

OSLER LIBRARY NEWSLETTER

McGill University, Montreal, Canada

No. 79 -June 1995

Edward Horton Bensley, 1906-1995



In 1976, a few days after I began work as assistant archivist in the McGill University Archives, I met Dr. Bensley for the first time. A tall, white haired gentleman came into the Archives reading room, looking like he owned the place, and announced that he needed to look up something in the first Montreal General Hospital patients' register. He was talkative and good-humoured, but also carried an air of command. The head archivist, Mr. Andreassen, introduced us: Dr. Edward Bensley, from the Osler Library. While the two senior gentlemen retired to Mr. Andreassen's office to chat, I was dispatched to the stacks to fetch the register. I was very new on the job, and archives often have rather eccentric shelving schemes, designed to accommodate materials of different formats and sizes rather than facilitate browsing. In short, I could not find the register. As the minutes ticked by and I frantically scanned the shelves, I began to calculate whether it would be more damaging to return upstairs and admit defeat, or to keep the distinguished doctor from the Osler Library waiting while I burrowed through the stacks for another hour. I chose to admit defeat. When I confronted Dr. Bensley in my chagrin, he gently laughed off my embarrassment, and offered to return to the stacks with me; he thought, he said, that he could recognize the register on sight. Indeed he could. He found it in a trice, but he also took me on a fascinating tour of the Montreal General Hospital archives, pointing out the most significant and interesting documents, and regaling me with anecdotes about the Hospital's history. I do not know how long we spent that morning poring over the old pictures and ledgers, but I was intensely grateful to Dr. Bensley for a wonderful initiation into a new corner of history, as well as for the kindly way in which he covered over my incompetence.

Dr. Bensley was an habitué of the Archives, and we had numerous occasions to meet and chat during my two years there. But it was only after I became Assistant History of Medicine Librarian at the Osler Library in 1985, and began to work with



Dr. Bensley on a daily basis, that I came to know some of the scholarly substance behind that gracious, voluble exterior.

Dr. Bensley was born in Toronto, and graduated in medicine from the University of Toronto in 1930, as gold medallist. He then came to Montreal to take up an internship at the Montreal General Hospital. In his memorial notice of Dr. Bensley prepared for the McGill Reporter, Dr. Don Bates recounts the following, typical Bensley adventure:

Bensley's love of Botany afforded him an unusual introduction into Montreal. While admiring a special tree from the steps of the McGill Arts Building, he overheard another man and his wife wondering what sort of tree it was. When he told them it was a Ginkgo tree, the man graciously thanked him but then insisted on escorting the new intern back to his quarters at the Hospital. Only afterwards did Bensley find out that the stranger, Dr. Bazin, was one of Canada's most distinguished surgeons, Professor of Surgery at McGill, and chief of the service at the Hospital, while Dr. Bazin discovered that "Ginkgo" was actually correct and not just the invention of a young intern who had been celebrating his new job with a few too many beers. For the next thirty years, Dr. Bazin was a mentor and friend of the promising young doctor.

When the first number of the Osler Library Newsletter appeared in June 1969, the Editorial Committee included Ellen B. Wells, then Associate Osler Librarian, as Editor, and Dr. E.H. Bensley as Advisor. When Ellen Wells left McGill for Cornell in 1972, Dr. Bensley became the Editor, and steered the fortunes of the Newsletter for the next twenty years. This spring, we lost both these founding editors: Dr. Bensley died on Sunday, March 26, and Ellen Wells on Sunday, April 2. This issue of the Osler Library Newsletter pays tribute to their work. Their imagination and devotion in establishing this special line of communication between the Library and its friends will always be deeply appreciated.

A memorial service for Dr. Bensley will be held at the Osler Library next Osler Day, November 1st, 1995, (in the afternoon).

