

The Osler Library: A collection that represents the mind of its collector

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"There are three well-stocked rooms which it should be the ambition of every doctor to have in his house; the library, the laboratory and the nursery — books, balances and bairns. But as he may not achieve all three, I would urge him to start at any rate with the books and balances."

When Sir William Osler died Dec. 29, 1919, he was the most renowned English-speaking physician of his day — regius professor of medicine at the University of Oxford, author of "The Principles and Practice of Medicine" (the standard text for medical students between 1892 and 1947) and a charismatic personality to whose Oxford home — nicknamed the "Open Arms" as a tribute to the Oslers' hospitality — flocked Canadians, physicians and friends from

all over the world. In the years following his death it was as a clinician, teacher and author that he was, with respect and affection, primarily remembered. The name of the minister's son from Tecumseh, Ontario, is still honoured. But as the number of those who knew him personally has

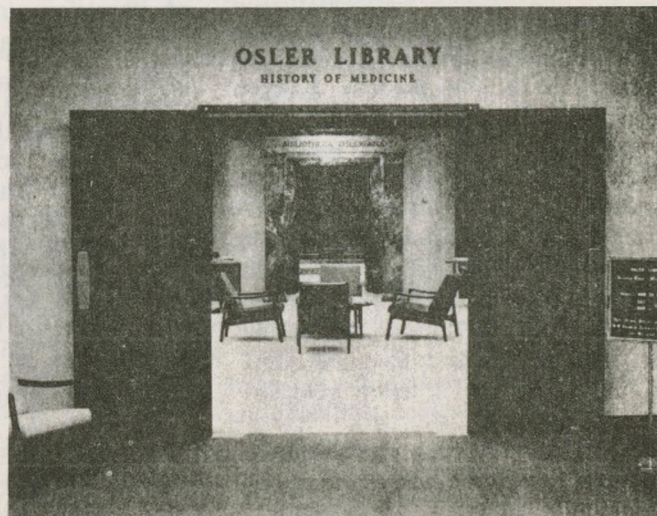
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diminished, and the practice of medicine has made advances of which his generation never dreamed, memories of his personality and scientific pursuits might have faded — were it not for the well-stocked Osler

Library of the History of Medicine at McGill University. Osler was always a man who put his theories into practice.

Osler would probably not recognize the library of medical and scientific works he assembled if he saw it now. The 8000 volumes he collected have been rehoused twice and recatalogued since they left Oxford in 1929. On Apr. 19 this year a new wing opened, the W.W. Francis Wing, as an addition to the four rooms in McGill's McIntyre medical sciences building already devoted to what is now a collection of more than 25 000 volumes. And next year, on May 29, the library will celebrate its 50th anniversary.

But the imprint of Osler's personality is still clearly visible. The basis of the library is the volumes he



The old and the new: (Left) Osler Room, Osler Library in its first location at McGill in the Strathcona Building. (Right) View of the entrance to the new Osler library. The Osler niche is visible in the background of each picture.

collected between 1867 and his death. Osler delighted in books — in the excitement of acquiring a rare text, in the joy of adding to knowledge of medical history, in the pleasure in giving to friends, acquaintances and libraries. He enjoyed the camaraderie of other bibliophiles and had a network of contacts all over the world to supply him with items. He purchased many rare Arabic manuscripts, for instance, through a Dr. M. Sa'eed, of Hamadan, Iran, including the priceless and unique 13th-century al-Ghafigi manuscript, a beautifully illustrated herbal. The Osler library contains many of the original invoices for purchases, repairs and shipping. A recent study of these by Miss Ellen Wells (published in the *Osler Library Newsletter* 26, Oct. 1977)* reveals that the highest price Osler paid for a single item was £40 to Leo Olschki of Florence for the extremely rare edition of Rhazes's "*Liber nonus ad Almansorem*" 1476, which he donated to the British Museum. Out of his thousands of purchases, few cost more than £4, often spent at auctions — "the only economical way to get old books" as he points out.

Osler paid high for herbals, *incunabula* (books printed before 1501) and finely illustrated volumes, but otherwise he was able to amass working groups in areas of interest without exorbitant expenditure — a copy of Huxham's "A dissertation on the malignant ulcerous sore-throat" for 5 shillings in 1914 and an edition of Sanctorius's "*De Medicina statica*" for 5 lira in 1909. And he was a shrewd businessman when occasion demanded. A Luigi Lubrano of Naples offered Osler an early 16th-century manuscript of medical texts of the Paduan school for £10 May 4, 1917. Ten days later he accepted a counteroffer of £6.

