

OSLER LIBRARY NEWSLETTER

McGill University, Montreal, Canada

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OSLER LIBRARY STUDIES IN THE HISTORY OF MEDICINE

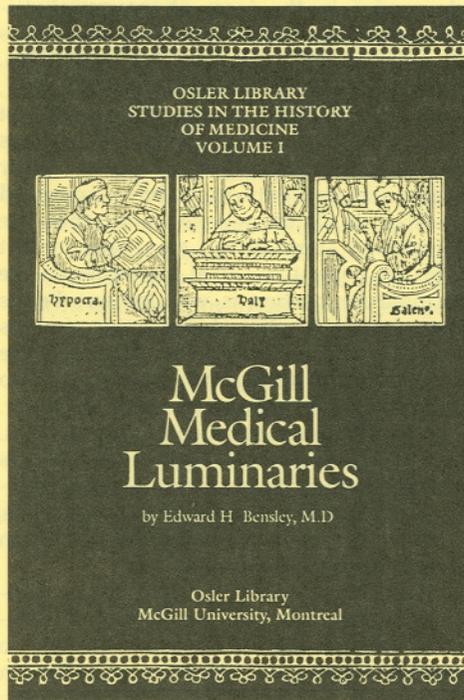


In this issue of the *Osler Library Newsletter* goes to press, another Osler Library publication is also on its way to the printers. This is the first volume of a new publications series, *Osler Library Studies in the History of Medicine*. The series is designed to fill a specific research and information gap. Its mandate is to produce monographs, editions, reference works and research tools centred on the Osler Library and its collections, on its founder Sir William Osler, on the history of the Faculty of Medicine of McGill University, and in some measure on the history of medical education and practice in the Faculty's immediate 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 will welcome comments on my choices, and indeed any other aspect of the work. Favourable comments will be appreciated, but unfavourable ones will be interesting and probably more helpful." Anyone familiar with Dr. Bensley and his work as a historian will rest assured, however, that his personal choice is likely to be the best and most judicious that could be made. A member of the Faculty for half a century, Dr. Bensley has served as its Associate, Acting

and Vice Dean through much of the 1960's, and more recently has emerged as its institutional historian. His numerous articles on Montreal's and McGill's medical past, and his contributions to the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, earned him the prestigious John B. Neilson award from Associated Medical Services of Toronto; he also holds the post of Honorary Lecturer in Medical History at McGill. Hence he is uniquely qualified to choose and to chronicle McGill's "medical luminaries", and his "final selection" will undoubtedly become the authoritative one.



Not that *McGill Medical Luminaries* is intended to read like an anthology of funeral orations. On the contrary, "Bensley's Worthies" are a rather colourful and occasionally controversial lot, and their lives contain a fund of anecdote, and even humour. Amongst the founding fathers, for example, we encounter William Caldwell, who fought a duel over the issue of establishing the Montreal General Hospital, and William Robertson, who read the Riot Act during a bloody election day fracas in Montreal. Amongst the Deans there was T.G. Roddick (1846-1923), who introduced Lister's antiseptic system into Canada, and was in the habit of sending his poorer patients groceries instead of bills for his services. Then there was Osler's first resident at The Johns Hopkins Hospital, Henri Lafleur, who was so sensitive to noise that on one occasion he asked the nurse to stop the ward clock

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 it, with correspondence, is inserted." The author of the "MS. trl." and the correspondence was perhaps considered too obscure to merit notice – or perhaps, on the contrary, 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*, 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, the *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 sur-

gery 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 it 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." Petit gave lessons in this "médecine de 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 "Forlis", 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 must 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 weaving 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 childbed. 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 known exactly when in 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. 3643 permit a rough reconstruction of the circumstances. It would seem that Osler envisioned a translation of the entire volume. He heard, prob-

ably 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 Forlis" 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 FORLIS;
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;
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.
Knocking in haste! the Bell's reverberant shock!
Blows in redoubled haste, & knock on knock!
Death in his look, pale face & quivering frame
A wretch bursts in: "Come quickly, in
God's name!"
He gasps, himself half-dead – "My love,
my wife, –
Alack! alack! all that I love in life –
Forgive me, sir – but even now, maybe –
No hope but you – her loss the end of me! –
You, you can snatch her from the clutch
of Death –
Come! On you hang my hope – my life –
my breath –"
He urged me still – & I was following him.
'Twas winter-time; a night exceeding dim
Wrapt us about with thickening veils of cloud
And hid the stars behind a murky shroud;
Torrents of rain ran splashing at our feet
Or whipt our shrinking brows with
ice-cold sleet.
Still, spite of storm or wind or piercing cold,
Distance was nought because our hearts
were bold.
We enter: find a household steeped [corrected

The God of Woe has come with all his fears
 To heep 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 commitments. She also refused Osler's proffered remuneration for the fragmentary 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 circumstances 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 anyone 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 *Murder 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 Dorothy 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 "Gratitude towards Physicians"

Faith Wallis

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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 portrait has never joined the Society's collection. Dr. Sakula assured us that he is determined to rectify this and he lost no time. During the summer of 1989, he commissioned 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 University 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 practitioner of obstetrics and gynaecology, he never forgot his medical roots, for he obtained his M.D., C.M. here at McGill in 1919. Reflecting his interest in medical history, he was a member of the Board of Curators 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 memorabilia. This he presented to McGill University and it is now housed in the Joseph N. Nathanson Room in our McLennan 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*.

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