It is the wish of Dr. Bensley's family that donations in his memory be made either to the Montreal General Hospital, 1650 Cedar Avenue, Montreal, Quebec, Canada H3G 1A4 or to the Osler Library, McGill University, 3655 Drummond Street, Montreal, Quebec, Canada H3G 1Y6.

A memorial service for Ellen Wells was held at the Museum of American History, Washington, on Friday June 16th, 1995.

The Smithsonian Institution Libraries has established a Wells Endowment Fund in memory of Ellen Baker Wells and of her father, Professor John W. Wells, paleontologist emeritus of Cornell University. Proceeds from the funds will be used to purchase rare printed and manuscript materials relating to science, technology, and instrumentation. Contributions to the Wells Endowment may be sent to Director, Smithsonian Institution Libraries, Natural History Building 22, MRC 154, Washington D.C.

Bensley's bent lay in the direction of medical chemistry, as it was then called, and he eventually became director of the Montreal General Hospital's Department of Metabolism and Toxicology. At the same time, he began teaching biochemistry, medicine and experimental medicine in the Faculty of Medicine. Dr. Bensley was such a talented lecturer that he once received an ovation for a lecture on the unpromising subject of urinalysis! During the Second World War, Major Bensley served with No. 14 Canadian General Hospital, and advised the Canadian army overseas on nutrition. After the war, he continued to pursue his research in this area, and was elected President of both the Nutrition Society of Canada and the Canadian Society of Clinical Chemists. He was a fellow of the American College of Physicians and the Royal College of Physicians of Canada, and a member of numerous societies relating to medical biology and chemistry, in whose journals he published widely.

In the 1960s, Dr. Bensley's work took a new turn, one which brought him into closer contact with the Osler Library, and laid the foundation for his "second career". As Associate Dean, Acting Dean and later Vice-Dean of the Faculty, his relationship with the Library -which he claimed was somewhat casual at first, an adjunct to his friendship with W.W. Francis - became deeper and more personal. When he entered upon his semi-retirement in 1968, the shape of his new work had already been announced by an exhibit, entitled "Milestones of the McGill University Faculty of Medicine", which he had prepared as Vice-Dean for the Canadian Centennial celebrations at McGill the previous year. In 1968, he joined the recently created Department of the History of Medicine (forerunner of the present Department of Social Studies of Medicine) as an active member.

Publications on the history of medicine in Canada and Quebec, which hitherto had formed a small, but significant part of his output, now swelled to a veritable flood. An outstanding series of essays on the history of the Montreal General Hospital, beginning with his stirring reconstruction of the Caldwell-O'Sullivan duel of 1819, were later collected and reprinted by the Hospital under the title Pages of History. With Don Bates, he edited Osler's "Inner History of the Johns Hopkins Hospital", and in collaboration with Barbara Tunis, traced the erratic career of McGill's first medical graduate, William Logie. But as the appended bibliography indicates, Bensley did some of his most interesting and original work for the Osler Library Newsletter,

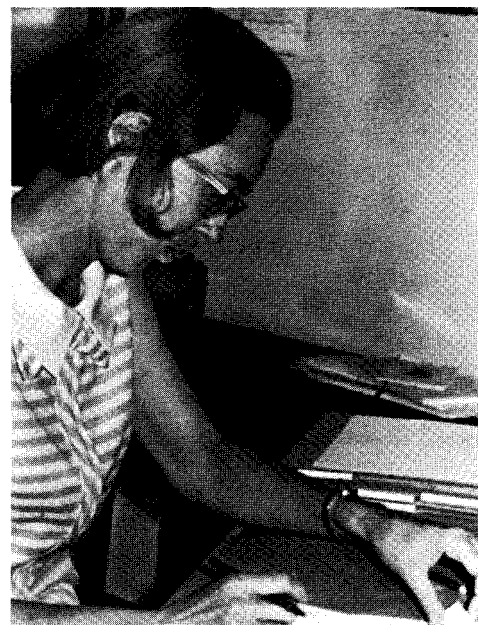
editing and publishing unusual documents from the Library's collections, and unravelling curious problems of Oslerian biography and bibliography. He also collaborated with Don Bates and Philip Teigen on the elegant 50th anniversary volume, The Osler Library. Simultaneously, he lectured on the history of medicine in Montreal and at McGill to Med II undergraduates, and was a mainstay of the Osler Society.

