

OSLER LIBRARY NEWSLETTER

McGILL UNIVERSITY, MONTREAL, CANADA

No. 11 – October 1972

SIR WILLIAM OSLER AND WILLIAM WILLIAMS KEEN



ir William Osler is universally recognized as the foremost physician of the first two decades of the twentieth century. Who was his counterpart among the surgeons? It is interesting – and it both emphasizes Osler's uniqueness and reflects some cardinal differences between medicine and surgery – that there is no such consensus in the choice of the greatest surgeon of that time. The criteria are so diverse that any informal polling soon dissolves into a debate over the relative merits of theory vs. practice, innovation vs. technical skill, generalism vs. specialism – and the overall conclusion that it is a senseless quest.

There is no question, however, that among the leading nominees in any such poll would be three intimate friends of Sir William Osler – Halsted, Cushing and Keen. The first two certainly need no introduction to readers of the *Osler Library Newsletter*, nor any defense of their nomination as prime surgeons of the world in their day. I have come to learn, however, that the image of Dr. William Williams Keen of Philadelphia has begun to fade from the brilliant prominence it once held in the lay and medical mind. There may be readers who need to be reminded – convinced, perhaps – that he ranked with the giants in the field of surgery – and, even, that he was one of Osler's oldest and closest friends.

Cushing's chronicle of the Hopkins period – understandably the most detailed and colorfully drawn – has tended to leave the Philadelphians a bit in the shade. Keen is a decidedly minor figure in *The Life*. There are few hints of the real closeness of a friendship that spanned half of Osler's long life. Throughout these two large volumes Cushing obviously had to restrain the temptation to linger over individual threads in the rich tapestry of Osler's life. It is clear, though, from Cushing's other writings that he warmly admired Keen as a man, as a masterful general surgeon, and as a pioneer in his own field of brain surgery.

Keen's credentials as the Dean of American Surgery are legion. Welch hailed him publicly as "the field marshal of the surgeons of America" and "the foremost leader of the medical profession of America". Cushing, in presenting him the Bigelow Medal of the Boston Surgical Society, in 1922, announced it was being awarded that year, not to an individual, but to an institution. It is a challenge to encapsule something of his seventy years of service to medicine and mankind in a paragraph.

William Williams Keen was born in Philadelphia in 1837. He studied at Brown University as an undergraduate (Class of 1859) and also as a graduate student. During and after his course at Jefferson Medical College (Class of 1862) he served as a surgeon in the Civil War, assisting his life-long friend, S. Weir Mitchell, with classical neurological researches at the Turner's Lane Hospital in Philadelphia. After two years in Europe he returned to Philadelphia to develop into a bold, skillful and innovative surgeon and a much revered professor of surgery at the Jefferson Medical College. He was among the very first crusaders for the application of Listerian principles in the operating room. He first tapped the cerebral ventricles and was the first to successfully remove a large intracranial tumor. He was a prolific writer of books and papers (over 600 items in his bibliography). He edited and contributed chapters to the first textbook of surgery based on bacteriological principles. His eight-volume *System of Surgery* (1905-1921) was the surgeon's bible. He was a surgeon to presidents, and himself a president of a series of select organizations, including the American Medical Association, the American Surgical Association, the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, and the American Philosophical Society. He presided over national and international surgical congresses. He held honorary degrees from nine prestigious universities in the United States, Canada and Europe. He was an honorary fellow of the most coveted surgical colleges. He was indefatigable. At eighty he was back in the army as a major in the First World War, and until ninety he was a spokesman around the world in defense of medical research against unscrupulous antivivisectionists.

Repeatedly through this many-stranded career ran the threads of Osler's life. The meshing was thickest, of course, during Osler's years in Philadelphia. Keen was among those invited to Dr. Pepper's famous dinner arranged to introduce Dr. Osler to the medical select of Philadelphia. Soon they were colleagues at the Orthopedic Hospital and Infirmary for Nervous Diseases. They both centered their interest in those early days on pathological anatomy, which they both taught vigorously. Both had absorbing interests in the nervous system. During off hours they were enthusiastic frequenters and boosters of the Library of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, serving on its committee and contributing throughout their lives in many ways to this excellent, ancient institution. There are a multitude of notes and letters from both of them to Mr. Fisher, the librarian, and to each other as they cooperated or competed in buying treasures from the booksellers.

