

THE OSLER LIBRARY

The Osler Library is the most important collection of old books in Canada. It is not a museum, still less a mausoleum of forgotten worthies, but a working library of the history of medicine and science. Besides the old books, its 9,500 volumes* include a large proportion of modern historical works and books of reference. It is housed in a beautiful room in the McGill Medical Building on the corner of University St. and Pine Ave on the same floor as the reading room of the McGill Medical Library, of which it is really a part, just as the latter is a separate division of the University Library.

The Library bears the name of the donor, Sir William Osler, one of the two physicians of world-wide reputation that Canada has produced, the other, of course, being the lamented Sir Frederick Banting. Osler was born in Ontario in 1849 and graduated in medicine at McGill in 1873. On his return from two years of study abroad he was appointed professor of physiology and pathology at the early age of 25. He made such a reputation here that he was called as professor of medicine, successively to Philadelphia, to Baltimore and finally to Oxford where he died in 1919 at the age of 70, saddened by the loss of his only son, killed in action in Flanders.

A prolific writer, his masterpiece is the celebrated textbook "Principles & Practice of medicine" first issued in 1892. There have been 14 editions, besides translations into French, German, Spanish and Chinese.

Always a booklover and interested in the history of his profession, he had more leisure at Oxford to indulge his hobby and ideal facilities for collecting old books. It was there that he planned this special library which, as he said, "would have a definite educational value and a literary and historical interest," a library to be given to McGill, his beloved Alma Mater. For though he had wandered far, he had never forgotten his early associations nor lost his affection for Montreal.

He also planned and began an annotated catalogue of the collection. The printing of this large book was not finished till 10 years after his death. It was edited by me and two collaborators and was published by the Oxford Press in 1929 under the title, "Bibliotheca Osleriana". It incorporates his own annotations on the books and is thus not only a guide to the use of the Library, but is useful also to those who have not access to the books. His arrangement of the books is peculiar, and not one that would commend itself to the professional librarian. He divided them into 8 sections. The first section, which he called Bibliotheca Prima, is the chief and original feature of his library and catalogue. Literature he said, was becoming so complicated and immense that fundamental libraries should be collected in different subjects. So this first section was planned to contain in chronological order and in a comparatively small number of works - there are about 1,700 in it - the essential literature of the evolution of science, represented by the works and lives of 67 authors who, in his opinion, were contributors of the first rank to science. It begins with Hippocrates, the father of medicine in the 5th cent. B.C. and ends with the 19th cent. He tried particularly to obtain the first edition of the fundamental contributions in each case whether this was represented by the great Aldine edition of Aristotle in 3 vols printed at Venice at the end of the 15th century or the 10-page pamphlet in which Roentgen announced the discovery of the x-rays in 1895. The only woman among his great innovators is Florence Nightingale.

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Now 13,750 vols.

Next year modern science will be 400 years old, if we date it from the appearance of two great books, both published in 1543 and both in our Library, namely the work of Copernicus on the revolutions of the heavenly bodies, and that of Vesalius, a masterpiece of art as well as science, the first accurate anatomy. In this section the works of Vesalius and those of Harvey, with the history of the circulation of the blood, are particularly well represented; also the literature of the discovery of anaesthesia, the greatest contribution of America to medicine.

The other 7 sections are arranged in the ordinary way, alphabetically according to authors. The second and largest section contains the works of authors not classed among the outstanding pioneers. The third section, called Litteraria, is of more general interest. It contains literary works written by physicians and books of medical interest whose authors were laymen. It includes an astonishing amount of bad poetry by good physicians. As a rule, the better the doctor, the worse his verses. Many seriously intended scientific works have been cast in verse form, but seldom with the success of the great Latin poet Lucretius. Francois Duport, for example, once dean of the Paris Medical Faculty, published a medical text book in 1613 in Latin hexameters so that the students might learn it by heart: But that was in his old age. The most complete collection of any one author is that of Sir Thomas Browne, English physician of the 17th century, whose "Religio Medici" (The Religion of a doctor), 1642, is still a great English classic. A modern edition of this was the first book that Osler bought in his young days and it remained his favorite. On his death-bed he scribbled in it in pencil "I doubt if any man can more truly say of this book, comes viae vitaeque (companion of my life's journey). Another favorite was Rabelais, immortal satirist and also a good physician who helped to reform the teaching of medicine at Montpellier. His delighted readers wore out the early editions which are now extremely scarce, but among many authors we have the first dated collective edition, 1553.

The next three sections of the library are History, Biography and Bibliography, mostly, of course, modern books. The seventh section is the most valuable, in dollars at least. It contains no less than 136 books printed in the 15th century, technically known as Incunabula. Besides being very rare, these incunabula have an artistic quality and are usually decorated by hand. For the early printers had to compete with the beautiful medieval manuscripts which they naturally imitated. With another 30 or more in the University Library McGill is rich in these artistic and historically interesting treasures.

