

# OSLER LIBRARY NEWSLETTER

McGILL UNIVERSITY, MONTREAL, CANADA

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## THE ARCHITECT OF THE FIRST OSLER LIBRARY: PERCY ERSKINE NOBBS



It is now more than fifty years since studies were made by Percy Erskine Nobbs and his McGill colleagues for refitting a room on the top floor of the Strathcona Medical Building to receive the Osler Library. The earliest record of this work in the Canadian Architecture collection at McGill appears to be an undated

blue print of the space proposed to be used on which someone, clearly not an architect, had described in white ink a possible disposition of the books to be grouped about a memorial section labeled "Osleriana". It seems likely that this drawing formed part of the architect's instructions, as it was preserved among his preliminary sketches and shows much of the essence of the splendid room that was finally opened in 1929.

The space allotted for the Library appears to have been originally designed as a laboratory. It was a high room and had an abundance of natural light from three large windows on the north wall, of which the central one was wider and higher than the others. In addition, it had a skylight, a little off-centre and closer to the south wall, evidently to distribute the daylight as evenly as possible. The entrance to the room was, curiously, extremely narrow and up four steep steps from the corridor. It was also inconspicuously placed in a corner of the room furthest from the light, as though to conserve precious work space. At both ends of the room there were cupboards or service areas, one of which had a small window.

The undated blue print had indicated upon it the required bookshelves carefully labelled: Incunabula, Biographica, Historica, Bibliographica, and Bibliotheca prima and secunda, and suggested possible uses for the cupboards, but everything else was unchanged. What appears to be the architect's first sketches, on the other hand, proposed sweeping changes. The entrance to the room was moved to the centre of one end, made broader and given five graceful steps. Opposite the entrance a niche to contain a bust of Osler was proposed to be the focus of the room. But the most telling change was the introduction of four square columns in the centre of the bleak room. These produced nine definite areas on the floor and ceiling which added immensely to the richness of the space. The three areas next to the windows and the three corresponding areas next to the south wall formed

Under the title "The Osler Library Reception Committee (1920-1928)" the February 1973 issue of the *Newsletter* offered an account of McGill University's preparations for the reception and housing of Osler's bequest of the greater part of his personal library. In this account mention was made of the architect of the original Osler Library room, Percy Erskine Nobbs. Believing that readers of the *Newsletter* would welcome more information about Professor Nobbs and his work, the Editorial Committee asked John Bland, Macdonald Professor of Architecture at McGill University and a former Director of the McGill School of Architecture, to write an article about the architect of the first Osler Library. Professor Bland kindly consented and his contribution appears here.

alcoves for bookcases which extended from the walls to the columns although not to the ceiling. The height of the ceiling was reduced except over the three central areas extending from the high centre window to the south wall. This was coved and into its centre the skylight was confined. The centre window, while remaining high, was reduced in width to conform with the others. All three were proposed to be decoratively glazed to reduce, warm and soften the harsh north light.

Preliminary sketches signed by the architect, Percy Nobbs, were ready to be sent off to Lady Osler in 1921. Working drawings made the following year agree with the original proposal except that for the semi-circular niche, bust of Osler and prominent urn for the ashes, a shallow recess and framed plaque showing Osler's head in profile was substituted, and Osler's ashes were then proposed to be concealed behind the plaque.

When the room was finished it was clear that the architect had done a supremely good job. No aspect of its floor, walls, windows, ceiling, fixtures or furniture had escaped his attention, and the work of each tradesman who had been involved could be seen to have contributed to the splendid result.

From 1896 to 1901, Percy Nobbs had been a pupil of Sir Robert Lorimer, the celebrated Edinburgh architect and Scottish counterpart of Sir Edwin Lutyens. Working alone, Lorimer had brought about a renaissance of 16th century Scottish architecture which had been so charmingly influenced by France, just at the time the architecture of England had been influenced by the Netherlands. Nobbs learned from Lorimer the architectural design procedure of first developing and then depending upon a team of brilliant craftsmen in all of the significant areas of construction. The Osler Library is precisely in the tradition of this humanist idea.

The historiated letter which appears on this page is reproduced from *Stirpium adversaria nova, ...* Authoribus Petro Pena et Mathia de Lobel, Lond., 1570, *Bibl. Osl.* 3640.

