Book review

***Recollections of a Civil War Medical Cadet*, by Burt Green Wilder, edited by Richard M. Reid**

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The history of the Civil War can be viewed through a multiplicity of lenses. Some prefer a distant view, with regional maps covered with arrows, roads, and railways, whereas others enjoy the personal view

of a single observer. This book is for the latter. Here we learn about Burt Wilder's experience at the Judiciary Square Hospital in Washington, DC, from October 1862 until May 1863. While there, he was involved with the care of patients injured at several well-known battles, but we learn nothing of them here. What he gives us, in this short book, is a picture of the workings at a new hospital both at the edge of the battlefield and at the heart of the capital.

As a cadet, Wilder's primary function was to assist the surgeon in the care of his hospitalized patients. He acquired the position of cadet after graduating from college, having studied comparative anatomy. He kept records, administered anesthetics, and performed postmortem examinations. The role of cadet was commonly given to medical students at that time. Indeed, at one point there were no medical students at Harvard Medical College, because all were engaged in the war, often as cadets.

Judiciary Square was a purpose-built hospital. Prior to the war, there were few dedicated hospital buildings, and patients would be housed in either private houses or hotels, neither of which was well suited for patient care. The new model was the "pavilion hospital," which had a central corridor with wards extending to either side. At Judiciary there were 10 wards, five on either side. Each ward would be under the direction of a surgeon and would have around 30 patients. There was no dining room or operating room. Wound care and surgery were done in the ward. Wilder mentions performing up to six anesthetics per day, sometimes feeling unwell himself after his anesthetics.

The hospital had quarters for the surgeons and cadets, who received meals and quarters as part of their compensation. The hospital was also staffed with nurses and with wound dressers. Convalescing patients themselves would sometimes fill these roles. It functioned primarily as a field hospital, meaning that patients were transported there from the battlefield. When battle was imminent, beds were made available by transporting patients to general hospitals, often in Philadelphia. They cared for both injured and ill, admitting up to 100 patients per day.

This book has three parts, with the central section containing Wilder's recollection of Judiciary Square. This section is around 50 pages and was written about 30 years after the events recounted. His memory is augmented by the letters written to Sarah Nichols, whom he later married. He also uses the diary of J. F. A. Adams, who was a cadet with him at Judiciary Hospital. This is the section that really brings the reader into the hospital and is of greatest interest to the medical reader physicians.

That medicine evolved over the course of the war is well known. The evolution of the Medical Department of the Army is well described in the lengthy introduction to this work. Therein is described both the changes in the Medical Department and in hospital design occurring in the first 2 years of the war.

The last part of this book contains the author's appendices. These contain 24 essays of varying length penned by Wilder in the years following the war. The longest of these is seven pages and devoted to James H. Fowler's "The Brief Experience of a Christian Nurse." In this work, Fowler excoriates military medicine in general and Judiciary Hospital during Wilder's tenure in particular. Here Wilder presents Fowler's complaints at length and defends the care provided at Judiciary.

After his time at Judiciary Square, the author went on to become acting surgeon of the 55th Massachusetts Regiment. He recalls this experience in a separate book.

Recollections of a Civil War Medical Cadet should be appreciated for what it is: an intimate view of a Civil War hospital from an astute and engaged junior student of medicine. It should be of interest to anyone interested in either Civil War history or the history of surgery.

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