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James Mann, M.D. (1759-1832): Military Surgeon for the "Second War of Independence".

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James Mann, M.D. (1759–1832): Military Surgeon for the “Second War of Independence”

The War of 1812 is remembered for the Burning of Washington, and Francis Scott Key’s “The Star Spangled Banner,” but little else. It was a poorly funded war of relatively short duration and nebulous resolution. Under such circumstances, it is understandable that the “Second War of Independence” failed to produce many notable military or medical advancements. However, one surgeon took it upon himself to recount his experiences in the field. For his dedication to the art and science of medicine, James Mann deserves recognition.

James Mann was born in Massachusetts in 1759. Little is known about his life before serving in the military. He received a degree in arts from Harvard, after which he studied medicine under Dr. Samuel Danforth, the fifth president of the Massachusetts Medical Society. He was awarded two honorary Master of Arts degrees from Yale and Brown Universities in the early 1780s, but it was not until 1815, after the resolution of the war, that Dr. Mann received an honorary degree in medicine from Brown University. In 1779, at 20 years of age, Dr. Mann became a military surgeon for the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War. He spent some time as a prisoner of war before returning to Massachusetts to practice medicine in 1781.¹ In 1788, he married Martha Tyler, with whom he raised five children.² As the author of multiple medical reports and for his eminence as a practitioner, he was elected a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1810.³

Thirty-one years after the Revolutionary War, at the age of 52 years, he was appointed as the Medical Director of the Northern Army of the War of 1812. For this service, he was called the “most important army surgeon in the field” during the war.⁴ Two future Surgeons General of the United States Army, Joseph Lovell and Thomas Lawson, as well as the “father of

gastric physiology,” William Beaumont, all served as medical personnel in the Northern Army under the direction of Dr. Mann.¹ He established hospitals at Watertown and Malone, New York, as well as multiple “flying” and tent hospitals during the course of the campaign, while managing hospitals at Greenbush and Plattsburgh, New York, and Burlington, Vermont.^{1, 5}

In 1816, after the conclusion of the war, Mann published, as noted by Dr. Samuel D. Gross in his *Manual on Military Surgery* (until the publication of that document itself in 1861), the only literature on military surgery to come out of America.⁶ In the preliminary observations of his *Medical Sketches of the Campaigns of 1812, 1813, and 1814*, Mann laments the fact that no revolutionary war surgeons had documented their findings and experiences. As Mann wisely counsels, “A record of incorrect practice, faithfully detailed, may be improved, like a beacon to a mariner, to avoid dangers and erroneous tracks.”⁵ He maintained that the medical knowledge of the day must be recorded in history, even if proven incorrect in the future.

Dr. Mann’s *Medical Sketches* (Fig. 1) are indeed an important record of many aspects of the war. He writes detailed descriptions of the maladies plaguing the military and how they were treated. He includes pulmonary autopsy specimens from soldiers who died from pneumonia.⁴ He describes amputations according to the recommendations of the Napoleonic surgeon, Baron Dominique Jean Larrey, detailing the types of injuries requiring such measures, as well as how and when to proceed. Also included in the *Sketches* are eloquent descriptions of the geography and state of colonization that he observed while traveling with the Northern Army. Of his experience at Niagara Falls, Mann relates “When we cast our eyes down on deep sounding caverns, or on yawning broad chasms below, all is apprehension ... we tremble in every joint; we seize on every bush, and cling to every tree ... and still feel we may be precipitated in a moment to the dreadful gulph. Such is the force of association of ideas, that the body irresistibly becomes the sport of its influence.”⁵

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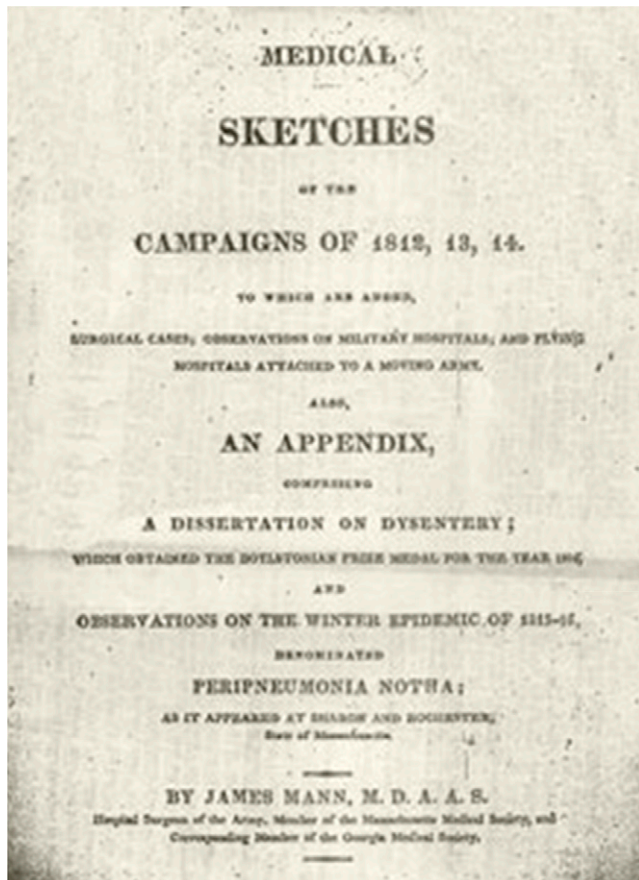


FIG. 1. Original book cover, 1816. Available from the United States National Library of Medicine; Research Publications Early American Medical Imprints Collection. Film 633, reel 62, no. 1190 at <https://archive.org/details/2562025R.nlm.nih.gov>.

