

LIFE AND LETTERS OF WILLIAM BARTON ROGERS.

CHAPTER I.

ANCESTRY.

William Barton Rogers. — His Brothers. — His Father Patrick Kerr Rogers. — The Rogers Family in Ireland. — Emigration of Patrick Kerr Rogers to America. — His Life in Philadelphia. — His Marriage. — Removal to Baltimore. — Appointment to the Professorship of Natural Philosophy and Chemistry in William and Mary College. — His Death in 1828.

WILLIAM BARTON ROGERS was born in Philadelphia on the 7th of December, 1804. His father was Patrick Kerr Rogers, afterwards Professor of Natural Philosophy and Chemistry in William and Mary College at Williamsburg, Va. His mother was Hannah Blythe, who died in Williamsburg in 1820 and left four sons between the ages of seven and eighteen. Of these the eldest was James Blythe, and the second William Barton, the subject of this memoir. The third son was Henry Darwin, who owed his middle name to the esteem of his father for Erasmus Darwin, grandfather of the famous author of "The Origin of Species." The fourth son was Robert, who afterwards assumed the middle name of Empie out of regard for the Rev. Adam Empie, for several years President of William and Mary College.

These four sons of Patrick Kerr Rogers and Hannah Blythe all achieved distinction in science. They are often referred to as "the brothers Rogers." They were all Americans by birth and education, but their ancestry was a blending of Irish, Scotch and English. Their father came from the North of Ireland not far from Londonderry. He was born in 1776, the eldest son of Robert Rogers of Edergole.

"Robert Rogers, the fourth of the name in lineal descent, was born about the year 1753, and lived on the Edergole or Knockbrack estate, which he owned in fee, and held, on lease, acres of land adjoining. This estate lies between Omagh and Fintano, in Tyrone County, Ireland. Newtown Stewart, in the barony of Strabane, then a good market for cloth and yarn,¹ ten miles off, is the nearest town, and Londonderry, forty miles distant, the nearest city. The number of his tenants, or extent of acreage held by him, is not now known. His social grade in the community is not indicated by his estate alone. When the Presbyterian Church which he attended was reconstructed, he rebuilt and furnished anew the large central pew which he had inherited. He was disposed to favour what was then termed the New-Light doctrine, but tolerant enough to listen to the religious and political opinions ascribed to the French philosophers.

"In the small villages and rural districts of Ireland at that period — more than a hundred years ago — those whose wardrobe was limited to a single suit and an extra shirt or two (and they were largely in the majority there, as well as everywhere) determined social position in the community by the interval between the family wash-days. In their estimation, those whose wardrobe was extensive enough to have their washing done once a year constituted the 'great families,' and

¹ *Statistical Survey of the County of Tyrone for 1801-1802*, by John McEvoy. Dublin, 1802.

those who needed to have a family wash-day every six months composed the second class in society. The washing of the Rogers family was done but twice a year by the house-women and tenants at the brook which flows through the estate.

“In the winter of 1774-75, when twenty-one years old, Robert Rogers married Sarah Kerr, of about the same age, who, tradition avers, was sprightly, conspicuous in conversation, and ever ready to discuss and advocate the New-Light doctrines of the Presbyterian Church, of which she was a member. This marriage had been delayed a year by her father, a recognized ‘gentleman’ in the community, who insisted that Robert Rogers must attain his majority before he could lawfully make a marriage settlement of all his lands upon the children of this union in equal shares, and that without compliance with this stipulation his assent would not be given.

“Robert Rogers was a well-to-do Irish gentleman, liberal in his views, hospitable, convivial and duly appreciative of education and learning.”¹

He was himself the youngest son of Robert Rogers of Edergole, who died about 1772. The last will of the latter, dated June 14, 1769, is still extant, and from this it appears that his eldest son was James; his youngest, as already stated, Robert; and his daughters, Elizabeth, Mary, Jean and Margaret. His land fell to the two sons, Robert retaining one portion, and James that part known as Knockbrack and Sheep-hill. A document has been preserved showing that on November 8, 1786, James leased Knockbrack to his brother Robert for sixty-one years,

¹ *Memorial of the Brothers Rogers*, read before the American Philosophical Society of Philadelphia, November 6, 1885. By W. S. W. Ruschenberger, M. D. Dr. Ruschenberger obtained these facts from Mr. Alexander Rogers of Baltimore, a cousin of W. B. Rogers.

at an annual rental of £24 7s. 6*d.* Concerning the Rogers family, it is further stated

“that, prior to the year 1641, they preserved the Bowling Green of Strabane and four townlands on the left bank of the Fin (their title was lodged in the castle of Strabane when burned by the O’Neils about 1642); that, in the troubles which afterwards ensued, they went to Lanarkshire, in Scotland; that about the year 1650 one brother, named William, returned and settled at Edergole, near Ballinahatty. He is known to have had four sons, namely, James, John, William and Alexander. John had sons, John (who got the family place at Edergole), William (who got Scotch Drum and Lower Edergole) and Alexander.”¹

The life of Patrick Kerr Rogers, father of William Barton Rogers, is full of interest.

