McGill University, Montreal, Canada

OSLER LIBRARY NEWSLETTER

No. 63-February 1990

OSLER LIBRARY STUDIES IN THE HISTORY OF MEDICINE

This issue of the Osler Library Newsletter goes to press, another Osler Library publication is also on its way to the printers. This is the first volume of a new publications series, Osler Library Studies in the History of Medicine. The series is designed to fill a specific research and information gap. Its mandate is to provide a resource environment, that is, the city of Montreal and the province of Quebec. The Osler Library is Canada's premier resource for the history of medicine, and is set in the heart of the nation's oldest and most influential medical school; it is felt that the Library can best contribute to the development of medical history by making itself, and its institutional and intellectual milieu better known to the community.

This being the rationale of Osler Library Studies in the History of Medicine, one can hardly imagine a more appropriate volume to inaugurate it than Dr. Edward H. Bensley's McGill Medical Luminaries. McGill Medical Luminaries is a collection of biographical essays of over forty major figures in the Medical Faculty's past, beginning with the four founders - William Caldwell, William Robertson, John Stephenson and Andrew Fernando Holmes - and continuing through to the generation of Wilder Penfield, C.P. Martin and J.S.L. Browne. Each essay is illustrated with a portrait of the subject, and source references are provided.

But just who qualifies as a "luminary"? Dr. Bensley's answer is disarmingly candid: any individual whom Dr. Bensley considers as such. "The final selection," he states in his preface, "has been mine and mine alone. I have consulted no reference work on Canadian or local medical history more frequently than I have consulted Dr. Bensley because its ticking made it impossible for him to percuss the patient's chest properly. Some of the luminaries were essayists and poets, like Sir Andrew Macphail; one of their number, David Landsborough Thomson, published a mystery novel entitled The Murder in the Laboratory, and another, Samuel Ernest Whitnall, wrote humorous pieces for Punch magazine under the nom de plume of "Tingle". But the "luminaries" earned their admission to the pages of Bensley's catalogue for quite serious reasons. Many of them were genuine pioneers of medicine in Canada, introducing new techniques, and sometimes entire new specialities into the country. They founded institutes, launched and edited journals, created hospitals and special clinical units, and organized societies. Above all, they taught generations of medical students at McGill, and laboured to build an outstanding educational centre. McGill Medical Luminaries acknowledges that, when all is said and done, there are many different kinds of talent and achievement that work in synergy to shape a medical school.

In launching Osler Library Studies in the History of Medicine with Dr. Bensley's book, the Osler Library is also acknowledging a special kind of talent. Dr. Bensley is our Honorary Osler Librarian, and editor of this Newsletter, but behind these publically recognized roles there are less visible, but no less valuable contributions which he makes to the Library. Since coming to work in the Library, I have consulted no reference work on Canadian or local medical history more frequently than I have consulted Dr. Bensley himself, whose meticulously maintained research files have proved an almost inexhaustible source of accurate and detailed information which he shares with ready generosity. Now one seam of this mine of lore has been opened to public view, and I have little doubt that researchers, friends and graduates of the Faculty, and librarians will long echo my own pleasure and gratitude.

Faith Wallis

NOTE: McGill Medical Luminaries will be available for purchase by the beginning of April, 1990. It is paper bound, 179 pages in length, illustrated, and indexed. Copies may be ordered from the Osler Library, McGill University, 3655 Drummond Street, Montreal, Quebec, Canada H3G 1Y6. Prices for Friends of the Osler Library are $12 (Canadian), or $10 (U.S.); the regular price is $15 (Canadian) or $10 (U.S.).
SIR WILLIAM OSLER MEETS MISS DOROTHY L. SAYERS

No. 3648 in the Bibliotheca Osleriana has one of the most charming titles of any volume in Osler's library. * Essai sur la médecine du coeur* by Marc Antoine Petit (1766-1811), published in Lyon in 1806, is not a treatise on cardiology, but a series of poetic reflections upon human relationships in the healing profession. But Bibliotheca Osleriana 3648 conceals another fascinating human relationship: the brief encounter between Osler and Dorothy L. Sayers.