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

Percy Erskine Nobbs had been born in Haddington, Scotland in 1875, but in early childhood he was taken to Russia where his father managed the Midland Bank in Petersburg. Each year he returned to Edinburgh to school and university but all his vacations were spent in the Baltic, where he learned how splendidly buildings can be made and how visually spectacular towns can be.

In Britain in 1901, Nobbs was named "Tite prizeman" and in the following year he won the "Owen Jones Studentship". These were the top awards of the Royal Institute of British Architects for talented young professionals and always testify to the exceptional ability of each winner. Nobbs won both.

In 1903, at the age of twenty-eight, he was invited to take the chair of architecture at McGill, succeeding Professor S.H. Capper, the founder of the School. Like Capper, Nobbs was recommended to Sir William Peterson, McGill's Principal, by Gerard Baldwin Brown, the Edinburgh professor of art and archaeology who happened to be a schoolmate of Peterson and his trusted adviser in matters of art. At McGill, Professor Nobbs combined teaching duties with professional service to the University and the first building that he designed here was the Students' Union, now the McCord Museum. This was followed by the Macdonald Engineering Building and simultaneously the new Power House. As decorative heraldry was one of his interests, he undertook to redesign the arms of the University as well as a flag and a new seal. Later on he was responsible for the decorations for all the University ceremonies which reached peaks at the times of the Royal visits. Many of his flags and coats of arms are still used as decorations here.

In his early years at McGill, Nobbs pursued field sports and particularly fencing. For his prowess in the latter he won an Olympic silver medal in 1908, which is believed to remain a singular achievement for a member of the McGill teaching staff. In 1909, he married the daughter of the Dean of Medicine, Dr. Francis J. Shepherd. Dr. Shepherd, like his new son-in-law, was a devoted sportsman and angler. Two years later a commission to design the new buildings for the University of Alberta forced Nobbs to retire as the Macdonald Professor and Head of the School of Architecture, but he continued, part-time, as Professor of Design until 1940. It was, therefore, in 1911 that he began a general architectural practice and to do so he formed a partnership with George Hyde. In addition to the Arts, Medical and Engineering Buildings for Alberta, they designed a head office building for London Liverpool and Globe Insurance Company and the University Club, both in Montreal. There was also a series of buildings for Henry Birks and Sons, built across the country, and there were many delightful houses in Westmount (Quebec) and elsewhere.

After participating in the War from 1915 to 1919 Nobbs resumed practice with Hyde, working upon a series of public schools in Montreal, several major competitions and numerous war memorials of which the Memorial Chapel in Christ Church Cathedral here is a good example. During this time he continued to design pleasant houses, each planned to meet the circumstances of the ground, the view and the way the sunlight falls. In the post-first-world-war expansion of McGill, Nobbs was given several commissions. These consisted of: the Percival Molson Memorial Stadium, originally

built as a Greek theatre on the slope of the Mountain; an extension to the Redpath Library, now almost entirely built in by later additions; and new buildings for Pathology, the Royal Victoria College and the Pulp and Paper Institute. There were also proposals for a war memorial auditorium, a men's residence and a new gymnasium which unfortunately were not carried out.

As Nobbs grew older his energy was directed to two very modern concerns, conservation and city planning. His long interest in angling had made him a champion in the plight of the Atlantic salmon, many of whose native rivers were being destroyed by hydro-electric works and whose numbers were being reduced by various other forms of carelessness. In 1934, a book entitled "Salmon Tactics" appeared under his name in which the final chapter gives an account of what was needed to be done. In 1936, another lifetime interest became the subject of a book, "Fencing Tactics", and in the following year a major work in architectural theory was published under the title "Design". This was a summary of his architectural teaching and remains a concluding work in the pre-machine era. He had long campaigned for public housing in Montreal and now with more time at his disposal he served as a consultant to the new City Planning Department, which he had helped to form, to evolve a scope of its work and to explore proposals for suitable provincial planning legislation. All Quebec municipalities, particularly Montreal, needed power to cope directly with problems of growth, a power that has long proved to be one the Quebec Government is reluctant to cede, yet unable to use itself.

In 1957, the architect of the Osler Library and many other delightful works was awarded an honorary degree by the University he had so greatly helped to build and in 1964 he died at the good age of ninety.