Dr. Bensley's appointment as Honorary Osler Librarian in 1979 sounds like a title of courtesy, but in fact it acknowledged the substantial assistance he gave to the Library and its staff in daily operations. His meticulous research files were an unparalleled source of documentation for answering reference queries about local history; his capacious and precise memory was an even more precious resource. He was in his office almost every day, the door was always open, and he was always willing to lend a hand with awkward correspondence or puzzling problems. His major concern in his latter years was the Newsletter. He contributed frequently to its pages, and was ever vigilant in seeking out authors for lead articles, or important news items. He also proof-read every line, with a thoroughness bordering on ferocity. Above all, he lent to this publication a distinctive stamp of formality and scholarship, qualities that reflected his own personality.

Dr. Bensley's last publication was his collection of biographical sketches entitled McGill Medical Luminaries (1990), or as Don Bates dubbed it, "Bensley's Worthies". It was his final homage to the University, the hospitals and the city in which he had spent his long and productive career. Osler's own works appear in the "Bibliotheca Secunda" of the Bibliotheca Osleriana, but Dr. Bensley, with understandable modesty, did not wish to include himself amongst the "worthies". There is no doubt that when a second edition of Luminaries appears, Dr. Bensley will be among them, as he deserves. I for one hope that this future biography will make room for those numberless memories of acts of kindness, diplomatic gestures, funny stories, and wicked anecdotes that made him such a joy to work with, and such an unforgettable person.

Faith Wallis

For a select bibliography of Dr. Bensley's writings, please see the insert.



In Memoriam - Ellen Baker Wells

Ellen Wells, who died of cancer at the Hospice of Northern Virginia on April 2nd, 1995, was Associate Osler Librarian 1968-1971, and Acting Osler Librarian 1971-1972.

A graduate of Oklahoma State University, Ellen Wells also earned an M.A. in library science from the University of California at Berkeley, and an M.A. in history from McGill. From 1964-1968 she worked at the National Library of Medicine in Bethesda, and then came to the Osler Library, where she worked for four years. In the year following her arrival she became the founding Editor of the Newsletter, and in the year of her departure she was instrumental in organizing the Friends of the Osler Library: two notable examples of her foresight and her imagination. The minutes of the Board meetings of the period attest also to her practical accomplishments, which included the drawing up of an acquisitions policy and a staff manual, and organization of the sale of duplicates.

The eleventh issue of the Newsletter, (October 1972), contains a tribute to Ellen Wells, (who had left McGill that summer to become Associate Librarian in the History of Science Collections at Cornell University) written by her former colleague Dr. Donald G. Bates. He dwelt particularly on her interest in the conservation of library materials, as recorded in the chapter on the maintenance of rare book collections in the publication Guide to Medieval and Renaissance Studies in Medicine, 1972.

In 1979 Ellen Wells left Cornell to begin her career at the Smithsonian Institution Libraries where she became head of the Special Collections department. She was

Curator of a number of exhibitions at the Museum of American History, and her publications include *Book Collecting and the Care of Books* (a Smithsonian pamphlet). Her keen interest in horses and riding is reflected in her 1974 publication *Horse-manship: a Bibliography of Printed Materials from the Sixteenth Century through 1974*, and in the article "Books for Horsemen in the *Bibliotheca Osleriana*" which she contributed to the seventeenth issue of the *Osler Library Newsletter*, October 1974. A later issue of the *Newsletter* (no. 26, 1977) contains her article "Books for the *Bibliotheca*: a Study of Sir William Osler's Book Bills".