“He was the firstborn, in 1776, of the twelve children of Robert Rogers and his wife Sarah Kerr. Four of them died in infancy. The rudiments of Patrick’s education were received in a schoolhouse built upon the estate. It is described as having had clay walls, a thatched roof, clay seats covered with bits of carpet, and as warmed by a turf fire. The teacher was a lame rustic boy, whom his aunt, Margaret Rogers, a lady of notable intelligence, had trained for the office. His classical learning was acquired under the tuition of an uncle, a clergyman. His mother died in 1790, and his father married, in 1791, a second wife who bore him three sons and two daughters.

“At the age when he should choose a profession he found himself one of a numerous family of brothers and sisters, and, though the eldest, without the right of primogeniture in his father’s estate. Entertaining

¹ Letter of Andrew Rogers, at Glenfern, to John Rogers at Glennock, Newtown Stewart, and by him forwarded to W. B. Rogers, at Boston, September, 1858.

opinions not rigidly orthodox, he was unwilling to enter the clerical profession, though he had the example of two uncles. At the time, a commercial career seemed best, and he therefore entered a counting-house in Dublin. How long he lived there, or was thus employed, has not been ascertained. But about the time of the Irish Rebellion, which broke out in May, 1798, he contributed to Dublin newspapers articles hostile to the government which, his friends believed, were likely to cause his arrest."¹

A kinsman, Alexander Rogers of Hill-head, having supplied the necessary means, he fled to Londonderry and sailed for America, arriving in Philadelphia, after a passage of eighty-four days, in August, 1798. At that time there were many Irish refugees in Philadelphia. Mr. Rogers evidently made his way rapidly, for only a few months afterwards we find him appointed as a tutor in the University of Pennsylvania.

In the winter of 1799 he was admitted to the Pennsylvania Hospital as a student of the eminent Drs. Benjamin Smith Barton and Benjamin Rush, and to certain medical lectures of the University of Pennsylvania by Drs. Shippen and Wistar. He attended also lectures on chemistry in 1799 and 1800 by Dr. James Woodhouse. During these years a warm friendship existed between him and his preceptor, Dr. Barton, to whom he dedicated his graduating thesis, and after whom he named his second son William Barton Rogers. While still in the medical school he was married, January 2, 1801, to Hannah Blythe, "an intelligent woman, a year older than himself, endowed with a cheerful and affectionate disposition."

"Patrick K. Rogers is described as a tall, erect

¹ Ruschenberger.

man, of grave deportment, having dark hair well sprinkled with gray, and soft, sleepy eyes. He played the violin and sang well, but never in company, or in the presence of strangers, because such performance or display seemed to him inconsistent with the dignity of a gentleman.

“Hannah Blythe was the youngest daughter of James Blythe, a native of Glasgow but a resident of Londonderry, and his wife Bessie, a daughter of James Bell, a mathematical-instrument maker and an English citizen of Londonderry. James Blythe was a publisher and stationer. He founded, in 1772, the ‘Londonderry Journal,’ the first tri-weekly paper printed in the North of Ireland. It became a daily, and is still published. . . . The paper was printed and issued from the house in which he lived. His daughter, Mrs. Ramsay, who died in Baltimore at the advanced age of ninety-two years, often mentioned, among the reminiscences of her early childhood, the gathering of a crowd reading a placard on the front of their house, headed ‘BLOODY NEWS FROM AMERICA,’ announcing the battle of Lexington, April, 1775. She also stated that many Protestant citizens rejoiced over this resistance of Americans to the British rule.

“James Blythe died in 1787, leaving a widow and three daughters, Elizabeth, Mary Ann and Hannah. The widow, Bessie Bell, who was an intelligent and energetic woman, removed to Strabane, about fifteen miles southward from Londonderry, took into partnership a foreman from the old establishment, and set up and conducted a newspaper till she died in 1794. The business was unprofitable. The daughters were left without support. They promptly determined to emigrate, embarked in a ship belonging to their cousin, Adam Crampton, of Londonderry, and, after a voyage of three months, arrived in Philadelphia. They were received by their cousin, wife of Thomas Moore, merchant, who had left Coleraine some time before on account of his affiliation with the ‘United

Irishmen.' These daughters are described as active, intelligent women, and being, like most ladies of that period, proficient in the use of the needle, with it supported themselves respectably and independently.

