together." Besides the master, the fathers of the boys sent to these schools, for the most part, thoroughly believed in this principle and the phrasing of the principle is evidently a rendition of some of the fathers who believed in it. Michael's father is credited with the statement that on one occasion the rawhide administered by Mr. Ward had cut through Michael's coat but he feared to tell his father about the incident lest he receive worse punishment at home for the lesson, undone or ill-done. However, in those days there were evidently a few fathers who did not believe in corporal punishment. One such, informed by his son of having received a rawhiding, visited Mr. Ward in the evening to retaliate on the master. When he appeared, Ward called to his sister:—"Mary, bring me my pistols." Mary did, and the interview ended at that point.

Another private school which Michael attended was one conducted by Mr. O'Donnell, known as "Mr. O'Donnell's Classical School." It was here that he gained a friendship which was to be life long. Dr. Burdett of Belleville had finished his course in medicine but could not receive his degree until he had passed Latin to complete his Matriculation. The friendship between Dr. Burdett and Michael was, as stated, to be life long, and it was from Burdett that Michael was inspired to choose medicine as a profession.

It was in these private schools and also in Regiopolis College, then at a very low ebb in its existence, temporarily closing its doors, that Michael Sullivan learned his classics. His Latin and Greek were studied in a way that we moderns can scarcely understand. Probably the secret of it all is that the teaching of these languages and the history, oratory, drama, etc., with which they were indelibly associated, began when the student entered the primary school and did not stop until the preliminary education ceased on entrance to one of the learned professions. How often have I seen the Senator in his later years construing with ease passages from Vergil's *Æneid*, I recall vividly the evening he loaned me a copy of "Plato's Republic." This naturally opened up for me a new field, which the following of the utilitarian idea of its value to medicine would have forever left closed. Then there were the evenings when he talked on anatomy, particularly the anatomy of the brain. But I am straying away on a tangent.

Michael finished his preliminary school work in 1854. Queen's had shortly

before opened its medical school, and he entered. Apparently a Mr. Hillier, whom the subject of our address always placed at the top as a dissector, and who was demonstrator of anatomy at that time, took him under his special consideration and inculcated a love of anatomy which never left him. At the end of his first year he was appointed demonstrator of anatomy, a position in which he was especially qualified even though he was still an undergraduate. In his third year he was appointed house surgeon in the Kingston General Hospital. He graduated before the age of 21, passing a brilliant examination and receiving at the Convocation special commendation by Principal Cook. He began the practice of his profession in 1858, specializing in surgery. He soon gained the recognition of his own city and then of the whole of the two Canadas; indeed as far afield as his students fixed their abodes in the practice of medicine, and still more extensively as the number of years spent in teaching surgery at Queen's increased. For it is a fact that from the very beginning of his teaching, there grew up among his students a confidence in his judgment and ability which increased with the years. Referred to affectionately as "Mickey," never did this familiar name indicate anything but respect. It carried much the same deference and respect as did the term "Gordie" when applied to that great principal of Queen's, George Munro Grant.

After practising four years he was asked to undertake the teaching of anatomy in his Alma Mater, and retained that position until 1870, when, on the retirement of Dr. Dickson, Dr. Sullivan was unanimously requested by the Faculty to become Professor of Surgery. This position he retained until 1904, when he retired. When the Women's Medical College was established he was appointed Professor of Anatomy; this position he held until the school was closed.²

In 1866 he was appointed a member of the Medical Council of Upper Canada, an organization long needed, the formation of which he aided greatly. In 1870, he was appointed an examiner of the Board of Examiners for this body, being given charge of Anatomy. He revolutionized the mode of examination in this subject, all questions being asked on a dissected cadaver. The old method, of asking questions without any reference to knowledge gained from dissection was obsolete, but this new method was not only practical but caused all medical schools to adopt the method of learning anatomy by dissecting the human cadaver. Incidentally the number of students "plucked" outside of Queen's was so large as to cause a storm of protest from the students and some of the teachers of Anatomy. The great majority of the profession, however, upheld Dr. Sullivan; and this innovation was of tremendous value to the graduating student, but more particularly to the patient on whom he practised, as the basis of surgery is a

² The Women's Medical College was opened in 1880 as a co-educational course. This was transformed to a Women's Medical School, quite separate from the men's, but affiliated with Queen's. It closed in 1894.

thorough knowledge of anatomy. This deed of Dr. Sullivan is little known, except to the older members of the medical profession, but should place him, in Ontario, at least, as one of the benefactors of mankind.