Dr. Bates recalls with pleasure an incident which took place when he, Ellen Wells and the staff were sending out the first issue of the *Newsletter*. The dispatch coincided with the appearance of a postage stamp honouring Sir William, and arrangements had been made for a "first day cover". Thousands of newsletters were being pushed into envelopes and thousands of stamps affixed, when the telephone rang and a voice asked: "Did you know there's a new stamp commemorating Osler?"

Former colleagues across the McGill campus remember Ellen Wells with respect and affection, and her association with the *Osler Library* has left a legacy of accomplishments both practical and creative for which her successors must always be grateful.

June Schachter

Osler and Walt Whitman: a Fresh Examination

Shortly after taking up his new post as Professor of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania in 1884, Osler became involved with the health problems of the famous American poet, Walt Whitman. Though the story of their relationship has been told in part on a number of occasions, the full extent and significance of the link has not hitherto received a thorough and documented treatment. Dr. Philip Leon, Professor of English at The Citadel in Charleston, South Carolina, has accomplished just this in *A Scythian Visitor at Delphi: Walt Whitman and Sir William Osler*, the culmination of research among archival sources here at McGill, and also at the Johns Hopkins, Oxford, and Manchester Universities. The centrepiece of Leon's book is a critical edition of Osler's *Reminiscences of Whitman*, never before published in full; the original manuscript of this account, one of the last texts which Osler wrote before his death, resides in the *Osler Library*. But the story does not stop with the *Reminiscences*.

Whitman, Osler, and their mutual friends form a nineteenth-century tapestry woven from the worlds of literature, medicine and art, that includes the doctors S. Weir Mitchell and Samuel D. Gross, painters Thomas Eakins and John Singer Sargent, and English and American literary figures such as Henry James and Edith Wharton, Edmund Gosse, the Brownings, and the Rossettis. *A Scythian Visitor at Delphi* presents previously unpublished documents such as Osler's marginal notes in his presentation copy of *Leaves of Grass*, and his correspondence with members of a fraternal group in England who blended worship of Whitman with homosexual tendencies, radical socialism, and religion.

A Scythian Visitor at Delphi is available from ECW Press, 2120 Queen Street East, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4E 1E2. The cost is \$29.95 (Canadian) or \$21.95 (U.S.) for the paperback edition, \$42.00 (Canadian) or \$32.00 (U.S.) in cloth.

Portrait of Sir William Osler

In November 1994, on Osler Day, Dr. William Feindel presented to the Library a copy of a portrait of Sir William which belongs to the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine in London. Dr. Feindel has now had the picture framed, and it is at the moment forming the centrepiece of a small exhibition in the *Osler Room*, consisting of a pictorial biography of Osler, along



with his family and some contemporaries, (mostly sepia photographs from the Library's collection). The portrait itself is described on p. 39 of Dr. Alex Sakula's book *The Portraiture of Sir William Osler*, (London/New York, Royal Society of Medicine, 1991), as the "last painted from life", commissioned in 1914 by Canada, a weekly illustrated journal published at Kingsbury House, London. It appeared in the issue of December 19, 1914, under the title *Medical Science*, as part of the journal's 'Canada Portrait Gallery'. The signature on the portrait appears to be Kanak (although Dr. Sakula read it as Kanuk). Efforts to identify the artist have so far proved unavailing.

Famous Patients on Exhibit

Was Freud's death a "physician-assisted suicide"? Did Lincoln have Marfan's Syndrome? What caused the madness of King George? Our curiosity about the medical histories of the famous and infamous seems almost limitless... as witness the rubric "Famous Patients" in the *Bibliography of the History of Medicine*. Further evidence of this fascination is the fact that a current exhibit at the *Osler Library*, "Disease in History: Medical Profiles of Illustrious Persons", got front-page coverage in the May 18 issue of the *Montreal Gazette*... undoubtedly a "first" for the Library! Mary Simon, Collections Assistant at the Library, prepared the exhibition; she explains why the study of "famous patients" is of more than anecdotal interest in her exhibition summary:

