

Bachelors in Baltimore: Mr. Mencken and Dr. Welch

Charles Stewart Roberts, MD

Between 1895 and 1950, Mr. H. L. Mencken of the *Sun* newspapers (Figure 1) let few outstanding persons and events in Baltimore escape his notice; Dr. William H. Welch of Johns Hopkins was no exception (Figure 2). Though never intimate friends, their likeness in many respects may have inspired Mencken to record his impressions of the pathologist in personal letters (1) and in an essay entitled “Moral Tale” (2), which appeared in the *Baltimore Sun* in 1935, a year after Welch’s death.

Both men came from well-to-do families and were bachelors in Baltimore for the greater part of their lives, each devoting his energy overwhelmingly to his profession. In contrast to Mencken, who was self-educated beyond graduation from the Baltimore Polytechnic, Welch undertook his education at Yale and then in Germany, where his study included stints in the laboratories of the experimental pathologist Julius Cohnheim and of the bacteriologist Robert Koch. Like Mencken, who wrote brilliant essays on political and social behavior, literature, drama, and music, Welch’s “fund of knowledge on every topic was inexhaustible” (3). Both men were omnivorous readers, with a mutual appreciation and curiosity for history (4). Medical students, after conversing with the pathologist on occasion, “resolved to go to art galleries, to hear music, to read the masterpieces of literature about which Welch discussed so



Figure 1. Mencken in the *Baltimore Sun* office in 1913. Published by permission of the Enoch Pratt Free Library, Baltimore, in accordance with the terms of Mr. Mencken’s will.



Figure 2. Dr. Welch in the pathology laboratory, circa 1911. Photograph by Hollinger. Used with permission of the Alan Mason Chesney Medical Archives of The Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions.

excitedly” (5). The music of Wagner, in particular, was admired and enjoyed by both men (6, 7).

Mencken and Welch shared an appetite for good food and drink, which increased the girth of each man over the years. Mencken, who lunched at the Hotel Rennert nearly every day, praising their crabcakes, terrapin, and other Chesapeake Bay delicacies, once declared, “I’m omnibulous: I drink every known alcohol drink and enjoy them all” (8). Not infrequently, Welch would consume several desserts after dinner (9). Simon Flexner, his friend and biographer, recalls his attitude toward food:

In Baltimore, he always kept a box of bonbons in his desk, and it irritated him to see people eat sparingly. When I visited there during the 1900s, he was disgusted by the simple breakfast he discovered I ate, and on one occasion he insisted that I breakfast with him at his club. I tried to escape by saying that

From the Section of Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgery, Winchester Medical Center, Valley Health System, Winchester, Virginia.

Corresponding author: Charles Stewart Roberts, MD, Section Chair, Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgery, 190 Campus Boulevard, Suite 410, Winchester, Virginia 22601 (e-mail: croberts@valleyhealthlink.com).

Note: This article was originally published in the April 1984 issue of *Anlage*, the newspaper of the Emory medical community, and is reprinted with permission.

I had to get started too soon for him—his late risings were notorious—but he opened his eyes wonderingly. “What do you mean?” he said. “I often eat as soon as the dining room opens; sometimes I wish it would open earlier.” The lesson he was going to teach me was, he felt, worth rising for at what was to him pale dawn. Sure enough, he was on hand at eight. I found the meal had been ordered—showers of eggs, griddle-cakes, sausages—and he kept a stern eye on me, making sure that I had put them all down (9).

In addition, both men perpetually smoked cigars. Mencken’s family owned a tobacco warehouse in Baltimore which, I suspect, provided him an unlimited supply. Indeed, on the cover of his *Chrestomathy*, he is at his typewriter with cigar in mouth. Welch, who apparently “would smoke anything that would burn,” enjoyed one fresh cigar after another at meetings and would dangle one in his mouth as he looked into a microscope (9).

The distinctive quality that Mencken and Welch had in common, however, was what Emerson had called “force of character” (10). The following interpretation of Welch by the Flexners would apply to Mencken perhaps, if “writer” were substituted for “scientist”: “Surrounded always with people, popular, adept at swaying men, the bachelor scientist moved on a high plane of loneliness that may have held some of the secret of his power” (11). Each man was recognized in his field by his 30s and was to achieve greater eminence. Mencken, a man of letters and an unavoidable critic, was author of 83 books and pamphlets as well as hundreds of book contributions, newspaper and magazine articles, book reviews, published speeches and talks, and radio addresses, and correspondence “in the scores of thousands”; 30 books were written about him between 1920 and 1961 (12, 13). Welch, along with Halsted, Kelly, and Osler, was a founding father of The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine and, indeed, of American medicine. Author of 411 published papers and addresses between 1875 and 1920 (14), his research and teaching brought him acclaim all over the world. On his 80th birthday, at one of the many dinners in his honor, President Hoover claimed that Welch “contributed more than any other American in the relief of suffering and pain in our generation and for all generations to come” (15).

In 1919, Mencken recorded in a letter to his friend Fielding Hudson Garrison an expression of dismay and disdain for the politics of the Johns Hopkins pathologist:

The case of Dr. Welch puzzles me. Unluckily, I don’t know him; he and Dr. Halsted are about the only Johns Hopkins men I have never met. I can easily imagine him being against the Germans in the war, if only as a matter of race loyalty, but what I can’t understand is (a) his open alliance with the most extravagant and ignorant sort of German-baiters and spy-hungers, and (b) his almost childish assent to the Wilson buncombe. It seems to me that (b) is now obviously a proof of intellectual napping, and that (a) comes unpleasantly close to compromising his common decency. One does not ask an intellectual in time of war to stand against his country, one expects him to stand with his country—but like a gentleman.