Readers of the *Newsletter* will be interested to see the correct, unexpurgated version of one of Osler's more roguish notes to Keen. The version published by Keen himself is evidently from memory, since he doesn't get it quite right.

It has Osler sending Keen a postal card to call him a pig and to chide him for buying a number of works that he himself had wanted, and adding, characteristically, "If you come across Servetus' 'De Christianismi' don't buy it. It's not a fit book for you to read!" The original, preserved in our archives at Brown University, comes at the end of a letter about Gilbert Murray — "Please do not buy up all the incubula, you greedy old rascal. If you come across Servetus' *Christianismi Restitutio* — send it to me — 'twould not be a proper book for you! Love to the girls".

Another amusing note from Osler, the famous one suggesting the bleeding of the Fellows of the College for a fine copy of Celsus, has likewise gone down to history inaccurately. The exact version is preserved as a pencilled note on a clipped catalogue entry pasted inside its front cover, as Mrs. Holloway can show you in Philadelphia today. It doesn't read, "I'll give \$25. Can't you bleed the Fellows for the rest.", as Cushing, slightly inaccurately quotes Keen's mis-recollection, but, "This is a superb copy. Why not bleed the fellows of the College? I will go \$25. W.O."

These two corrections provide nice examples of the advantage diligent archivists have given us over the authors or recipients of historic letters. They seem often to have found it difficult to put their hands on the originals when they wanted to quote them.

This Keen-Oslerian fun was not confined to professional and semi-professional circles. It was constantly erupting among Keen's four daughters. Keen records how, with the straightest of faces, Osler would escort the eldest and prettiest about at functions, introducing her as his wife. It was with this same miss that some rogue had himself loudly and publicly announced at a Royal College of Surgeons *Conversazione* as Dr. and Mrs. Egerton Yorrick Davis". Osler's letters to Keen regularly have some allusion to his girls.

It is curious, then, that there is so little record of this long friendship in the vast Oslerian literature. Cushing's fourteen references to Keen in *The Life* are mostly brief and impersonal. Even in Keen's warm tribute to Osler prepared for the *Osler Memorial Number* (July, 1920) of the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* there are virtually no references to their collaboration in the Philadelphia period and thereafter. It is a very telling reflection of an easy, hearty relationship between two big-hearted men, but it is singularly sparse in foci in time or place. Read in the perspective of what we are beginning to uncover in the Osler Library and in the archives of Brown University, it is striking for what it does not and, for the most part, could not say.

On July 12, 1886, Osler's thirty-seventh birthday, in the little village of Osterville on Cape Cod, Massachusetts, physician and surgeon watched helplessly while Keen's young wife died of an abdominal lesion. Osler had come from Philadelphia the day before in answer to a telegram from Keen. He had come to care for the wife, but stayed to support the husband left there by the sea with his four young children.

There are no published details of "this one great sorrow" in Keen's life and of Osler's role in it. We are just beginning to put the story together from clues in Montreal and in Providence. One side is found in Osler's *Day Books* and in letters from Keen preserved in the Osler Library. The other is in

Keen's manuscript *Reminiscences*, written for his children, and in letters to him from Sir William and Lady Osler, found in an extensive collection of materials recently given to Brown University by Dr. Norman E. Freeman of Bolinas, California, grandson of Dr. Keen, and other Keen descendants. These gifts came in response to inquiries from Ms. Mary Louise Record, University Relations Officer at Brown, who organized a Keen Commemorative Celebration in May, 1970. As the story unfolds we will share our findings with readers of the *Newsletter*. We are eager to hear from any who can help us locate further Keen materials.

We at Brown are pleased and proud that Osler was so staunch an admirer of our distinguished alumnus of the Class of 1859, and that their friendship should link Providence so intimately with the circle of Bond Head, Toronto, Montreal, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Oxford.* We look forward to more archival sharings.

G.E. Erikson
Professor of Medical Science
Brown University

*We are proud of another Brown connection with Sir William Osler. He thought very highly of Dr. Elisha Bartlett (Brown, M.D. 1826) and came to Providence in 1899 to deliver a fine commemorative tribute to him in an address reprinted in *An Alabama Student and Other Biographical Essays*.

Editor's Note: Professor Erikson is Leader of the Section of Morphology in Brown University's new Biomedical Science Program, which has just been extended to grant the M.D. degree. He is also Anatomist in the Department of Surgery at the Rhode Island Hospital and is the newly appointed Historian and Archivist of the American Association of Anatomists.