John Bland

## THE AGE OF ACUPUNCTURE

Both the early birth of acupuncture in the Far East and its frequent and continuing reappearance throughout centuries of European medical literature are illustrated in an exhibit at the Osler Library this summer. A modern edition of the *Huang-Ti Nei-ching* or "Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine" printed in Peking in the "11th Year of the Republic" (1922) begins the long history of acupuncture. Parts of the *Nei-ching* date back to the 5th century B.C. at least. Moxibustion, a closely related therapeutic technique, is recommended in the Hippocratic corpus, specifically in the work, "De Affectionibus." Emil Littre's edition of Hippocrates translates this form of therapy as "moxa de lin écu."

The seventeenth century saw the opening of Japan to the West. A medical member of the Dutch East India Company, which constituted the only foreign presence in Japan for some two centuries, wrote the first detailed report of acupuncture for European consumption. Willem Ten Rhyne's *Dissertatio de ... Acupunctura* (1683) was cited as the authoritative work on acupuncture for two centuries thereafter. Credit for the introduction of the acupuncture and moxa treatments to Europe is also due to Engelbert Kaempfer (1651-1716). In the 1964 reprint of the 1777-79 edition of his *Geschichte und Beschreibung von Japan* on exhibit,

Kaempfer describes acupuncture as gentle in comparison with some contemporary European practices.

Works on display by Lorenz Heister (1683-1758), Michael Berniard Valentini (1657-1729), Felix Vicq d'Azyr (1748-1794), and François Dujardin (1738-1775) exemplify the survival of the knowledge of acupuncture in Europe through the eighteenth century. Heister expresses shock that the Chinese and Japanese, "a people in other respects judicious," should resort to "so desperate and severe" an operation.

The nineteenth century produced its own classic of acupuncture, as well as several attempts at experimentation. Claude Philibert Dabry de Thiersant (1826-1898), Consul of France in China, intended to make his country aware of the richness of the land in which France had recently gained a foothold; the result was *La Médecine chez les Chinois*, a valuable, detailed report which, unfortunately, was not recognized as such at the time of its publication. The obscurity of the work may be attributed to the fact that, at the time of publication, acupuncture was not practised in Europe. An 1863 edition of Dabry's work is on display.

Several French acupuncturists predicted a great future for the technique, among them Pierre Pelletan (1782-1845). His essay, *Notice sur l'acupuncture, son historique, ses effets et sa théorie, d'après les expériences faites à l'hôpital Saint-Louis* (1825) is one of the more scientific examples of a number of works published during the nineteenth-century French vogue in acupuncture. After recounting several experiments and observations concerning the effects of an electric current passed through a needle embedded in "un organe souffrant", Pelletan concludes his essay with the general observation that "aucun phénomène thérapeutique n'est plus propre que l'acupuncture à étudier le rôle que joue l'action nerveuse dans les maladies, et à déterminer, par exemple, si l'irritation nerveuse n'est pas la cause première de la plupart des inflammations."

The nineteenth century is further represented in the exhibit by works from Britain and North America. *A Treatise on Acupuncturation* (1823) by J.M. Churchill and "Of Acupuncturation" (1802) by W. Coley are evidence of early British interest in acupuncture. In the United States, H.R. Wharton was describing acupuncture and moxibustion as "widely employed ... local revulsants" in his *Minor Surgery and Blood-letting* (3d ed., 1896). Perhaps an indication of its frequent usage is an acupuncture anecdote in Harvey Cushing's *The Life of Sir William Osler* (1925). Occurring in Osler's "Montreal period", the incident had financial, not medical repercussions. Osler's failure to relieve Peter Redpath's "intractable lumbago" meant the loss of "a million for McGill."

Finally the exhibit reaches the twentieth century which may be witnessing the "coming of age" of acupuncture in the West. A human figure of rubberized plastic painted with meridians and acupuncture points is featured among the books on display. The figure was made by the National Shanghai Model Factory and was presented to McGill University by Dr. Chen Wen-chieh and Dr. Ha Hsien-wen of the Academy of Medical Sciences in Peking, on the occasion of the Norman Bethune Seminar held at McGill (in Redpath Hall, of all places!) in 1971.

The attractiveness of the exhibit is heightened by the display of some "tools of the trade" on loan from a Montreal acupuncturist, Dr. Chin Kwo. They include modern acupuncture needles made in Shanghai, including *Hao-chien* ("hair needles") of various lengths, and a "skin" or "seven star" needle comprised of a holder and stem; a moxa roll from Hunan; models of the human hand and ears indicating the various acupuncture points, and tiny "ear" needles which may remain inserted in the skin between visits to the acupuncturist.