When they were in contact in 1917, Sayers was employed by the Oxford publisher Basil Blackwell. Aside from her budding literary reputation, especially as a translator from Romance languages, she probably showed few symptoms of being marked out for fame. Even when the Bibliotheca Osleriana was published in 1929, the note appended to the description of no. 3542 simply stated that "the 'Essai' is in verse; a MS. trl. of a fragment of the "Essai sur la médecine du coeur" by Marc Antoine Petit (1766-1811), published in Lyon in 1806, is inserted." The author of the "MS. trl." and her brand of celebrity was considered a little unbecoming for the pages of Bibliotheca Osleriana. For in 1923, the scholarly Miss Sayers published *Whose Body?*, her first detective novel featuring her particular creation, the aristocratic sleuth Lord Peter Wimsey; thus she inaugurated her brilliant career as a mystery novelist.

Whether it was ignorance or fastidiousness that kept her out of the Bibliotheca Osleriana, Dorothy Sayers definitely deserves to be properly admitted. The prolific chronicler of Lord Peter Wimsey's triumphs of detection was also an essayist, dramatist and poet. She published translations of French and Italian medieval literature as well, the most famous being the *terza rima* rendering of Dante's *Divine Comedy* which she undertook for Penguin Classics. The background for this many-sided talent was laid by her private education in a cultivated rural English parsonage — she was reading Latin and French by the time she was six — and by a first-class degree at Oxford, or rather, by first-class marks in her final examinations, for Oxford in 1915 did not yet grant degrees to women. After a year of teaching in Hull, she published her first collection of poems and landed a new job, both with the Oxford publisher Basil Blackwell. She joined the firm in April of 1917 as general assistant to Basil Blackwell himself, and her job was, quite simply, to learn every aspect of the business so that she could take over if Blackwell was called up. Meanwhile she was working on a new volume of poetry and a translation of a 12th century French romance, *Tristan of Thomas of Britain*.

What precise purpose Sir William Osler had in mind when he commissioned a translation of Petit's *Essai sur la médecine du coeur* is not known. But it is not difficult to see what attracted him to the book and its author. Marc Antoine Petit was definitely a man after Osler's own heart. He studied surgery at the Ecole pratique de Paris from 1785 to 1787 under Pierre Desault, and then returned to his native Lyon when he became chief surgeon of the Hôtel-Dieu in 1793. There he inaugurated a course in anatomy and surgery modelled on Desault's. Xavier Bichat was his pupil from 1791 to 1793.

Petit was a famous clinician and medical scientist, but he seems to have seen himself, rather as Osler did, primarily as a medical educator. He aimed to teach his students much more about medicine than mere surgical technique. In the preface of the *Essai* he says: "The art of healing does not consist exclusively of the precepts which can promote that happy end...; one must add thereto all the resources which mind and heart can create, in order to establish a more immediate contact between physician and patient. Because the person must care for is a creature of intelligence and feeling, the art of healing must also have precepts for gaining access to that intelligence, and for stimulating, calming and sparing those feelings of a patient. The art of medicine of Petit's *Essai sur la médecine du coeur* in the form of inaugural discourses at the commencement of his courses in anatomy and surgery at the Hôtel-Dieu. Cast in the form of verse epistles to "Forlì", they were, in Petit's words "for myself first and foremost, for my disciples, and perhaps as well for the instruction of my son." Their spirit and contents have appealed greatly to Osler, whose belief that the physician's spiritual and emotional contact with his patient is a vital ingredient in the formula for healing is well known. Petit's commitment to clinical instruction, and his weaviong of these humanistic values into the very tissue of that instruction, must also have struck a responsive chord in Osler. Above all, Petit's devotion to his students, and his earnest desire to educate their hearts as well as their heads, mark him as a kindred spirit. Osler's sense of that kinship is revealed in the many passages he marked in pencil throughout the book.

The essays cover such topics as the difficulties connected with the practice of medicine, the quality of trust in relation to medical practice, and the effect of the French Revolution on public health, but the poem which Osler set Dorothy Sayers to translate was on "Gratitude towards Physicians". It tells of how the doctor, roused in the middle of the night by a distraught husband, administers first aid to his wife, apparently haemorrhaging in childbirth. The wife rallies under the doctor's ministrations, and the husband expresses appropriately fulsome gratitude. But a short time after the doctor's departure, she sinks rapidly and dies. The husband now confronts the doctor with bitter accusations, against which the doctor defends himself and his profession.