"In May, 1802, Mr. P. K. Rogers received the degree of Doctor of Medicine from the University of Pennsylvania. His thesis on *Liriodendron tulipifera* (the tulip-tree), in which he records the results of experimental observations of its chemical and therapeutic properties, was printed and is extant. A son, James Blythe, the eldest of the brothers Rogers, was born in Philadelphia, February 11, 1802. The city directory for 1802 states that P. K. Rogers, M. D., lived at No. 55 Lombard Street, implying that he had established a home for himself very soon after his marriage."¹

In 1803 Robert Rogers, the father of Patrick and grandfather of William Barton Rogers, died, and Dr. P. K. Rogers, being the eldest son, returned in the same year to Ireland to adjust the family affairs. This duty occupied nearly a year, after which he returned to Philadelphia, bringing with him two of his younger brothers. Among his papers is a ticket to a medical course in the University of Pennsylvania, dated 1805, and bearing the name of Mr. Frederick Rogers. This may have been one of these brothers. Meanwhile his second son, William Barton Rogers, was born. At this time the family was living at 262 North Second Street, probably between Vine and Callow Hill streets, and the family fortunes were at a low ebb. Among Dr. P. K. Rogers's papers is a brief autobiographical statement which, unfortunately, is limited to this period of his life and the trying years which followed. The paper, which bears no date, and begins and ends

¹ Ruschenberger.

abruptly, was apparently written in Baltimore about 1817. It is as follows:—

“In the year 1803 I was engaged in full business in Philadelphia as a physician, and the products of my practice were more than equal to my current expenses. But I was encumbered with small debts to a considerable aggregate amount, perhaps three thousand dollars, gradually contracted during the first years of my professional and family establishment. My father dying in 1803, I thought it important to go to Ireland to adjust family affairs, and to obtain that share of property to which I was entitled. I was barely able to bring to Philadelphia, after an absence of almost a year, as much money as paid my debt. This agreeable business I performed promptly, and when done I had neither money nor an establishment.

“It being difficult in the medical profession to make a second beginning in the same place (and I was wedded to the place by a thousand attachments), I was never able afterwards to procure a share of business equal to the expenses of my family, however moderated. Other aids were sought to make good the deficiency, but they only served to involve me more rapidly in debt.

“A medical library appeared to be a thing wanted at the seat of medical learning. Some respectable booksellers advised me to undertake the enterprise as one not calculated to interrupt my professional exertions in any great degree. They were sanguine and liberal in aiding this establishment, and several thousand volumes were speedily arranged. The library was not supported, and in less than two years I begged to return the books as the only measure that would enable me to do them any degree of justice. Many of the works were more valuable than salable; all were said to be somewhat injured. Except about two hundred volumes, all were returned, and I allowed the booksellers damages. The library room, fixtures,

damages and contingent expenses left me in debt at least four thousand dollars.

“Previous to and during these transactions, I was engaged in giving lectures on the practice of medicine, in the winter season, yearly. On the death of Dr. Woodhouse, I applied for the chemical chair in the University of Pennsylvania, but I had not a sufficient number of patrons in the board of trustees. My scientific friends thought I had a claim more just and reasonable than that which is founded on family connections, and accordingly they urged me to relinquish the practical lectures, and prepare a full course on chemistry for a popular audience.¹ I complied. Apparatus, and the appropriation of much time to experiments for demonstration, involved me in more debt and undermined my practice. For some years I experienced the most pungent anxiety on account of my circumstances. Sensibility to reputation, and the dread of a species of disgrace attached to insolvent persons, prevented me from seeking relief in the humane and benevolent institutes of our country.

“Several of my creditors, interested for my happiness and the welfare of my family, advised me to remove to Baltimore or New York and resume the exercise of my profession, believing I would not be harassed, as the more importunate had already stripped me of effects. I was left without even the necessary accommodations for a house and family, as furniture and kitchen utensils.

“In Baltimore I have sought repose of mind and subsistence for my family. The latter I have found; the former has, during more than four years’ residence in this city, been interrupted only by the importunities and suits of my Philadelphia creditors. I again feel the terrible condition of a debtor destitute of

¹ Perhaps the first series of popular lectures on chemistry given in this country, — certainly the first, or one of the first, to which ladies were admitted.

resources, while looked to by a numerous family for support.