Four Chinese scrolls, of undetermined date, in the large case in the Osler Room reflect the theme of the main portion of the exhibit at the entrance to the library. The scrolls depict lateral, anterior and posterior views of a human figure in classic pose, draped in loin cloth and rows of meridians.

The exhibit is not a complete bibliographical history of the ancient art. Rather it is intended to draw attention to the long history of acupuncture in the West as well as in the East.

Marilyn Fransiszyn

### ACTING LIBRARIAN APPOINTED FOR OSLER LIBRARY

The McGill University Libraries System has appointed Mr. Herman Dirk Vos as Acting History of Medicine Librarian for the academic year 1973-74. In this capacity, Mr. Vos will serve as Librarian in charge of the Osler Library; at the same time he will continue to fulfill his present duties as Head Cataloguer of the Library. Mr. Vos assumes these new duties until June 1974, when the position of History of Medicine Librarian will again be open.

### FRIENDS OF THE OSLER LIBRARY

The academic/fiscal year 1972-73 drew to a close at the end of May and the Library is very pleased to report that 123 Friends have contributed a total of \$1705. Contributions for the academic year 1973-74 will be solicited with the October 1973 issue of the *Newsletter*. The Osler Library is most grateful for the support of all its Friends, of whom the following are the most recent additions:

D.M. Albert, New Haven, Connecticut  
P.H. Gruner, Montreal, Quebec  
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#### DO WE HAVE YOUR CURRENT ADDRESS CORRECTLY RECORDED?

In order to ensure that our readers receive their copies of the *Newsletter* as soon as possible after it has been printed, we are most anxious to maintain a mailing list that is as up-to-date as possible. Please let us know if you are moving or if there are any changes to be made in the address which appears on the envelope.

Dr. Harold N. Segall, a member of the Board of Curators of the Osler Library, has given the Library a copy of the most recent version of the Royal College of Physicians Harvey Film. This is a very welcome addition to our holdings. (Those wishing information about this excellent film are referred to a note published in *Medical History*, 16, 155, 1972.)

The last issue of the *Newsletter* contained a notice of the publication by the Plantin Press of Osler's essay on Sir Kenelm Digby's Powder of Sympathy. Two copies of this volume, one of which is specially bound as a presentation item, have been deposited in the Osler Library by the editor, Dr. K. Garth Huston.

The Library is also grateful to the following who donated books or other gifts during 1972-73: R.V. Christie; D.L. Cowen; E.G. Dimond; R.R. Forsey; S.K. Hamarneh; A.D. Kelly; R.P. Howard; M.H. Saffron; F.B. Rogers; C.G. Roland; Miss S. Gillespie; R.L. Richards; J.J. Bulger; A.E. Rodin; Mrs. T.A. Malloch; F.S. Winser; Mme. E. Lesky; E.H. Bensley; D.G. Bates; J.G. Turner; W.E. Goodwin; J.M. Cassie; H. Bloch; B. Lieberman; Mrs. M. de Santis; C. Tyrone; E.M. Crawford; Miss M. Fransiszyn; K. McNulty; E.F. Nation; Mrs. Z. Blazina; M.V. Amasuno; A.W. Franklin; H.J. Alcántara; S. Hinohara; M. McGregor; Mrs. R. Adler; Mrs. J. Seely; R. Fortune; W. Penfield; E. Koper; B. Gandeveia; W. Kona; Miss E.B. Wells; A.H.T. Robb-Smith; Miss S. Guillaume; A.L. Gordon; G.C.R. Morris; E.T. Peer; T. Young; R.K. Daniel; F.L. McNaughton; Library of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia; Law Library, McGill University; U.S. Surgeon General's Office; McGill University Archives; Société belge d'histoire des hôpitaux; Australian Mutual Provident Society; Università degli Studi d. Ferrara; Bethune Memorial Committee; Royal Victoria Hospital Library; Arno Press, New York; Universitätsbibliothek, Bonn; Medical Library, McGill University; Guyana Medical Science Library; Montreal Neurological Institute; National Library of Medicine; Institutul de Medicina si farmacie, Bucuresti; Library of Congress; Royal College of Physicians of London; Wellcome Institute, London; Rheinischen Friedrich-Wilhelms Universität, Bonn; National Library, Ottawa; Royal National Institute for the Deaf, London; Trent Collection, Durham, North Carolina; Howard Dittrick Museum of History of Medicine, Cleveland; University of Manitoba; Royal Australasian College of Physicians; University of Texas, Galveston; Smithsonian Institution, Washington; Queen Elizabeth Hospital; Niels Bohr Library, New York; and an anonymous donor.