It is not until February 1917 that the year 1917 Osler commissioned the translation, nor do we possess his side of their correspondence. However, the two letters from Dorothy Sayers pasted into no. 3463 permit a rough reconstruction of the circumstances. It would seem that Osler envisioned a translation of the entire volume. He heard, probably through the academic grapevine, that Miss Sayers, formerly of Somerville College and now working for Mr. Blackwell, was accomplished in French and a fine writer. He asked her to try her hand at the essay on gratitude, both to test her abilities, and to give her an opportunity to see if the task appealed to her. On October 15, Sayers sent Osler a few sample pages, and apologized for taking so long about her task. Her letter, and her draft translation of the first 42 lines of the second Epistle to Forlì* are transcribed here.

Oct. 15 1917

Dear Sir William Osler

I am so sorry to have been so long over this, but I am very busy just at present, & have only the evenings to work in. I have done roughly a couple of pages, which I hasten to send lest a longer delay seem rude. If this is the kind of thing which you are looking for, I should be pleased to make some arrangement with you, though, as the job is rather a lengthy one, I could not undertake it if you are in any hurry for it, as I am under contract to produce my "Tristan" in translation in the spring.

Very truly yours

Dorothy L. Sayers

PETIT: THIRD EPISTLE TO FORLÌ;
OF GRATITUDE TOWARDS PHYSICIANS.

The tongue of bronze had tolled the day's last hour,
And Sleep already, passing with her shower
Of poppy-blooms, my threshold softly strown,
Her gentle summons I withstood alone;
Of good work yet performed, or yet to do,
Such was the charge that I received from you,
In strict retirement & assessment due
Of good work yet performed, or yet to do,
The [corrected from: My] hand that fixed my Memory on the page
Built beacon-fires to light the coming age.

Death in his look, pale face
Quivering frame
A wretch bursts in: "Come quickly, in God's name!"
We enter: find a household steeped
Of poppy-blooms, my threshold softly strown,
Memory on the page

OF GRATITUDE TOWARDS PHYSICIANS.

"Twas winter-time; a night exceeding dim
Torrents of rain ran splashing at our feet
And hid the stars behind a murky shroud;
"Come! On you hang my hope"
Quivering frame
A wretch bursts in: "Come quickly, in God's name!"
We enter: find a household steeped
Of poppy-blooms, my threshold softly strown,
Memory on the page

"Alack! alack! all that I love in life
No hope but you"
Quivering frame
A wretch bursts in: "Come quickly, in God's name!"
We enter: find a household steeped
Of poppy-blooms, my threshold softly strown,
Memory on the page

OF GRATITUDE TOWARDS PHYSICIANS.
The God of Woe has come with all his fears
To heap them on one hapless woman's head,
Bathed in her blood, stretched lifeless on
the bed;
In frightful shudderings life persists alone,
Checked by the efforts of a long-drawn groan.
To torments dire that sapped her strength
with throes.
The force of youth was all she could oppose
– Some twenty summers – & the will to live
Of one to whom life still has joys to give.
Her kind companions bustling at her side
Their helpless charge with vain
attentions plied.
Fresh ways they try – despair at once of all,
And to mere pity & lamenting fall.
My cheerful looks suspend her fears awhile
Hope through her tears forth issues in a smile.

Osler was apparently pleased with what
Dorothy Sayers had done, and did offer to
“make some arrangement”. However, he
evidently wanted the job done quickly, and
Miss Sayers was obliged to refuse, due to her
other committments. She also refused
Osler’s preferred remuneration for the frag-
mentary translation.

October 20th 1917
· Sir Wm. Osler
Norham Gardens
Oxford

Dear Sir William Osler,
Thank you for your note. I am sorry that I
shall not have the opportunity of doing the
translation for you. I should very much have
liked to do it, but I fear that in the circum-
stances I could not undertake to get it done
before the spring at the earliest, as it is rather
a lengthy job. I cannot, at the moment, think
of anybody in Oxford who would be the right
person to undertake it, but if I do hear of any-
one I will certainly let you know. The ‘time
and brains’ which I spent on those two pages
are really not worth consideration, thank you
very much!