AN OSLER FAVOURITE REPRINTED

Students of the horse in all its relations and indeed everyone interested in the history of veterinary science will welcome the recent publication of an authorized reprint of General Mennessier de la Lance's *Essai de Bibliographie Hippique*.* The original edition has long been out of print and the issue of these relatively inexpensive paperback volumes makes this classic bibliography once more readily available. The appearance of this reprint is a pleasant reminder of the delight with which Sir William Osler greeted the original edition. Not only did he add it to his library (*Bibliotheca Osleriana* No. 7208); he also wrote an enthusiastic appreciation for the *Veterinary Review* (vol. 2, pp. 1-4, 1918).

In this appreciation, Osler described himself "as a former teacher in a Veterinary College". The reference is to the Montreal Veterinary College which later became a faculty of McGill University. During his Montreal period Osler was deeply involved in the field of veterinary science. He was Professor of Physiology in the Veterinary College and had much to do with bringing the College into close relation with McGill University. In 1881 he travelled to England as an official representative of the College to the British National Veterinary Congress. He was also one of the most active members of the Montreal Veterinary Medical Association. After he left Montreal, his activity in this field lessened

but he never lost interest. In this connection it is worthy of note that the index of the *Bibliotheca Osleriana* lists 34 titles under Veterinary Medicine and Comparative Anatomy. Of these, 5 relate specifically to the horse and there are 3 other items concerning the horse which do not fall under Veterinary Medicine or Comparative Anatomy. In building up his magnificent library, Osler cast his nets far and wide. It is therefore not surprising that he added Mennessier de la Lance's work to his collections.

Osler's continuing interest in veterinary science was, however, not the only reason for the delight he took in Mennessier de la Lance's bibliography. He regarded it as a model of what he called bio-bibliography. There is every reason to believe that the French General had succeeded in doing for the literature of his subject precisely what Osler hoped to do with his own library. In view of this, it is small wonder that Mennessier de la Lance's bibliography so intrigued Osler and no doubt he would thoroughly approve the publication of this reprint.

E.H. Bensley

**Essai de Bibliographie Hippique, donnant la description détaillée des ouvrages publiés ou traduits en Latin et en Français sur le Cheval et la Cavalerie, avec de nombreuses biographies d'auteurs hippiques, par le Général Mennessier de la Lance, ancien commandant de la 3^e Division de Cavalerie, 2 volumes, authorized reprint of the Paris edition, Librairie Lucien Dorbon, 1915-21. B. De Graaf, Nieuwkoop, Netherlands, 1971.*

WILBURT CORNELL DAVISON (1892-1972)

AN APPRECIATION

On June 26 Wilburt C. Davison died in Durham, North Carolina. He had just passed his 80th birthday and with his death another personal link with Sir William Osler has been severed, his having studied with Sir William at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar commencing in 1913. During his years with Osler, Wilburt Davison's own unique spirit and personality were moulded and enriched by the Oslerian model of humanism in medicine.

Wilburt Cornell Davison, M.A., M.D., D.Sc., LL.D., the son of a Methodist minister, was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan on April 28, 1892. In 1927, while acting Dean and Pediatric Head at Hopkins, he was chosen at the age of 35 to plan, organize and build the new Duke University School of Medicine and Hospital. While many helped at the outset and during the subsequent years, the present Duke Medical Center with all that it has accomplished stands as its own tribute to the first Dean and Pediatric Chairman who directed the Medical School from the ground up and guided it to the place of prominence and eminence which it now holds.

"The Dean", as most of us invariably call him, or "Dave", as he preferred to be called, was a humorous, dynamic and informal man. He set no written rules if it were possible to avoid doing so. The past was prologue; he always looked to the future. Throughout a distinguished career as physician, educator, author and administrator Dr. Davison, ahead of the times, consistently maintained that while research and specialization in medicine are necessary, the success of total medical care must depend largely upon a substantial portion of well-rounded primary physicians.

Like Sir William Osler, Dr. Davison has left a tradition of warmth, humanity and humor, and his family, his hosts of friends, former students and colleagues will remember him not only for his many accomplishments but for the grace and beauty of his personality, his ability to inspire those around him, his modesty and his twinkling good humor. He was to those of us who loved him what he said of Osler, "... the most human of human beings I have ever known... and though Osler, unlike Atlas, never stopped to shoulder the world he always kept his arms around it."