In 1883, Dr. Sullivan was elected to the presidency of the Dominion Medical Association. The British Association for the Advancement of Science held its well-remembered meeting in 1884 at Montreal. Dr. Sullivan, as president of the Dominion Medical Association, gave the annual address. His address to an audience which included large numbers of his own Canadian colleagues as well as leading members of the British medical profession was hailed as one of the best delivered on such an occasion. One point he made was all-important, viz. the unexplained difference in the mortality of the various provinces, and he advocated the appointment by the Dominion government of a commission to investigate thoroughly the situation. That the appointment of such a commission was long past due was demonstrated in the small-pox epidemic in Montreal in 1885, which more than decimated the population.³

In 1885, Dr. Sullivan was requested by the Federal Government to act as purveyor-general during the Second Northwest Rebellion. Going first to Winnipeg, he recognized the necessity of a well-equipped hospital as close to the scene of conflict as possible. He, therefore, went to Swift Current and established a hospital there, and, when circumstances required it, he removed it to Moose Jaw. The ambulance arrangements whereby the sick and wounded were brought to this hospital were considered 100% efficient for those days and called forth unqualified praise from Dr. Boyd, sent out by Princess Louise to assist in attending the wounded and sick. There was probably none better qualified to pass judgment on such matters than Dr. Boyd, who had a considerable military experience at Plevna and 'during the last Russo-Turkish war. Dr. Sullivan received the thanks of the Minister of Militia publicly in the House of Commons and the Ladies' Aid Society of Montreal and other places gave him the highest praise for the admirable manner in which their presents were distributed.

Already one is seized with the remarkable activity or series of activities of the subject of our address. He not only served as House Surgeon to the General Hospital during his final year in the medical school but following graduation, when practising his profession, followed his patients to that institution and treated them there. For many years he was a member of the Board of Governors, an appointment made, I think, by the County of Frontenac or the City of Kingston. But it was to the Hôtel Dieu Hospital that he rendered his greatest service. In 1858, he became surgeon to the Hôtel Dieu, remaining such until his retirement. At the time of his appointment, the Hôtel Dieu was lodged in the four stone

³ Frequent references are made here from "Prominent Men of Canada," by G. Mercer Adam.

buildings on the right side of Brock street, nearly opposite the present site, but westerly about one-fourth a block.

During the first year the number of patients treated at Hôtel Dieu was 90, but in 1859 the number went up to 300. Dr. Sullivan demonstrated operative surgery at the Hôtel Dieu during the years 1862-1870 while teaching anatomy at Queen's. It was during his early surgical work at Hôtel Dieu that he persuaded a patient to undergo a serious and unheard of operation in this community, by promising her a new bonnet. On leaving the hospital, the patient collected her bribe. Following his appointment as Professor of Surgery in 1870 – a professorship he retained until 1904 – he lectured one hour a week at the Medical Building on the "Principles and Practice of Surgery." So well was he versed in his subject that the story went round that Dr. Sullivan jotted his notes down on the back of an old envelope and on the way to class lost the envelope. His lectures never seemed to suffer from this loss.

I have among my notes reference to a student who had recently graduated, a Dr. McGurn, who was to assist Dr. Sullivan in an operation. It was the custom of Dr. Sullivan to allow the student to do the operation, while he himself assisted (or directed). When this operation came along, word was sent to Dr. McGurn to go ahead. Dr. McGurn went ahead with the operation, which, needless to say, was a success (or I would not be telling this story). Dr. Sullivan knew the extent of the ability of the young doctor and wished to increase his self-confidence by throwing him on his own resources. I recall that during my last years of teaching school near Marysville – 1899 – reference was frequently made of Dr. McGurn, who had been born there, graduated from Queen's, and eventually went to Alpena, Michigan, where he gained a great reputation as a surgeon. He died of an infection. Knowing he was in a dangerous condition, he sent for his old teacher, Dr. Sullivan; but the disease had progressed beyond the reach of medical skill.