Yours sincerely,

Dorothy L. Sayers

So ended the brief collaboration of Sir
William Osler with the future author of Mur-
der Must Advertise, Gaudy Night and The Nine
Tailors. Osler’s grief over the death of
Revere, and his own failing health and
energy, doubtless prevented his pursuing
the project further, but one wonders if Dor-
othy Sayers likewise laid aside Petit’s Essai
in 1917 and never glanced at it again. Hers
was a mind which kept what it caught, and
frequently re-cycled it in the form of detail
or anecdote in her novels. Perhaps one of her
many fans amongst the readers of the Osler
Library Newsletter will be able to spade up an
episode in one of the Lord Peter Wimsey
stories that echoes the verse epistle of “Grat-
titude towards Physicians”

Faith Wallis

References

Brabazon, James. Dorothy L. Sayers: a Bio-
ography. Don Mills, Ontario: General Publish-
ing, 1981.

Patel, Maurice. “Deux chirurgiens lyon-
nais du XVIIIe siecle: Claude Poteau, Marc-
Antoine Petit.” Progrès medical 87
(1957):337-341.

Roussel, J. “Un trait du caracterie de M.A.
Petit d’apres un livre de sa bibliotheque.”
Bulletin de la Société franqaise de l’histoire de la
médecine 33 (1939):33-36

PORTRAIT OF OSLER AT THE
ROYAL SOCIETY OF MEDICINE

In the June 1989 issue of the Osler Library
Newsletter, under the title “Dr. Alex Sakula
visits the Osler Library” reference is made to
Dr. Sakula’s book The Portraits, Paintings and
Sculptures: Royal Society of Medicine. During
his visit, he presented a copy of his book to
the Osler Library. At the time, he noted that
one figure absent from this catalogue is Sir
William Osler. In spite of the fact that Osler
was the founder and first president of the
Section of the History of Medicine, his por-
trait has never joined the Society’s collec-
tion. Dr. Sakula assured us that he is
determined to rectify this and he lost no
time. During the summer of 1989, he com-
missioned Philippa Abrahams, highly
regarded at the National Portrait Gallery, to
do a copy in oils of the Seymour Thomas
portrait of Osler, based on the original at
Oxford and the copy at the Royal College of
Physicians of London. On January 16th of
this year, Abrahams’ copy was presented to
the Royal Society of Medicine where it now
hangs on the wall between the entrances to
the common room and the restaurant. Dr.
Sakula has published the details of this
interesting story in the January 1990 issue of
the Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine
(vol.83, pp.42-44).

JOSEPH N. NATHANSON
(1895-1989)

With the death of Dr. Nathanson on
December 18th at the age of 94, McGill Uni-
versity has lost a good friend and the Osler
Library has lost a loyal supporter. Although
spending the greater part of his professional
life in New York as a teacher and practi-
tioner of obstetrics and gynaeology, he
never forgot his medical roots, for he
obtained his M.D., C.M. here at McGill in
1919. Reflecting his interest in medical his-
try, he was a member of the Board of Curat-
ors of the Osler Library, a generous
contributor to the Friends of the Osler
Library, and supported the Dr. Joseph
Nathanson Prize awarded annually to the
medical undergraduate who wrote the best
examination in the history of medicine.
Mention should also be made that, over the
years, Dr. Nathanson acquired one of the
largest private collections of Lincoln memo-
rabilia. This he presented to McGill Univer-
sity and it is now housed in the Joseph N.
Nathanson Room in our McClennan Library.
McGill University is indeed greatly in his
debt.
FRIENDS OF THE OSLER LIBRARY

The Library gratefully acknowledges the support it has received from Friends, both old and new, who have responded to the appeal for funds for the 1989-1990 academic year. To date 263 Friends have given a total of approximately $17,050. Most of the contributions have come from Friends in Canada and the United States of America. However very welcome contributions have come also from Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Chile, Denmark, Norway, United Kingdom, Switzerland, and West Germany.

