



THE FACULTY OF MEDICINE  
Harvard University

# William Vincent McDermott, Jr.



William Vincent McDermott, Jr., was born in Salem, Massachusetts, on March 7, 1917. He was the son of Mary Feenan and William V. McDermott. Dr. McDermott died at his home in Dedham on July 19, 2001, surrounded by his family and loved ones.

Bill McDermott seemingly was bred for leadership in Boston medicine. His father graduated from Harvard Medical School in 1896, was a neurologist in Salem, and was on staff at Massachusetts General Hospital. Bill Jr. matriculated from Salem High School to Phillips Exeter Academy, and then attended Harvard College, where he graduated in 1938 with a concentration in French history and literature. He then went on to Harvard Medical School, graduating in 1942. His surgical training was done at Massachusetts General Hospital. His entire clinical and academic careers took place at one of the Harvard-associated surgical services. At his death, Dr. McDermott was the Cheever Professor of Surgery, *Emeritus*, at Harvard Medical School and the retired Chairman of the Deaconess-Harvard Surgical Service, which was the successor to the Fifth (Harvard) Surgical Service at Boston City Hospital. Dr. McDermott

directed these Harvard surgical programs from 1963 through 1984. In 1985, the William V. McDermott Jr. Chair of Surgery was endowed at Harvard Medical School by grateful patients and friends to honor Bill for a remarkable 22 years of Harvard surgical leadership during an era of tremendous change in clinical medicine, academic expectations and physical location for his part of the Harvard Surgical diaspora. Of course, we were all blessed with another almost 20 years of Bill McDermott's active participation in and observation of clinical medicine, numerous celebrations of his career, his family, his students, and his commentary on the even more staggering changes in medicine and the academic environment that occurred around him following his purported retirement.

Through his entire career and regardless of the currents swirling about him, Bill McDermott held fast to certain truths:

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*In tribute to their dedicated efforts to science and medicine, deceased members of the Harvard Faculty of Medicine (those at the rank of full or emeritus professor) receive a review of their life and contributions with a complete reflection, a **Memorial Minute**.*

- 1) Boston was the hub of the universe.
- 2) Harvard was the hub of Boston.
- 3) Harvard men and women should carry themselves with grace – their intrinsic ability of course was assumed.
- 4) No Harvard/Yale game, or for that matter, no Bean Pot hockey match, could be missed.

Dr. McDermott's medical education, his surgical preparation, his intellectual focus particularly early in his career, his mentoring of young surgeons, and his organizational successes and "staying power" later in his career were all of a single well-defined continuum. During his training he became one of Dr. Edward Churchill's favorites among an extraordinary cohort of surgical acolytes at Massachusetts General Hospital. Ready to succeed Dr. Churchill at Massachusetts General Hospital, or to contend for the Moseley Chair at what was then the Peter Bent Brigham, McDermott instead was called in 1963 by Dean Ebert to lead and expand the Harvard Surgical Service at Boston City Hospital. At the time of this appointment Dr. Churchill remarked, "Dr. McDermott's work on ammonia metabolism with clarification of the so-called hepatic coma has been one of the outstanding contributions of the department at the Massachusetts General Hospital in the past several years." The venue at the Boston City Hospital was just right, both for Bill McDermott's clinical research as well as for his organizational skills. Liver failure, hepatic coma, ammonia intoxication, cirrhosis and surgery in cirrhotic patients, the physiology and consequences of one or another type of portal-systemic shunt, liver cancer, and liver transplantation were all interests explored and developed, first at Massachusetts General Hospital and then carried throughout Bill McDermott's career at Boston City Hospital and The Deaconess – garnering him and his surgical units both regional and national acclaim. But it was his ability to deal with people, his charm, or perhaps his unusual combination of obvious acuity and blarney that enabled such a huge range of contacts, from the "bigwigs" at Harvard to all of his patients and his over 110 chief surgical residents, to remember and value their interactions with Bill McDermott.

Perhaps it was his intrinsic personality, or perhaps it was partly from his war experiences tending the wounded at Omaha Beach on through to the liberation of the survivors of the Ebensee Concentration Camp in Austria, but somehow Bill McDermott seemed to handle the major problems he faced in the changing medical and sociologic context and significant personal tragedy with incredible grace, calm, and a quiet knowledge that his positive leadership could make a difference. And it did.

The transition to his leadership at Boston City Hospital in 1963 reinvigorated a revered but somewhat fragile Harvard Surgical Service. The end of Harvard's involvement at Boston City Hospital and the physical transition of the Cheever Chair to The New England Deaconess Hospital was possible only because of Dr. McDermott's personal efforts and abilities. The remarkably successful joint surgical leadership (for almost six years) with Neil Sedgwick allowed The New England Deaconess Hospital to make a smooth evolution from a hospital designed essentially as a "condominium" of famous and successful clinics into a full-fledged Harvard teaching hospital dominated by vigorous, successful clinician-researchers. In 1980, when The Lahey Clinic moved to its new home in Burlington, Dr. McDermott added the title of Chief of Surgery at The New England Deaconess Hospital to his duties as Chairman of the Harvard Surgical Service. Although the new venue for the old Harvard Fifth Surgical Service was centered at The Deaconess, Dr. McDermott incorporated and integrated numerous surgical programs including those at Cambridge Hospital, the Manchester New Hampshire VA Hospital, The Faulkner Hospital, as well as residual affiliations in trauma at Boston City Hospital. And of course, the collaborative approach to liver transplantation in Boston occurred, in part, because of Bill McDermott. Without this unusually collegial approach it is likely that Boston's involvement in liver transplantation

would have been delayed.

In addition to his many scientific papers and books (more than 230 journal publications and eight books), Dr. McDermott wrote a remarkable memoir of his WWII experiences entitled *A Surgeon in Combat*, drawing from the 700 or so letters he had written to Blanche O’Riorden, the sweetheart he married three months before joining Patton’s Army. Publication of his *History of Surgery at The Deaconess Hospital* and the biographical sketches contained in *Doctors Afield and Afar* of Galileo, Copernicus, Keats, Livingston, Joseph Warren and others who were trained in medicine but famed for their non-medical achievements, rounded out the bona fides of a true Renaissance man. However, all of his worldly knowledge and experience proved to Bill McDermott that there was nothing better than his home in New England. He ascended to the presidency of numerous academic and specialty organizations: Aesculapian Club 1970, Boston Surgical Society 1971, New England Surgical Society 1986-87, Harvard Medical Alumni Association 1975-76, Massachusetts Chapter of The American College of Surgeons 1983-84, but countless times declined membership and/or leadership opportunities that would have taken him away from his beloved Boston.

Bill McDermott is survived by two daughters, Gwen of Dedham and Jane Hoch of Chestnut Hill, a son, Shaw of Dedham, and six grandchildren. He is also survived by countless surgeons, academicians, trainees, colleagues, and friends who owe some significant portion of their talents or spirit to him.

One of Bill McDermott’s favorite quotes (and he had many) was from Longfellow:

*Lives of great men all remind us  
We can make our lives sublime  
And, departing, leave behind us  
Footprints on the sands of time.*

Bill McDermott left large footprints behind, indeed.

Respectfully submitted,

Glenn D. Steele, Jr., *Chairperson*

Albert Bothe, Jr.

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