“A considerable part of my debt was contracted with friends, — real friends, who never intended to coerce, much less distress me. Some of them are no more, and their descendants are not at liberty to act as the deceased would have done. Others have failed in trade, and their claims have passed into the hands of trustees for the benefit of their creditors. From either class of original creditors or their successors it is now impossible to obtain assent to a general release.”

During these years three children were born, — a third son, Henry Darwin, August 1, 1808, and two daughters, both of whom died in infancy.

In 1808 the family lived at 205 Mulberry (now Arch) Street, Philadelphia. From 1809 to 1812 they lived at 13 South Ninth Street, where they remained until their removal to Baltimore. The fourth son, Robert, was born in Baltimore, March 29, 1813. A fifth son, Alexander, born May 4, 1815, died a few years later.

In 1810 Dr. Rogers published an outline of a course of lectures entitled “A Syllabus of a Course of Lectures on Natural Philosophy and Chemistry, with the Application of the Latter to Several of the Arts.”

“It may not be improper for me to mention that between the years 1808 and 1811 I delivered several courses of lectures on chemistry and natural philosophy in Philadelphia, some of which were attended throughout (no doubt for amusement, or from courteous or friendly motives) by the director of the mint, Robert Patterson, and several of the professors of the University of Pennsylvania.”¹

¹ Letter of P. K. Rogers to Thomas Jefferson, May 21, 1819.

Dr. Rogers removed to Baltimore about the end of 1812.

“At first he lived at 15 Market Street, Fell’s Point, where he had an apothecary’s shop, and subsequently at 68 South Charles Street. He was elected physician of the Hibernian Society in 1816. The same year it was charged that ‘Dr. P. K. Rogers, at Fell’s Point, persists in the use of variolous matter in preference to vaccine, against the public remonstrance of Dr. James Smith.’¹ The controversy on this question carried on in the newspapers was detrimental to his professional business.”²

It does not appear, however, that his opinions on vaccination did him lasting injury, for on June 7, 1819, he was elected by the Maryland Medico-Chirurgical Society their “orator” for the next year, 1820.

In the letter of May 21, 1819, to which reference has already been made, Dr. P. K. Rogers applied to Thomas Jefferson for a professorship in the newly established University of Virginia. He received from Mr. Jefferson the following reply:—

THOMAS JEFFERSON TO PATRICK KERR ROGERS.

MONTICELLO, June 23, 1819.

SIR, — Your favour of May 21 was received in due time. The Visitors of the University of Virginia had determined at their meeting in March that it was not expedient to divert any of its funds from building during the present year, but that propositions should be made, and an engagement entered into with Dr. Cooper, to undertake the Professorship of Natural Philosophy, Chemistry, and Mineralogy, as also that of

¹ *Medical Annals of Baltimore*, by John R. Quinan, M. D., 8vo, pp. 274, Baltimore, 1884.

² Ruschenberger.

Law, and to open these schools in April next. The probable impracticability of providing buildings this season for the other professorships induced them to expect that another year would be necessary for that object, and that a general opening of the University would have to be postponed till 1821. It is now visible that the slow progress of building will produce the delay they apprehended. I am sorry, therefore, that this state of things, and the anticipation of the appointment of a professor to the school you desired, leave no room for availing the University of the offer of services you have been pleased to tender. Accept, pray, the assurance of my great respect.

TH: JEFFERSON.

“In 1819 his qualifications and capacity to teach were recognized, and he was elected Professor of Natural Philosophy and Chemistry in the ancient College of William and Mary (founded at Williamsburg, Va., in 1692), in place of Dr. Robert Hare, resigned. Dr. Rogers left Baltimore in October, 1819, and was soon settled with his wife and boys in the Brafferton House, on the college campus. He was earnest in his work. He made all the apparatus required to illustrate his lectures. In this making and mending he was habitually aided by his sons, who thus acquired unusual facility in the use of tools for working wood and metals.”¹

During the summer of 1820, after the close of the session of the college on July 4, Mrs. Rogers was attacked with malarial fever and died. To avoid this fever, which always prevailed in that locality during the summer, Dr. Rogers usually left Williamsburg as soon after the close of the term as practicable. Eight years after the death of his wife, having come northward for the college vacation, he was seized with

¹ Ruschenberger.

malarial fever and died, at Ellicott Mills, Md., August 1, 1828, in the fifty-second year of his age. The reverence and affection with which the brothers regarded their father and the influence of his somewhat remarkable and unique character are more fully illustrated by incidents dwelt upon in the next chapter. Of the life and character of their mother, who died before the sons had attained maturity, pleasant traditions alone remain.