#### FRANK CYRIL JAMES (1903-1973)

Dr. F. Cyril James died in England on May 3rd. As Principal of McGill University from 1939 to 1962, Dr. James was an *ex-officio* member of the Board of Curators of the Osler Library for 23 years. During that period the Board held 20 meetings. In spite of almost overwhelming demands on his time, Dr. James attended 18 of those 20 meetings, a clear indication of his concern for the welfare of the Osler Library. Following his retirement from the Principalship in 1962, Dr. James was appointed Principal Emeritus and moved to England. However, he continued to take a keen interest in McGill University, including its Osler Library. At the time of his death he was planning to write for publication in the *Newsletter* what he described as a nostalgic essay about his first meeting with the Osler Curators in 1940.

In the academic year 1972-73, members and friends of the Osler Society enjoyed two regular meetings and the 52nd Annual Osler Banquet. President Donald Doell secured the highest quality of speakers for us on all occasions.

The Society's first speaker of the year, Dr. Kenneth Flegel, the 1973 winner of the Osler Medal of the American Association for the History of Medicine, presented a paper entitled, "Clap and the French Pox — A Confusion of Discharges — A Historical Viewpoint," in which he discussed the origins in the 16th Century and the resolution in the 19th Century of the confusion in distinguishing gonorrhea and syphilis as disease entities. He stressed that both the confusion and its resolution arose in eras without the benefit of medical microbiology and molecular biology. The astute physicians of the times solved this thorny problem relying solely upon clinical acumen. Dr. Flegel cited the original works of Hunter, Balfour and others to document his viewpoint.

Our second speaker, Theron Young, MDCM IV, an earlier winner of the Osler Medal of the American Association for the History of Medicine, presented a paper entitled, "To Preach or to Leech: the Dilemma of the Medical Missionary," in which he reported on his researches into the life of Peter Parker, M.D., D.D., the first medical missionary in China, and discussed the problems facing Dr. Parker and others who have served two jealous mistresses, Medicine and Evangelism. When the American Board of Missions sent Dr. Parker to Canton he was instructed that he must never allow the practice of medicine to supersede or interfere with his charge as a teacher of religion. However, the decision as to which mistress ultimately claimed Dr. Parker's devotion lay with the Cantonese who, in the course of Dr. Parker's dozen years in China, came to his door seeking medical advice and treatment in numbers 490,000 strong, but knocked at this same door seeking conversion to Christianity only 12 times. Perhaps the most interesting point aired in the discussion was that Albert Schweitzer went to Africa with the charge to devote himself to the practice of medicine and not let the teaching of religion distract him from that task.

The final speaker at the year's regular meetings, Alan Pavilanis, MDCM IV, presented a paper entitled, "History of the Medical Faculty of the University of Vilnius, Lithuania," in which he reported on the many frustrations history placed before the Lithuanians. Invading Russian, Polish and Swedish armies delayed the Faculty of Medicine's opening until 1778, two hundred years after the Jesuits founded the University. Tsarist repression also bore heavily on the University. He illustrated his presentation with many pictures of Vilnius taken while he was there for a medical elective last year.

With two quotations from Sir William Osler on the program (from *A Way of Life* and *Teacher and Student*) the Banquet started off more heavily laden with Osleriana than it has in recent years. The guest speaker was Dr. Maurice McGregor, a former Dean of the McGill Faculty of Medicine and now Vice-Principal (Health Care), McGill University. He was introduced by Dr. Mary Ellen Avery, Honorary President of the Osler Society. Dr. McGregor explored the fascinating topic of how Osler might view present trends in medical education. In the course of his remarks, he laid special emphasis on the fact that Osler was not afraid to imbue students with his moral attitudes, a fearlessness medical educators could well cultivate today. Dr. McGregor's talk provoked much discussion which continued late into the night at Le Bistro.

Michael Terrin, MDCM III  
Secretary, Osler Society