

## Sir William and the Osler Library's Board of Curators

**B**OOKS HAVE BEEN my delight these 30 years, and from them I have received incalculable benefits." That Sir William Osler was a lover and user of books is well known; that he was a frequenter and benefactor of libraries is attested to by scores of institutions on both sides of the Atlantic. Wherever he lived, Osler became interested in and involved with the affairs of the local medical library. As Cushing wrote, "His interest in libraries was cumulative, and a contact once made was never subsequently lost." Prior to his death in 1919 Osler bequeathed his rich personal collection of 8,000 books to McGill University. The instructions which accompanied this gift were contained in "Memoranda relating to the Bibliotheca Osleriana," in the first section of which Osler listed the Curators whom he wanted to guide the affairs of his library. His choices reflect to a large extent his own experience with libraries and his own feelings toward them; the following paragraphs give a brief resumé of Osler's major associations with libraries and examine the composition of his Board of Curators in the light of them.

McGill, which owes the most to Osler's generosity, was also the first institution to feel his benevolent interest. It became a familiar pattern: words of encouragement and advice, financial support, gifts of appropriate or valuable books. In Osler's day in Montreal the McGill Medical Library was "of a miscellaneous character," its annual revenue amounting to "about \$600." Osler was responsible for the printing, in an 1877 issue of the *McGill University Gazette*, of an appeal to every member of the Graduates' Society to "... pledge himself to subscribe fifty or one hundred dollars, within four or five years after graduation, to the library fund." Cushing cites several occasions on which, long after Osler had left McGill, he despatched specially chosen books to his alma mater. As a majority of these books very probably bore a pre-1850 imprint date, it follows that many volumes originally acquired from Osler were among the 4,000 pre-1850 books transferred in

recent years from the Medical Library to the Osler Library, thereby adding to the size and richness of his original gift.

Shortly after Osler arrived in Philadelphia in 1884 to take up his new appointment as Professor of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, he became a member of the Library Committee of the College of Physicians. He retained membership until his departure from the city, although even away from Philadelphia the pattern of active interest in library affairs, begun with McGill, continued.

When Osler arrived in Baltimore in 1889 as Professor of Medicine at the fledgling Johns Hopkins Medical Centre, he found that a small library had been started in the new hospital; the medical school, opened four years later, also contained the beginnings of a library. Although, once again, his generosity was apparent from the outset, one gets the feeling that perhaps Osler's clinical or textbook responsibilities prevented him from involving himself in the libraries' affairs to the same extent as at other times and in other places. At Hopkins, however, Osler exhibited another lifelong characteristic - encouraging his students in the use of libraries and inspiring many of them with his own love of books. Of the great medical classics discussed during informal book sessions, many were from Osler's own growing collection, while others were brought over from the Surgeon-General's Library in Washington.

In this latter library, too, Osler was a familiar figure during his Baltimore days. Although the Surgeon-General's Library had existed in some form since 1836, it was, in Osler's day, under the leadership of Dr. John Shaw Billings, that it began to develop greatness. An indication of its stature among libraries in the days when Osler knew it is suggested in words spoken during its centennial celebrations in 1936: "In 1876 the Library contained forty thousand volumes and as many pamphlets, and in 1895 . . . the number had increased to 308,445." F.H. Garrison has written of Osler's association with this Library, "he has always been regarded as one of the best friends the Library has ever had . . . ."

The historiated letter at the beginning of this text is from Reginald Scot (1538?-99), *The discoverie of witchcraft . . .*, London, 1584, B.O. no. 3950. This book is part of an exhibit "Medicine and the Mystic Arts" currently on display in the Osler Library.

Because of his own ties in Philadelphia and Baltimore, Osler named representatives from these cities as members of the Board and these appointments were perhaps the most significant in terms of his belief that members of the practising medical profession should play an active role in library affairs. For he chose medical men with bibliophilic interests – the chairmen of the library committees with which he himself had been associated – rather than the libraries' administrative heads; nor did he look to either the University of Pennsylvania or Hopkins, despite his activities there, drawing instead from outside the academic community.

In naming Curators for his Library from McGill, however, Osler chose from within the University, probably looking to the composition of the Bodleian Board of Curators for his example. Corresponding to the position he himself held as a Curator of the Bodleian, Osler named the Professor of Medicine, a man who would be at least as much a member of the medical community as he would be of the academic community in the days when a university appointment was most often an addition to and not a substitute for private practice. Finally, since McGill was to house his collection, and the Board of Curators was to be the custodial body for it, the chief administrators of the University and the Medical Faculty, the Principal and the Dean respectively, were logical choices, and again the Bodleian provided a precedent.

This, then, was the membership of the Board of Curators of the Osler Library as named by Osler in the Memoranda written shortly before his death. In writing these instructions concerning his library, however, Osler showed an awareness of the future, for Section XI of his Memoranda begins: "Knowing how with time conditions change, the Curators are at liberty to make alterations in these regulations, . . ." Times have indeed changed; the Library's collection has almost tripled since 1929 and with this increase in size has come a corresponding growth in responsibility to a variety of individuals and interests. In addition to continuing to serve the McGill medical community, the Library through the years has come to look upon itself, and has been looked upon in turn, as an institution with national, and to some extent even international, responsibilities. In recent years, particularly with the advent of increased financial support from the University, the Osler Library has become increasingly aware of its role as a member of the library system of McGill. Thus the Osler Library has associations with three different communities or sets of interests, all of which needed to be represented in the composition of its Board of Curators. At their last meeting, in May 1968, the Curators accordingly approved the constitution of the Board's *ex officio* membership to reflect these commitments and sources of support of the Library.