The 8th and last section contains the manuscripts, including several from the Middle Ages, and some of unique historical interest. The oldest is from ancient Assyria, written on clay in the cuneiform (wedge-shaped) Babylonian characters. It gives a variety of prescriptions for a disease of the eye, and it bears the name and address of the medical student for whom it was copied about 700 B.C.

"The Library" Osler wrote, "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 vest of French literature."

The books were brought out to Canada in 1928 after the death of the donor's widow who endowed the Library. They are arranged on the shelves in the same order for the most part as they are listed in the catalogue. In the place of honour, in an alcove at the end of the room, there is a bronze plaque, a portrait of Osler in bas-relief, and behind this are his ashes, for he desired to be buried among his beloved books. On each side of the portrait are two cases containing his own writings and those of his favourites, Browne, Rabelais and others.

The oldest of our printed books bears no date, but came from the press of Rusch at Strasburg probably in 1464, eight years after the famous Gutenberg bible. It is the encyclopaedia of Rabanus Maurus, bishop of Mayence in the 9th century. If the assumed date is correct, it is not only the first book printed in our Roman characters, but is the first to touch upon medicine. But the medicine, so called, of this good bishop was concerned entirely with morals and theology, witness his definition of leprosy, the most terrible disease of his time. Lepers, he says, are heretics blaspheming the Lord Jesus-Christ:

The most ponderous tome in the Library - it weighs nearly 30 pounds - and one of the most beautiful, is the first edition of the "Speculum morale" (The moral mirror), another Strasburg book, printed in 1476. It is one of the six volumes, of which we have

three, of the great encyclopaedia compiled by Vincent of Beauvais in the 13th century for St. Louis, King of France. It is in a contemporary binding of thick oak boards with great metal bosses. The thick paper is astonishingly white and fresh, and the pages are embellished with initials painted by hand. At one place there is a very old strip of leather which may have been inserted there by the abbot of a monastery which owned the book, for it marks a most important chapter for his monks to read, "De fugiende societate mulierum" - on fleeing the society of women.

Naturally the inimitable medical satires of the great Molière find a place on our shelves. Among them is an extremely rare edition of the "Livret" of the "Malade imaginaire", printed in 1673, when the play was first acted. The actual text of the play itself was not issued till the following year. This "Livret", of libretto, gives the words of the skits put on between the acts, including the famous burlesque ceremony, in which the medical student is examined in Frenchified dog Latin, by the pampous Paris Faculty, which even then 50 years after Harvey's demonstration, still refused to believe in the circulation. At the 4th performance of this "Ceremony", on Friday, the 17th (not the 13th) Feb., 1673, Molière was playing the part of the candidate when his aneurysm suddenly ruptures and he bled to death. That is what comes of ridiculing our profession, even when we deserve it.

Another great mocker who is far from being considered a saint in our Province of Quebec, is Voltaire, of whom we possess a unique relic. It is a magnificent edition of his "Henriade", 1741, superbly bound for him by Padeloup, the greatest of all binders. Our copy was presented by Voltaire to his physician, Silve, who, he said, was the sort of doctor that Molière would never have ventured to ridicule. Voltaire has inscribed in his own hand on the fly-leaf some graceful and original verses to Silve.

A curiosity which always interests the ladies is the memoirs of the Spanish Military Nun, of which we have what is perhaps the earliest known manuscript, as well as printed translations. She was the most famous woman soldier who ever fought a man. St. Joan of Arc never disguised her sex. Catalina, or Catherine, de Krauso was born in 1592. Her father, a Spanish gentleman, proud and poor, put her in a convent when she was two because there was no prospect of a dowry for her. At the age of 15 she ran away, turned herself into a boy, and enlisted. She fought in the Spanish armies in South America for 16 years before her sex was discovered. Then in 1624 she was sent home to Madrid where she created a sensation. To make her peace with the Church she went to Rome, and the Pope not only absolved her, but gave her a dispensation to dress as a man. A glance at her authentic portrait is sufficient to explain this. There was more of the tough guy than the glamour girl about Katie. She looked horribly masculine and behaved accordingly. Returning to America, she drove a mule train between Vera Cruz and Mexico City till her death in 1650. As Mr. Churchill might say, some nun!

Another of our woman soldiers, but nearer home and not so wild, is Dr. James Barry, the mystery of whose origin and others vainly tried to solve. She died at London in 1865, medical head of the British Army, and only then, at autopsy, was found to be a woman. She had graduated at Edinburgh in 1812, as a man of course, and with the help of an unexplained "pull" at the War Office, she had a successful career as an army surgeon. She was well known in Montreal in the eighteen-fifties when she was stationed here in medical charge of the garrison, and lived at the corner of Sherbrooke and Durocher Streets. Always sensitive about her feminine appearance, she fought more than one duel with colleagues indiscreet enough to comment on her smooth chin.

In conclusion let me assure you that I shall be happy to show these curiosities and treasures, with others which I've not had time to describe, to those who may be interested in them.

(to p. d. n. n.)

James M. M.