For example, like Lansdowne, like Arnold Bennett and like Anatole France and Richard Strauss, not like D’Annunzio, Kipling and Irvin Cobb. The course of Dr. Welch frankly gave me the shock of my life. Consider the sharp contrast offered by the course of other men, notably Halsted and Barker. Neither owed one-tenth as much to Germany as Welch owed, and yet both carefully avoided the slightest hysteria, and not a word came out of them from first to last that any reasonable opponent could object to today (1).

But Welch’s positive impression upon his fellow bachelor became manifest in Mencken’s essay entitled “On Trial,” in which he presents the case of the late Dr. Welch, “a sort of walking *reductio ad absurdum* of some of the most confident theories of his fellow resurrection-men” (16). Mencken was an ardent supporter and admirer of those in the true pursuit of science, i.e., those “too busy in their laboratories to give any time to either metaphysics or theology” (17), and he believed that “the science of hygiene, which is largely in the hands of quacks, lays too much stress upon mere longevity” (18). In his own city, the famous pathologist lived 84 years “with a distaste for exercise, a habit of sitting up until all hours of the night and an enlightened appreciation of each and every variety of sound food and drink” (16). In “On Trial” Mencken described his encounter with Dr. Welch:

A year or so before his death I happened to sit beside him one day at lunch. The main dish was country ham and greens, and of it he ate a large portion, washing it down with several mugs of beer. There followed lemon meringue pie. He ate an arc of at least 75 degrees of it, and eased it into his system with a cup of coffee. Then he lighted a six-inch panatela and smoked it to the butt. And then he ambled off to attend a medical meeting and to prepare for dinner. The night before, so I gathered from his talk, he had been to a banquet, and sat until 11:30 listening to bad speeches and breathing tobacco smoke. The wines had been good enough for him to remember them and mention them. Returning to his bachelor quarters, he had read until one o’clock and then turned in. The morning before our meeting he had devoted to meditation in an easy-chair, cigar in hand. At the lunch itself, I forgot to say, he made a speech, beginning in English and finishing in German.

What are we to gather, brethren, from Dr. Welch’s chart? Simply that pathology is still far from an exact science, especially in the department of forecasting. In the presence of what are assumed to be causes the expected effects do not always or necessarily follow. Here was a man who stood in the very front rank of the medical profession, and yet his whole life was a refutation of some of its most confident generalizations. He lived to be a pallbearer to scores of colleagues who made 36 holes of golf a week a religious rite, and to scores more who went on strict diets at 30 and stuck to them heroically until they died at 50 and 60 (16).

To Mencken, the pathologist offered more than another humorous irony worthy of pen and paper; Welch provided, by his example, justification for Mencken’s own disregard for

hygiene, which he defined as “the corruption of medicine by morality” (19). I have before me a letter from a college friend which conveys a story of Mencken’s death. Evidently, when he died, there was some doubt of the cause, and his body was brought to Hopkins for an autopsy. News of his arrival preceded him and a number of surgeons gathered around to see the great Mencken. As the story goes, the pathologist doing the procedure accidentally sliced the bladder and fluid shot out across the onlookers. Someone said that Mencken would have liked that, no doubt; in death, as in life, the great debunker.

-
1. Mencken HL. Letter to William Fielding Garrison, 1919. In Furgue GJ, ed. *Letters H. L. Mencken*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961:159–162.
 2. Mencken HL. Moral tale [*Baltimore Sun*, April 11, 1935]. In *A Mencken Chrestomathy*. New York: Vintage Books, 1982:372–374.
 3. Flexner S, Flexner JT. *William Henry Welch and the Heroic Age of American Medicine*. New York: Dover Publications, 1941:168.
 4. Flexner S, Flexner JT: 420.
 5. Flexner S, Flexner JT: 168.
 6. Mencken HL. Wagner [*Smart Set*, July 1922, pp. 41–43]. In *A Mencken Chrestomathy*. New York: Vintage Books, 1982:536–537.
 7. Flexner S, Flexner JT: 420.
 8. Johns B. *The Ombibulous Mr. Mencken: A Drinking Biography*. San Francisco: Synergistic Press, 1968:5, 57.
 9. Flexner S, Flexner JT: 251–252.
 10. Emerson RW. Self-reliance. In Atkinson B, ed. *The Complete Essays and Other Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. New York: Random House, 1940:153.
 11. Flexner S, Flexner JT: 136–137.
 12. Alkder B, Wilhelm J, eds. *The Mencken Bibliography*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1961.
 13. Owens H. H. L. Mencken, a personal note. In Furgue GJ, ed. *Letters H. L. Mencken*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961:v.
 14. Welch WH. *Papers and Addresses*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1920:vol. 3, 505–557.
 15. Hoover H. Address. In Freeburg VO, ed. *William Henry Welch at Eighty, a Memorial Record of Celebrations Around the World in His Honor*. New York: Milbank Memorial Fund, 1930:35.
 16. Mencken HL. On trial. In *A Mencken Chrestomathy*. New York: Vintage Books, 1982:372–374.
 17. Mencken HL. The eternal conundrum [*American Mercury*, Feb. 1931, pp. 252–254]. In *A Mencken Chrestomathy*. New York: Vintage Books, 1982:337.
 18. Mencken HL. Pathologic note [*Smart Set*, Dec. 1919, pp. 66–67]. In *A Mencken Chrestomathy*. New York: Vintage Books, 1982:369.
 19. Mencken HL. The physician [*Prejudices: Third Series*, 1922, p. 269]. In *A Mencken Chrestomathy*. New York: Vintage Books, 1982:12.