

# George Walter McCoy: 1876—1952

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WITH THE DEATH of George Walter McCoy on April 2, 1952, the United States Public Health Service lost one of its most respected and distinguished officers. Born in the Cumberland Valley, Pennsylvania, in 1876, Dr. McCoy received his medical degree from the University of Pennsylvania in 1898, and entered the U. S. Public Health and Marine Hospital Service in 1900. His early investigations dealt with plague, leprosy, and the natural diseases of rodents. Among the latter he recognized a plaguelike disease from which he isolated and cultivated, with C. W. Chapin, the causative organism of tularemia.

Dr. McCoy's work in these fields was widely recognized and led to his appointment as director of the Hygienic Laboratory (which later became known as the National Institutes of Health), a position he held for 23 years. Under his leadership the laboratory grew in scientific prestige and expanded from the single "red brick building" to four excellent buildings, wherein the enlarged staff found improved facilities, at 25th and E Streets, Washington, D. C. The institute was later transferred to Bethesda, Maryland.

After becoming director Dr. McCoy, in addition to his administrative duties, found time to continue research and field studies on such problems as leprosy, dengue fever, influenza, psittacosis, post-vaccination tetanus, antirabies vaccination paralysis, amebic dysentery, biologics control, etc. He was a strong advocate of a combined field and laboratory approach to disease problems, and his contributions to both epidemiology and laboratory knowledge were substantial. His publications were models of directness, conciseness, and clarity.

His scientific opinions and advice were much sought; yet perhaps his greatest contribution to science came from his unique method of handling students and young scientists. In order to appreciate his methods and to judge the full impact of his influence, one must understand the character and personality of the man.

In scientific matters Dr. McCoy was an austere critic, yet always kind, fair, self-effacing, and loyal. As director of the laboratory he considered himself to be the servant rather than the master of the bench workers. In the atmosphere of his laboratories it was easy for the investigator to become absorbed in his problems; and when he was once interested, he was allowed free rein to follow his own ideas, leads, or hunches, without restraint or questioning. The director never pressed an investigator for early publication;

in fact, he was more likely to advise "more study before going on record." Yet he considered the investigators' time as almost sacred and was resentful whenever administrative or other matters distracted them from their problems.

Among the small, devoted group of scientists privileged to enjoy his stimulating influence were Joseph Goldberger, Edward Francis, James P. Leake, R. R. Parker, Charles Armstrong, R. R. Spencer, Ida Bengtson, Alice Evans, R. E. Dyer, Kenneth Maxcy, and R. D. Lillie.

Perhaps the personal quality that best characterized Dr. McCoy was his downright honesty. He was ever ready to acknowledge when he did not know, or to admit an error, or to change his opinion in the face of evidence; but otherwise he could not be coaxed or cajoled to do so. It was quite natural for him in a research institution to place research above all else—he cared little for a fine "mill," but he cared everything for the "grist." He would readily approve expenditures for research necessities, but he would permit no luxuries such as rugs, fine desks, fancy furniture, or paintings in his own or other offices. Some smiled at these "peculiarities," but they were a natural and necessary result of his stern sense of propriety.

Dr. McCoy was appointed professor of preventive medicine and public health in the School of Medicine, Louisiana State University, in 1938 and served until 1945. He filled the position with distinction through mastery of the subject field, ability to go directly to the heart of a problem, and a manner of expression that was simple, concise, and direct.

For his contributions to public health George W. McCoy was awarded the Sedgwick Gold Medal by the American Public Health Association in 1931. He served on the National Board of Medical Examiners, 1921–40; the Basic Science Board for the District of Columbia; the Council on Pharmacy and Chemistry of the American Medical Association; the Committee on Biologic Products of the U. S. Pharmacopeia; and on the Committee of Virus Research and Epidemiology of the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis. He was a member of the Society of the Sigma Xi and many professional societies and associations.

George W. McCoy was a great man, an able investigator, a foresighted administrator, an inspiring teacher, and an unimpeachable government official, who by his versatility contributed much to the health of the world.