Osler said, "No man is really safe or happy without a hobby", but his consumed a considerable part of his income, wise buying notwithstanding. The records that have survived indicate he spent £544 in 1909 and £462 in 1914 — a substantial sum in today's terms.

Some of his spending was incurred on what he described skittishly as

his "quinquennial brain dusting" trips, on which he would make the rounds of continental laboratories and antiquarian bookshops to keep abreast of what was happening in the arts of medicine and bibliophilism. He acquired this travelling habit early — his brother paid for him to study for 2 years at University College, London, after he graduated from McGill in 1872 and before returning to Montreal as a clinician. He was certainly not above some friendly rivalry with other philanthropic bibliophiles. In the Sir William Osler memorial number of the *CMAJ* (July 1920) W.W. Keen relates how he had got in ahead of Osler among the Italian bookshops



Photo portrait of Sir William Osler in academic dress, Oxford, 1908.

in 1907, picking up for the College of Physicians in Philadelphia some 25 *incunabula* and other rare items. Osler, finding himself anticipated, retaliated with a postcard largely and legibly bearing the words "You pig". But this did not curb Osler's own generosity to Philadelphia, where he spent 4 years as a professor of clinical medicine in the University of Pennsylvania after leaving Montreal in 1884, and to whom he donated at least 54 titles — each accompanied by a note from him as to why the book was a desirable addition.

Although Sir William's purchases were prolific, his choices were not random. He collected along two lines; as he explained, he bought "books that are of historical im-

portance in the evolution of medicine and books that have interest through the character or work of their authors." The text books of his student days are included for "the sake of auld lang syne". The contents of the Osler Library mirror his interests not just in their variety, but also in their organization. When he decided to leave most of his books to his alma mater, he had already conceived the decidedly unusual arrangement of the catalogue that was to present his material for other enthusiasts.

The arrangement depends on a subdivision into eight categories, of which the first two most clearly emphasize Osler's approach to medical history. The first section he called *Bibliotheca Prima*. This contains around 1700 works by or about 67 authors who in his opinion were contributors of the first rank to medical science from Hippocrates to the 19th century. Some of his selections he admitted were idiosyncratic; by the entry in the catalogue for Conrad Gesner, he wrote, "I am not sure that this fellow should go into *Prima*, but I love him so much that I must put him there."

The second section, entitled *Bibliotheca Secunda*, was the largest and most strictly medical: it contained what in Sir William's opinion were important but not first-rank contributions. The other categories include *Bibliotheca Litteraria*, *Biographica*, *Historica*, *Bibliographica*, and *Incunabula*. The prize of the *Bibliotheca Litteraria* section is Osler's superb and unrivalled collection of the various editions of works by his hero, Sir Thomas Browne, whose motto "Aequanimitas" Osler adopted when he was made a baronet in 1911 by George V.

The spread of the catalogue is wide, as befits its author, who believed that "to keep his mind sweet, the modern scientific man should be saturated with the Bible and Plato, with Shakespeare and Milton." The books are no longer organized according to the original scheme, since as the library grew it proved impractical not to adhere to a more orthodox cataloguing system. It was consequently reorganized in 1970, to "improve security, preservation, use and development."

Many libraries benefited from Osler's legendary generosity. Whenever he visited any hospital or university,

*The *Newsletter* is available free by writing to the editor, Osler Library of the History of Medicine, 3655 Drummond Street, Montreal, PQ H3G 1Y6



Clinic by Osler at Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal, 1902.

he would always make time to dash up to the library and have a quick look at what was on the shelves. As his biographer Harvey Cushing remarked, "Osler's interest in libraries was cumulative, and a contact once made was never lost."

He established funds for book purchases at Maryland's library of the medical and surgical faculty and the University of Toronto and played a major role in building up the nascent library at Johns Hopkin Hospital, where he was in charge of the medical department between 1899 and his departure for Oxford in 1904. But it was to McGill he decided to will the bulk of his own collection, because, as he explained, "the formative years were there, with the strong ties of head and heart... The members of the medical faculty adopted me, bore with vagaries and aggressiveness and often gave practical expressions of sympathy with schemes which were costly and of doubtful utility. That they believed in me helped to a belief in myself, an important asset for a young man, but better had by nurture than by nature."