Queen's University originally conducted a medical school; but, on account of financial stress, in or about 1867, threw the Faculty overboard. A few of the old teachers and graduates applied then for a charter for the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Kingston. The incorporators were Drs. Lavell, Fowler, Kennedy (of Bath), Fenwick and Sullivan. In 1892 they were re-admitted into the University without financial obligation to the university. In 1912, the school became an integral part of the university, the latter assuming financial responsibility. At the same time, the university became non-sectarian, the Presbyterian Church altruistically withdrawing its control.

Let us turn from the professional accomplishments of our subject, which alone would fill the life of most men, to the activities he assumed not only as a citizen of 'no mean city' but of the province and of the nation-to-be. He served on every civic board in Kingston – Separate School Board, Municipal Board of Education, Board of Governors of the General Hospital, City Council as alderman and as mayor. For 10 years he represented Sydenham ward, being elected by acclamation

in each instance. In 1873 he was urged to run for mayor (the mayor at that time being selected by themselves from among the 21 aldermen). Though assured by the 21 aldermen of his success, he was defeated by a small vote of 1 or 2. The following year our present system of electing a mayor by popular vote was begun. Dr. Sullivan ran and was elected. He held the office for two years and then retired from civic politics.

Like his father, Dr. Sullivan was a strong Conservative and enjoyed the close friendship of Sir John A. McDonald, who persuaded him to run on the Conservative ticket, but he was defeated by a small majority by Alexander Gunn – due to party defection, behind which, perhaps, was the same miserable cause which Newman deplored in his series of lectures collected in a book called “Position of the Catholic People in England,” that cause – “the Protestant Ascendancy.” One is reminded here of the occasion when Sir Wilfred Laurier, visiting Toronto, was “cheered to the echo” smilingly said, “You always cheer me when I come to Toronto but you never send me members to support my government.”

There was one society in Kingston in which Dr. Sullivan was markedly interested, viz. the St. Patrick’s Society. It was composed of men actually born in Ireland or of Irish descent. Religion was no bar to membership. Dr. Sullivan was president of this society for several years, but resigned in 1870, because, as he put it, they only wanted to sink into debt by putting all the money and more than they had, into the pockets of the Robinsons (painters), who painted banners for the annual parade of the 17th of March. The Robinsons were leading Orangemen in Kingston. Tom was always grand marshal on July 12th and looked very handsome with his steel gray hair and beard, his regalia and sword, and mounted on a white charger. One often wonders what Orangemen would think of the Battle of the Boyne if they stopped to consider that about 60% of King William’s army were Catholic mercenaries from the Low Countries and that William was an ally of the Pope with Austria, to keep down Catholic Louis XIV of France, who by his strength and aggressiveness, had seriously disarranged the balance of power in Europe.

Another society in which Dr. Sullivan was interested was the Young Irish Catholic Society of Kingston. They were an industrious and intelligent lot – not possessed of much of this world’s goods, or education, but surprisingly capable of expressing themselves on a great variety of subjects. They met every Sunday afternoon in a room in Regiopolis College, now the central part of the Hôtel Dieu. Discussions arose from the agenda sent out with notices of meetings or placed on a notice board during the previous week. The fees were small, 10 cents a fortnight, but the benefits accruing from membership were many. In the event of a member’s wife dying, \$25 was given to the member towards defraying funeral expenses; in the event of a member dying \$50. In those days \$50 would ensure a very decent funeral! Other corporal works of mercy were performed by the society. As the

members were young, the fees small but always paid, it is surprising how the funds accumulated. This led to discussions how surpluses might be disbursed to the best advantage of the members – picnics or excursions for the families, etc. Dr. Sullivan's son, from whom I have received valuable data for incorporation in this address, recalls his father asking a very energetic and valuable member, Ned Garvin, if he ever thought of taking a trip to Ireland. Ned pondered a long time, evidently with conflicting emotions, and finally said, "When the Irish flag floats over College Green, I'm gain' back to Ireland."