The names of Friends whose contributions are recorded after January 31, 1990 will be listed in the June issue of the Newsletter.

Ted Adler
Daniel M. Albert
* American Osler Society
* Sidney W. Arnold
* P.G. Ashmore
* Dr. & Mrs. Joseph Aspler
* E.H. Bensley
* Dr. & Mrs. Stanley W. Jackson
* E.C. Astbury
* Frederick A. Davies
* Abel E. Berland
* William A. Caplan
* Ronald Barry
* Don G. Bates
* Ronald Bayne
* William K. Beatty
* Robert E. Bell
* Leonard G. Bendikas
* E.H. Bensley
* Abel E. Berland
* Dennis L. Bernardini
* Zlata Blazina
* Harry Bloch
* Anastasios Boubalo
* J. Robert Bowen
* Ivan W. Brown
* S.R. Bruesch
* Howard B. Burchell
* J. Walker Butin
* Robert Campbell
* OJ Canale
* John C. Carson
* Howard B. Burchell
* J. Walter Butin
* Robert Campbell
* D.J. Canale
* Mrs. A. Cantero
* Richard M. Caplan
* John C. Carson
* Francois P. Chagnon
* G.E. Chalmers
* Bruce Charles
* Richard R. Cherry
* L. Parker Chesney
* Stephen D. Clark
* Elizabeth Clark-Price
* Alan Coffey
* Jack Cohen
* Robert P. Comitto
* Audrey Copping
* Elizabeth S. Cranah
* Lamar Crevasse
* R.F.P. Cronin
* Richard A. Currie
* N.A. D'Amato
* Danish Osler Society
* J. Dana Darnley
* Charles S. Davidson
* Frederick A. Davies
* Nicholas E. Davies
* Eric De Bellaigue
* Nicholas Dewey
* Mark J. Diotallevi
* Alfred M. Donovan
* William R. Dorsey
* Althea Douglas
* Jacqueline Duffin
* T.W. Dukes
* James W. Dutton

* David G. Eastman
* Philip Eibel
* John A. Ellerton
* David Fardon
* Charlotte Ferencz
* R. Roy Forsey
* Robert Fortuine
* T. Emmett Francoeur
* Richard Fraser
* Samuel O. Freedman
* Richard R. Galpin
* Mr. & Mrs. Leonard Geller
* Menard M. Gertler (In memory of Frank Gertler)
* Allan Gibosky
* S.A. Gillespie
* Douglas S.M. Glasgow
* Pierre Gloos
* Alan B. Gold
* Phil Gold
* David S. Goldbloom
* Richard L. Golden
* James T. Goodrich
* Willard E. Goodwin
* Douglas L. Gordon
* Sheldon H. Gottlieb
* Dorothea Gould (In honour of Dr. Segall's 92nd Birthday)
* Peter E. Greig
* Mrs. Max Guggenheimer
* Fraser N. Gurd
* Rosemary Haddad
* Anthony Hall
* Eve Osler Hampson
* William C. Hanigan
* George T. Harrell
* Theodore J. Haywood
* Health Sciences Library, McMaster University
* F. David Hoening
* John R. Hogle
* R. Palmer Howard
* John Hsu
* David C. Hull
* Braham H. Hyams
* Reed W. Hyde
* Mark Ivey Jr.
* Robert Jackson
* Dr. & Mrs. Stanley W. Jackson
* Saul Jarcho
* Orville N. Jones
* Edward D. Joseph
* George T. Harrell
* Sheldon H. Gottlieb
* Dorothea Gould (In honour of Dr. Segall's 92nd Birthday)
* Peter E. Greig
* Mrs. Max Guggenheimer
* Fraser N. Gurd
* Rosemary Haddad
* Anthony Hall
* Eve Osler Hampson
* William C. Hanigan
* George T. Harrell
* Theodore J. Haywood
* Health Sciences Library, McMaster University
* F. David Hoening
* John R. Hogle
* R. Palmer Howard
* John Hsu
* David C. Hull
* Braham H. Hyams
* Reed W. Hyde
* Mark Ivey Jr.
* Robert Jackson

Legal Deposit 1/1990 ISSN 0085-4557