At his death, the cataloguing of his collection was a long way from completion. But just as the library's shelves today bear witness to Osler's own enthusiasms, so the catalogue bears the firm imprint of his personality. Not only had he formed the collection and decided on its arrangement: he had also nominated the man who was to be the librarian

of his collection at McGill and suggested suitable candidates to aid in the completion of the catalogue — the "Bibliotheca Osleriana" — before the books left Oxford.

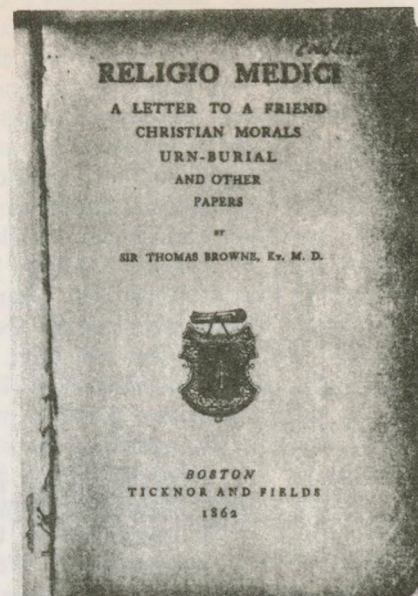
Dedicated disciple

William Willoughby Francis, the first Osler librarian after whom the new wing is named, was Osler's cousin, a medical graduate of Johns Hopkin, and a member of the *CMAJ* staff between 1912 and 1915. He inherited more than just the guardianship of the formidable library from Osler; he also shared his humour, bibliomania and certainty that a knowledge of the historical texts of medicine would enhance the life and practice of any aspiring physician. From 1922 until 1929, along with Osler's nominees R.H. Hill, Archibald Malloch and Leonard Mackall, Francis laboured over the preparation of the "Bibliotheca" with a painstaking precision that had the publishers, Oxford University's Clarendon Press, grinding their presses with impatience. But Francis refused to be hurried. He was convinced that for the catalogue to have any sort of value, it must be meticulously accurate — and that meant no shortcuts. He also shared with Osler the belief, as Osler said of Billings, Haller and Gesner, "there is no better float through posterity than to be the author of a good bibliography."

The task was finally completed in 1929, and the books shipped to McGill. The catalogue is as much a tribute to Francis as to Osler. He knew how to spice finicky bibliography with the kind of remark or anecdote any reader would love. The most quoted example of his witty erudition is this comment on the conflict among historians as to the death date of Francesco Redi, the Italian naturalist:

Death is almost a habit with Redi — in the books of reference. He died, perhaps for the first time, in 1676... again in 1694... and then more frequently. Autopsied in 1696, he was found dead in March 1697 and made his will the following December... His final dissolution occurred in 1698.

Finally with books, completed catalogue and librarian gathered in Montreal, the Osler Library had its official opening May 29, 1929, on what Francis commented was "the



Title page of "Religio Medici" the cornerstone of Osler's collection.

hottest day in the memory of the participants, particularly those functioning in academics."

The Osler Library was then located in McGill's Strathcona medical building, now the university's department of anatomy and dentistry. The space allotted to it appears to have been originally designed as a laboratory, with a high ceiling, three large windows and an uncomfortably narrow doorway. But McGill asked Percy Erskine Nobbs, the respected Montreal architect and former head of McGill's school of architecture, to refit the room to receive the Osler Library. By breaking the space up with pillars, moving and broadening the entrance and employing gifted craftsmen to work the plastic and decorative details, he created a room that combines harmony and intimacy, charm and dignity. Opposite the entrance is the semicircular "Osler niche", in which there is a plaque showing Osler's head in profile and a panel behind which the ashes of Sir William and Lady Osler are immured, flanked by Osler's own works and his treasured collections of Browne, Burton and Rabelais. Far from giving the impression of a morgue, these Oslerian relics suggest the spirit of the library's founder peeping down at readers, propelling them along the same bibliophilic trails.

In the years following its establishment, the library grew rather slowly. By 1940 only 1500 books had been added — many as a result of

combining the McGill library's collection of medical history texts with Osler's. Part of the reason was that the library was richer in memories and manuscripts than in endowments. Lady Osler had supported the work on the catalogue and also provided £10 000 in additional endowments, and generous additional funding came from Sir Charles Lindsay, the Montreal philanthropist, Dr. Charles F. Martin and members of the Osler family. But money was still tight. In 1957 the Wellcome trust came forward with a generous grant to provide funds for strengthening the collection.