To refer again to Dr. Sullivan's political activities: he was defeated by Alexander Gunn in the Kingston Constituency in the general election of 1882, but was nominated to the Senate on January 29, 1884, to fill the vacancy caused by the death of Hon. John Hamilton. The appointment of Dr. Sullivan to the Senate was received with acclaim by both Catholic and Protestant, Conservative and Liberal. Here was a man especially endowed by nature and by education for such a position. A strong Conservative by conviction and by heredity, Dr. Sullivan never displayed strong partisanship but treated each piece of legislation presented, on its merits. I shall always recall our short discussion one evening on a Canadian navy in 1908, 1909 or 1910 (I cannot recall the correct date). The doctor liked Laurier and hated to find himself in the group opposed to him. The Liberals proposed to build a Canadian navy to be built by Canadian shipyards, Canadian labour, and manned by Canadian men, whereas the Conservatives proposed to build 3 super-dreadnoughts, the largest and greatest that money could buy, and hand them over to England, to be used by her in any capacity to protect the British Empire, which she had been doing for decades and even centuries. To one looking back the difference in policy seems like the difference between Tweedledum and Tweedledee. Not so, then. Australia and South Africa had adopted the navy idea. The Doctor, swayed on the one hand by affection for Laurier and on the other by loyalty for his party, said, "For what seen or unforeseen reason, [much abbreviated by the Doctor], does Canada want a navy? Have you ever noticed, Gibson, that when a man becomes wealthy he buys himself a bull-dog and walks about with him on a leash?" At this time Canada was certainly prosperous, and though there had been a rattling of the sabre by Kaiser Wilhelm (the telegram of congratulation to President Kruger and the Agadir incident), no one thought of war, except our so-called diplomats. At the time, I thought it an excellent figure of speech.

Besides the Senator's splendid knowledge of Latin and Greek and, of course, of English, he had studied French and spoke it fluently. He had also taught himself German, which he spoke with almost equal fluency.

As an Irishman by birth, he naturally was a strong supporter of Home Rule. On tours of the United States and Canada by Justin McCarthy and Michael Davitt to arouse, through lectures, the sympathy of the people of both countries, and no doubt to collect that most necessary prerequisite, money – the sinews of war – in

support of a campaign which the Irish from experience knew would be long – in the instance of each man visiting Kingston, Dr. Sullivan was his host and the outspoken and emphatic supporter of his cause.

Naturally in the case of a man so widely known and famed, there are many incidents well worth telling, but time will not permit. One, at least, must be told. This most unexpected happening must have caught the doctor “napping,” or nearly so, although he had often been asked to speak on the shortest of notices. He had been called to see a patient in the parish of Douro, in the diocese of Peterboro. After the visit he went to mass at the parish church. At the end of the mass, Father Keilty, the parish priest, approached the sanctuary railing, read the Gospel and Epistle, made the announcements and then said that there would be no sermon but that as he saw Dr. Sullivan in the congregation he would ask him to address them. Astounded, he rose to the occasion, however, and addressed the congregation on “Hygiene.”

In my happy association with Dr. Sullivan, one outstanding event which occurred towards the end of his busy and altruistic life, showed me the love and respect in which he was held in Ottawa, where he had spent over a quarter of a century as senator. Illness had prevented his presence for nearly two years in the Senate and all his friends desired that his seat should not be allowed to lapse; hence he was persuaded to go to Ottawa to take his seat in the hope, unfortunately unfulfilled, that his health might improve to permit a resumption of his senatorial duties. With his son William, I accompanied him to Ottawa, where we lodged at the Russell Hotel. During his short stay, his room at the Russell House was like a levee, where friends flocked to pay their respects – as it later proved for the last time. I recall that it was the late Senator Derbyshire of Brockville, a political enemy, but a thoughtful friend, who made the necessary arrangements for the senator from Kingston taking his seat for the last time.

He died January 26, 1915, and the University which he had served so long and so well, through the Senate, gave him an unusual tribute, an academic funeral. So passed Michael Sullivan, Irishman by birth, Canadian by adoption, beloved by all with whom he came in contact, a great doctor, orator, statesman, a fine Catholic gentleman. Newman’s beautiful prayer is applicable: “May He support us all the day long till the shades lengthen and the evening comes and the busy world is hushed and the fever of life is over and our work is done. Then in His mercy may He give; us safe lodging, and a holy rest and peace at the last.” And may we join in that shortest of prayers on Newman’s tomb:

“Ex numbris et imaginibus in veritatem.”