His writings show that Dr. Mann was forward thinking in his approach to patient care in the early 1800s. He denounced the use of mercury for treating syphilis as he observed its failure to cure the disease, describing the necessary excision of a patient's maxilla after devastating erosion from treatment with calomel (mercurous chloride).⁷ Dr. Mann recommended against giving alcohol as part of soldiers' rations, and noted that when the army is without funding and soldiers do not have the means to purchase alcohol, their health improved significantly. He details the rigorous standards of cleanliness kept at the Burlington Hospital that decreased mortality, recommends separating patients with contagious diseases into a different ward,⁷ and states "cleanliness is the life of an army, while filth and dirt are among its disease-generating causes."⁵ Referencing the revolutionary "volantes," as noted in the work of Baron Larrey, Mann introduced the concept of the ambulance for the first time to the United States,⁴ though he did not have the resources to implement their use. No less important was his humanitarian position on

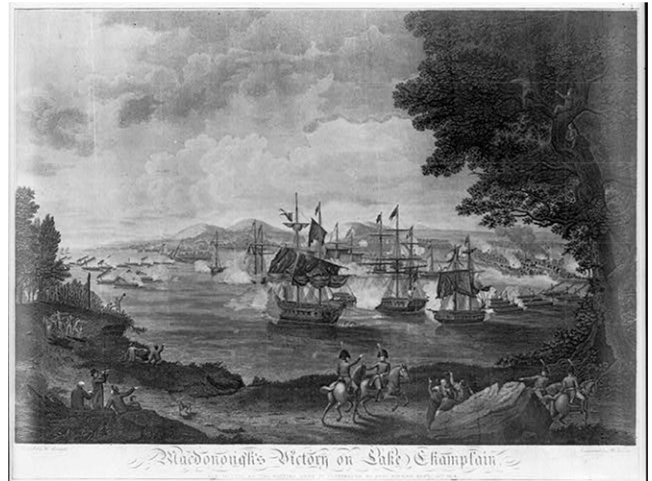


FIG. 2. "Macdonough's Victory on Lake Champlain" with Crab Island observable in the upper left hand corner of the lake. Painted by Hugh Rehnagle, 1816. Engraved by Benjamin Tanner. Available from the Library of Congress at <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2004669105/>.

the treatment of prisoners of war: "The captive soldier is no longer viewed as an enemy. He receives from the victor every attention which humanity dictates and circumstances allow."⁵

Though Dr. Mann reveals himself to be a humble leader throughout his Sketches, there were likely times during which his actions were directly responsible for the preservation of hundreds of patients' lives. For example, he orchestrated the evacuation and transportation via sleigh of 450 "sick and invalid" patients over 70 miles of land "almost destitute of inhabitants" in the dead of winter. The procession of sleighs, beginning in Malone, New York, was three days long, and it was more than a week later before they had all arrived at their destinations in Plattsburgh and Burlington. All but six patients survived the trip. Of this difficult feat, Mann merely stated "it was no inconsiderable task."⁵

Later that same year, in September 1814, the Battle of Plattsburgh took place, a land and naval confrontation on Lake Champlain that would become one of the last major battles of the war. The British occupation of Plattsburgh before the battle forced, Dr. Mann to move his patients, numbering greater than 700, from the Plattsburgh Hospital to the small and uninhabited Crab Island (Fig. 2). Over the course of the fighting, all the wounded from the British and American fleets, as well as the armies on land, were transported to the island. Dr. Mann tended the wounded on his own, being the only surgeon on the island, with only the help of a sick surgeon's mate. In four days on Crab Island, he performed more than 30 amputations, tended countless gunshot wounds, and cared for the hundreds of ill to the best of his ability,

before finding the resources to transport them to the Burlington Hospital by boat.⁵

With the signing of the Treaty of Ghent at the end of the war, the United States military establishment underwent several stages of reorganization, throughout which Mann stayed on, though his post changed. He was likely passed over for the position of Surgeon General due to his advanced age, and it is suggested that his high regard for Joseph Lovell, as described in his Sketches, helped to secure the position for the younger man.¹ In 1819, at 60 years of age, he was named to the consultant surgical staff of the Massachusetts General Hospital. By 1830, Mann was stationed on Governor's Island in New York, where he died two years later, at the age of 73 years.⁵

The passing of time has not been kind to the memory of this capable clinician and leader; one cannot even find a single portrait of Dr. Mann in the National Library of Medicine, nor from university archives. Yet his humble and unflinching answer to the call of duty time and time again in the service of a young United States, and his meticulous documentation of military medicine in his day, set an important example for the many great individuals who followed him.

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