A member of the Osler family will continue to sit on the Board, as will the Principal and the Dean of Medicine. Also unchanged from Osler's original instructions are the Osler Librarian as secretary, and the Director of the National Library of Medicine, the latter thus preserving that valuable link forged by the friendship of Osler and Billings. Two other *ex officio* positions, however, have been eliminated, those of the Chairmen of the Library Committees of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia and the Medical and Chirurgical Faculty of the State of Maryland. In place of *ex officio* membership for the Professor of Medicine, the McGill Medical Faculty will now elect one of its number to a five-year term. The McGill medical community will be further represented by the Chairman of the Department of the History of Medicine and by a medical student appointed annually by the Medical Students' Society. In recognition of the Osler Library's position in the McGill library system, the Director of University Libraries and the Medical Librarian have been added to the Board.

Osler's Memoranda of 1919 made no provision for elected members of the Board, but at their first meeting in 1929 the Curators unanimously agreed to the election of Dr. Archibald Malloch, friend of Osler and one of his literary executors. Of the 13 Curators elected since that first meeting, most were or are medical men, the majority practising physicians, and all with a great interest in and support of libraries in general and of the Osler Library in particular. Thus are Osler's feelings, as well as the experiences of his own life, reflected in the composition of the Board of Curators of his Library.

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But it was the Medical and Chirurgical Faculty of the State of Maryland to which Osler directed most of his attention during his days at Hopkins. In 1891 he volunteered to become a member of the Library Committee of this body and served until he left Baltimore in 1905. Of his contribution Cushing has written, "the rejuvenescence of this respectable and aged society . . . is almost wholly attributable to Osler's interest and activity." When he arrived in Baltimore, the Library contained only a few hundred volumes housed in a dilapidated basement; when he left it had approximately 15,000 volumes, had been moved to new quarters, had appointed a librarian, and had the beginnings of an endowment fund, to which Osler himself contributed generously.

Osler's appointment in 1905 as Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford automatically made him a member of the Board of Curators of the Bodleian Library. This body met only twice a year and it was not long before Osler was elected (and re-elected) to the Standing Committee, a far more important group, which met every week. There is evidence that Osler drew heavily from this experience when considering the governing body for his own collection. Although no one from Oxford was designated as a Curator of the Osler Library (quite possibly owing to problems of transportation in a pre-jet age), it seems highly likely that the composition of the Board chosen by Osler was inspired by that of the Bodleian, the Statutes of which provided that

"There shall be 15 Curators, to whom shall be entrusted the general control of the Library. Of these 8 shall be Curator by virtue of office, namely the Vice-Chancellor, the Proctors or their deputies, and the Regius Professors of Divinity, Civil Law, Medicine, Hebrew and Greek. The other 7 shall be chosen by vote . . . ."

Underlying the bare facts of Osler's participation in library affairs was his basic attitude toward libraries and his belief that the relationship of the medical library and the medical profession should be a reciprocal one. On the one hand, there is his opinion that "for the general practitioner, a well-used library is one of the few correctives of the premature senility which is apt to overtake him." On the other hand, one learns from his writings that, while a librarian should administer the library and provide assistance, it is the responsibility, indeed the privilege, of the users of the library, the medical profession, to support it.

Not content just to preach, Osler found grateful recipients for his own generosity of purse wherever he went. He himself could be considered such a man as he described thus,

"in every city of this size [Baltimore] there is usually a physician with the happy combination of literary tastes . . . and a long purse -- to whom should be entrusted this part of the literary work," i.e. acquiring originals of the world's great medical literature. In addition, he found ways of helping his colleagues to contribute tangible support. In Baltimore, for example, he founded the Book and Journal Club, whose membership dues were used for the purchase of items for the Medical and Chirurgical Faculty Library. As President of the Association of Medical Librarians (later the Medical Library Association), Osler sent out an appeal to physicians, first to support the infant Association by their membership, and secondly, to provide unwanted books and journals to be used in what would appear to be the forerunner of the MLA Exchange. By thus actively soliciting their support, Osler demonstrated his feeling that medical practitioners owe as much responsibility to libraries as libraries do to them.

Bearing in mind Osler's philosophy toward libraries and his own experience with them during his career, one can look beyond the words of his Memoranda of 1919 establishing the Osler Library to try to determine the reasons for his choice of Curators.

A family representative was a logical choice and needs no justification. Friendship perhaps accounted for the appointment of the Librarian of the Surgeon-General's Library as an *ex officio* Curator. Osler no doubt had fond recollections of many hours spent in this developing library, and more particularly of his warm and close friendship with Dr. John Shaw Billings. Today the National Library of Medicine in the United States is one of the world's great libraries, and it is a happy thought that the professional association which unites it with the Osler Library is a recognition of the personal association of two great medical men of letters.