



WILHELM ERB
1840-1921

Obituary

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Wilhelm Erb has passed away. Through his death Germany has lost the man who had been to her what Charcot was to France and Gowers to England—her leading neurologist. He had nearly reached his eighty-first birthday; he was born in Winnweiler in the Bayerische Pfalz on Nov. 30, 1840, the son of a forester. To the conditions of his earlier life he probably owed a rugged constitution and his tremendous capacity for work. His enthusiasm for his science, his keen sense of duty and responsibility left him little time for recreation. It is true that every summer he was absent from his post for many weeks, but he usually returned with the manuscript of some important work. He was a man of exceptional energy, who had few personal interests. It was the truth, and the truth only, which counted.

He had a keen sense of humor although life, with many triumphs, had brought him much sorrow. He was gruff to all and prone to lose his temper. His gruffness, the writer felt, was a cloak behind which he hid his tenderheartedness, of which he was ashamed. Those who worked with him and under him know from personal experience, that he never overlooked an opportunity to be of help to them or to do some thoughtful, kind deed.

He began his medical studies at the University of Heidelberg at the age of 19, continued them in Erlangen and received his degree in Munich in 1864. His dissertation was on "Die Pikrinsaeure; ihre physiologischen und therapeutischen Wirkungen." He became assistant to the pathologist Buhl, but remained with him for only a short time. The offer of an assistantship under Friedreich soon brought him back to Heidelberg where he established himself as a teacher in medicine. The title of his Habiliationschrift was "Zur Entwicklungsgeschichte der roten Blutkoerperchen." In 1880, he became professor ordinarius and director of the Medical Policlinic at Leipzig, and, in 1883, professor ordinarius and director of the Medical Clinic at Heidelberg. Here he remained in spite of tempting calls to Bonn, Leipzig, Vienna and Berlin, and it was here that his most important work, which will assure him a place in the memories of many generations of neurologists, originated. His activities as a writer, however, were not limited to this specialty, for nearly one fourth of his 237 publications were devoted to internal medicine.

He was the author of three major works, all of them in their days considered among the best on their particular subject: "Handbuch der

Krankheiten der peripheren cerebrospinalen Nerven," "Handbuch der Krankheiten des Rueckenmarks under verlaengerten Marks" and "Handbuch der Elektrotherapie." A number of monographs of importance issued from his pen: "Klinische, experimentelle und pathologisch-anatomische Begruendung der Entartungsreaction," "Die Thomsensche Krankheit (Myotonia congenita) Dystrophia muscularis progressiva," "Ueber das intermittende Hinken" and "Tabes dorsalis."

Many of his shorter publications were devoted to these same problems, while others dealt with a great variety of topics, both in neurology and in internal medicine. He was one of the founders and editors of the *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Nervenheilkunde* and edited, together with von Bergmann and von Winckel, Volkmann's "Sammlung klinischer Vortraege."

Erb's reputation rests not alone on his many and valuable publications. Great as he was as a clinical investigator, he was even greater as a clinical teacher and diagnostician. He possessed to a degree rarely encountered the faculty of arousing the interest and enthusiasm of his pupils, and therefore not a few of his former students and assistants are counted among the abler neurologists of Germany. It was not easy to work for him. He, who himself would never permit anything to interfere with his duties and his work, expected the same sacrifices from his assistants. He was a stern task-master, feared by all, but also respected and loved.

Patients came to him from all corners of the world. They all received the best that was in Erb, the day-laborer in the public wards of the hospital or the Grand Duke who came to his consulting room from Petrograd. Among his private patients he was known as "Der grosse Zauberer."

If Erb looked back in his declining years on a career which had brought him much fame and many honors, he had also to look back on many sorrows. Three of his four sons had died before him, as had his first wife. The desperate straits in which his native country found itself during the last year deeply affected him. And still the end came beautifully. He was at a concert, listening to the notes of a composition which was his favorite, the "Eroica," when an attack of syncope overcame him which gradually merged into a calm and peaceful end.

SYDNEY KUH.