He was truly a lifelong exemplar of the Oslerian spirit and such men, in the words of Sir Berkeley Moynihan, "are gratefully remembered not so much for the work of their hands and minds, or for spoken or written words, but for the spiritual legacy bequeathed to those they inspire; this is true immortality."

JOHN P. MCGOVERN, M.D.
President-Elect, American Osler
Society,
Director, McGovern Allergy
Clinic, Houston, Texas.

FRIENDS OF THE OSLER LIBRARY

Dr. H. Rocke Robertson, a former principal of McGill University and a member of the Board of Curators of the Osler Library, has been unanimously elected by the Board to serve as the first President of the Friends of the Osler Library.

To date, \$1410.00 has been received from the Friends of the Osler Library. This has already made possible the continuation of the *Newsletter* and provided much needed funds for the restoration of some of our priceless Osler items. The Library gratefully acknowledges the support it has received from its Friends.

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We regret the omission of the names of those who made contributions after this issue went to press.

Editorial Committee for the *Newsletter*: E.H. Bensley, Editor;
 Susan Biggs, Associate Editor; Karl Holeczek, Photography.

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A LEGACY FROM MISS WELLS

The last issue of the *Newsletter* reported the resignation of our Acting Osler Librarian and former editor of this publication, Miss Ellen Wells. Much could be said of her outstanding accomplishments in the four years of her association with the Library. But they are all recorded in the things she has done, in the monthly and annual reports, in the minutes of the Curators' meetings, and in the memories of the users of the Library and readers of this *Newsletter*.

Among the policies which Miss Wells pursued enthusiastically was that of giving love and tender care to the Library's books. In this regard she had inherited the good beginnings of her predecessors and the volunteer work of some of the Library's well-wishers. The results of her efforts, and theirs, are eloquently recorded in a recent publication, *Guide to Medieval and Renaissance Studies in Montreal*, Montreal, 1972. This contains a number of references to the Osler Library, noting that it "is rich in medieval and Renaissance material, both manuscripts and incunabula". But of special interest are some passages in the chapter "The Maintenance of Rare Book Collections in Montreal". We would like to quote these as a fitting tribute to Miss Wells' stewardship.

"Housecleaning" should be performed periodically — optimally once a quarter — fungicides should be used in the battle against molds, mildew and spores, and measures taken against termites, rodents, and vermin. Books should be hand vacuumed and leather-bound texts polished. Only the Osler Library had a regular program which included all these measures. ... The Osler seems to be the best equipped and most progressive library in Montréal. For example, the Osler has recently ordered acid-free [file folders], which have been discovered to neutralize the papers within manuscripts and thus to extend their lives. Patterned folder cases, which can be cut individually to the specifications of the size of the book, give support and protection to books which are falling apart. ... [The design for this is available] at the Osler. Solander cases are being used to keep out dust, light and acid. Elephant[in] shelves give additional support to extra large dossiers which must rest supported on their backs. Leather bound books are periodically treated with potassium lactate and dressing to prevent dessication.

A prohibition is placed upon the use of Scotch-tape and other pressure sensitive tapes. Instead, specially treated transparent tapes are being used to mend tears and red cloth tape used to [support] bindings. Wax paper and aluminium foil have been found to be beneficial in giving additional support to books whose bindings have worn through. As a final precaution, books are never permitted to lean one against the other, but rows of books are gently supported by bookends, while caution is taken that they are not tightly stacked.

Donald G. Bates

NEWSLETTER SALE LIST NO. 4

Enclosed with this *Newsletter* is a list of duplicates from the Osler Library which are being offered for sale to our readers. All of the items offered are concerned with Canadian medical history or with Sir William Osler; some of the items are in multiple copies. The duplicates have been priced and orders will be filled on a first come, first served basis. The earliest postmark will be the deciding factor. *Please do not send money with your request*; invoices will be sent at the same time the books are mailed. The sale will close January 31st, 1973.

Correction — Please Note

American readers still wishing to become members of the Friends of the Osler Library should note that the Friends of McGill University Inc. address was printed incorrectly as "Hampstead." The correct address to which Friends from the United States should mail their cheques is: Friends of McGill University Inc.

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