Nobb's original design had allowed for only a 25% expansion of the library, and in recognition of Wellcome's generosity and in the general reshuffle of McGill medical facilities, the McGill authorities decided to shift the Osler room, pillar by pillar, to the new McIntyre medical sciences building, where space could be provided for a second room, to be known as the Wellcome Camera. The move was made in 1964, and the old-fashioned oaken elegance of Nobb's creation is now approached through the streamlined pine decor of the Wellcome Camera, which serves as catalogue room as well as additional library and reading room. And from this year there is the Francis wing as well, which provides extra shelving for rare and circulating books of the Osler Library, a staff lounge and additional office, seminar and study space for McGill's department of the history of medicine.

The chairman of that department, Dr. Donald Bates, officiated at the unveiling of a plaque last year in memory of Francis, who died in 1959. The plaque bears a poignantly appropriate inscription taken from Owen Meredith (a pseudonym of the first Earl of Lytton):

That man is great, and he alone,
Who serves a greatness not his own,
For neither praise nor pelf;
Content to know, and be unknown;
Whole in himself.

Current activities

The library is a monument to its founder, but, it is very much a living monument. It is associated with the very active Osler Society of McGill, founded in 1929, whose thrice yearly meetings are usually held in the li-

brary: it founded a "Friends of The Osler Library" to stimulate interest and financial support, and since June 1969 it has published an *Osler Library Newsletter* which is a fund of anecdotes and information about Osler, the library and medical history. From backnumbers of the newsletter one can mine such nuggets as "Books for Horsemen in the Bibliotheca Osleriana", "The Dismal Swamp"; a tale written by William Osler for his son Revere" (and worthy of comparison with anything by Edgar Allan Poe) and an account of "The Fortsas Catalogue, an ingenious bibliophilic hoax that took place in 1840."

The library is also consistently busy expanding its collections through acquisition and is particularly interested in gathering more material on



View of northeast alcove with Osler's desk.

the history of Quebec medicine.

A significant addition to the library was the result of a will by Miss Mabel Purefoy Fitzgerald of Oxford, who first met Osler during the early years of the century and spent much time searching out items for his library. Osler wrote her a steady stream of letters from 1905 until his death; these concern not only his requests and instructions on the acquisition of books and manuscripts, but advice on her own scientific career. To his letters, Miss Fitzgerald added even more illuminating notes.

However, the Osler Library had to wait an unusually long time to acquire the letters. Miss Fitzgerald lived to 101 and it was only 5 years ago that the letters finally arrived in Montreal.

Recent additions include such titles as "Société de Tempérance de l'Eglise St. Pierre de Montréal 1877-8: Lecture sur l'Alcoolisme par J.A.

Laramée, MD, Montreal, 1879", and a photograph taken at Montreal's Royal Victoria Hospital in the early 1930s showing Dr. E.W. Archibald and Dr. Norman Bethune performing a surgical operation. This line of acquisition is consistent with Osler's will: "The library is for the use of students of the history of science and medicine, without any other qualifications, and I particularly wish that it may be used by my French-Canadian colleagues, who will find it rich in the best of French literature."

50th anniversary

As the library approaches its 50th anniversary, it can expect a surge in its steady stream of visitors — which includes high-school students and doctoral scholars, media researchers and Osler admirers. In 1936 Governor General Lord Tweedsmuir made a private visit to the library because he was so keen to see Osler's collection of Browne editions. Tweedsmuir was not only, as John ("Thirty-nine steps") Buchan, a distinguished author himself; he was a Browne collector too and a descendant of both Browne and the "mad Earl of Buchan" to whom the rare 1716 edition of "Christian Morals" was dedicated. In 1973 the Chinese ambassador to Canada, Chang Wen-Chin, was escorted round the library, and shown "our choicest memorabilia of Dr. Norman Bethune".

There are other libraries of medical history (including the impressive Woodward Library at the University of British Columbia); there have been larger bequests of volumes on the history of medicine and science (such as Erik Waller's gift of 21 000 books to the Royal University of Uppsala in Sweden). But the Osler Library is unique because it is both a working collection of texts for students and a monument to the man who so enjoyed putting it together.

"A library represents the mind of its collector, his fancies and foibles, his strength and weakness, his prejudices and preferences... the friendships of his life, the phases of his growth, the vagaries of his mind, all are represented," its founder wrote in the first edition of the catalogue. And when the collector was a man of such outstanding ability, humanity and wit as Osler, his library is a fascinating reflecting pool in which to dip. ■