Cheves McCord Smythe  
1924 – 2020

Cheves McCord Smythe, physician, professor of medicine, husband of Polly, father of five sons, hunter, fisherman, sailor, golfer, cook, avid reader, and intellectual, died on Monday, May 11, 2020. He died of heart failure, fourteen days before his 96th birthday. Due to the pandemic, a memorial service will be postponed until later in the year, when he will be memorialized and his remains interred in the graveyard of the Second Presbyterian Church of Charleston, the church of his father, grandfather and great-grandfather.

Cheves Smythe was born May 25, 1924 in Charleston, South Carolina, the youngest child of Augustine Thomas Smythe and Harriott Ravenel Smythe. He graduated from the Taft School in 1942 and went to Yale. Due to the war, he left Yale at age 19 before graduating and joined the Navy to go to the Harvard Medical School. While at medical school, he met his future bride, Isabella Carr Leighton, then in high school. They were married in Harvard Memorial Church on August 12, 1949, immediately after her graduation from Vassar College.

After medical school, he trained at Bellevue Hospital in New York City and at the Boston City Hospital, where he was chief resident in 1954-55. He was called to active service in the Navy in 1952-53 in a research laboratory at Camp Lejeune and served in the Navy Reserve for many years thereafter. In 1955, he joined the faculty of Medical College of South Carolina, now the Medical University of South Carolina, as an associate professor of medicine. In 1962, at age 37, he was named the dean of the Medical School, the first of three medical schools of which he was dean and a major shaping force.

In 1966, after considering positions in various institutions, he moved his family to Chicago to become the associate director of the American Association of Medical Colleges. This was a period of rapid growth and change for that organization and the medical education system nationwide, with sixteen new medical schools opening in the United States and nine in Canada. In 1970, the family moved to Houston, Texas, to begin his 41-year association with The University of Texas Medical School at Houston beginning as its founding dean. He remained in that position until 1975. During his tenure, the faculty was recruited, the class size doubled, and the principal buildings were built, all within budget.

From 1975 until 1979 he stayed on the medical school faculty as a professor. However, in 1979, he began to shape the third medical school of his career, the Aga Kahn University Medical College in Karachi, Pakistan. He was hired initially as a consultant working from Houston, moving to Karachi in 1982 when he was named the founding dean, where he was heavily involved in recruiting the faculty and getting the school off the ground. During those years they made many lifelong friends from all over the world.

He and Polly returned to Houston in 1985, where he became interested in geriatric medicine, then an under-valued medical specialty. He did a fellowship in geriatrics in Los Angeles for a year, with a goal of organizing a geriatric unit at the Medical School. However, upon his return
to Houston, his efforts were met with resistance and it took about 10 years for those efforts to come to fruition. During those years he served as a clinician and on the faculty of the Medical School, including a stint as the second president of the Texas Geriatric Society.

In 1991, he was lured back to Karachi for a year as chairman of the Department of Internal Medicine, greatly stabilizing and strengthening it. He then returned to Houston where he was named chief of medicine of the LBJ Hospital, which he also ably managed and strengthened.

In 1995, he was named interim dean of the Houston Medical School. In that role, he finally occupied the physical office he had designed 25 years earlier but never occupied. After his service as interim dean, he served as a clinician, faculty member and on numerous committees until his retirement from medicine on July 31, 2011, 64 years after graduating from medical school and 68 years after he first started working in hospitals. During his long career he received countless awards for his integrity, insight and clinical and teaching abilities.

Cheves was an avid outdoorsman, a duck hunter, sailor and offshore fisherman in the Gulf of Mexico, which he knew like the back of his hand. His boys were always the first invitees on these ventures and they and many of their friends learned these pursuits under his tutelage. A man of tremendous energy, after a full day in the field or on the water, he would come home, clean up, perhaps do some office work, then cook supper before finally falling to a well-earned sleep listening to the opera.

In 2013, Cheves and Polly moved back to Charleston, after 47 years away, to take up residence in the Bishop Gadsden retirement community on James Island, where they were re-united with many old Charleston friends and made many new ones. He is survived by his wife, Isabella Carr Smythe, their five sons, Alexander Cheves Smythe, James Leighton Smythe, Augustine Thomas Smythe II, Daniel Thompson Smythe and St. Julien Ravenel Smythe, 14 grandchildren, three great grandchildren and numerous nieces and nephews. In addition to his family, he leaves a legacy of the three medical schools he created or transformed, thousands of physicians whom he trained, and tens of thousands of patients he cared for. One is reminded of a line from the Messiah, one of his favorite musical works, taken from Corinthians I: Oh death, where is thy sting? Oh grave, where is thy victory? Death is swallowed up in victory.