One of the major fascinations of the diseases of the famous is the effect of the malady on their behaviour, since these patients achieve their fame because of the influence they have on the affairs of mankind. If they had not been ill, would that influence have been exercised in a different way? Would it have been greater or less; or, in the case of the arts, literature or music, more creative or less? There is a special fascination in trying to answer these questions, since any conclusion is a game of speculation as the insights and presuppositions about a particular illness of the past were often different from those of the present and the words used for medical conditions over the years may have changed their meanings, often greatly.

The study of the illnesses of famous men and women forms a legitimate part of both medical history and general history. In medical historiography such studies give an indication of the

medical practices of the time and of the state of nosology. The course of medical history has been influenced, sometimes favourably, sometimes most unfavourably, by the illnesses of famous persons which have stimulated investigation of the causes and treatment of disease....

Mary Simon's exhibit contradicts the conventional wisdom that the patient is the "forgotten person" in the history of medicine. Few know the names of Van Gogh's or Nijinsky's doctors, but the mental disorders of these artists are the subject of a copious historiography; speculation over the cause of Mozart's demise inspires fresh articles, to say nothing of plays and films, every year. Readers of the Newsletter who wish to gratify their own curiosity on these intriguing questions will not want to miss "Disease in History", which will remain on display throughout the summer.

Fifty Years of Psychiatry at McGill

In 1993, the Department of Psychiatry at McGill University celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. This year, a volume of commemorative essays entitled *Building on a Proud Past: 50 Years of Psychiatry at McGill* was published to mark that event. Its joint editors are Dr. Gilbert Pinard, Chair of the Department, and Dr. Theodore L. Sourkes, a distinguished researcher in the field of neurochemistry and psychopharmacology, and a member of the Osler Library's Board of Curators. *Building on a Proud Past* includes reprinted articles by E. A. Collard on Sir Hugh Allen and his mansion "Ravenscrag" (now the Allen Memorial Institute), and by D.E. Cameron, the first Chair of the Department. Robert A. Cleg-horn, M. Dongier and D. Pivnicki reminisce about the early days of the Department and Institute, while Hans Lehmann describes what life was like "Before there was a Department of Psychiatry at McGill", and even "Before they called it psychopharmacology". Dr. Sourkes contributes his own thoughts on "The Climate of Discovery" to a section on research at the Allen Memorial Institute. There are also essays on affiliated hospitals, on psychoanalysis at McGill, and on the role of women in psychiatry. All too often, even a "proud past" can be lost or misrepresented when the living actors disappear; Drs. Pinard and Sourkes are to be congratulated for seizing the day of Psychiatry's fiftieth birthday to capture and preserve the essence of that past.

The Fountain Runs Dry...

In the last number of the Newsletter, we published a clipping from the Sunday Times of London, illustrating a glass fountain constructed for the Great Exhibition of 1859 by the firm of F. and C. Osler, and asked our readers to furnish any clues as to a connection between this firm and Sir William's family. A reply promptly came in from the indefatigable Dr. Richard Golden, who upon reading the original article in the Times, had entered into a correspondence with descendants of Follett Osler, the glass manufacturer, whose family apparently came originally from Somerset. This correspondence confirmed that there is no connection between the two Osler families. While the surname "Osler" is somewhat unusual, it is, in the end, probably an occupational title (an "ostler" or "hosteler" is a stable-hand at an inn. There is also a minority view that the name derives from the French oiseleur, but philological support has yet to be found for this. At all events, if it is a "trade name" it could designate quite unconnected families).

Editorial Committee for the Newsletter:
Faith Wallis, Osler Librarian and Editor;
June Schachter, History of Medicine
Librarian and Assistant Editor; Wayne
LeBel, Assistant History of Medicine
Librarian and Assistant Editor; Lily
Szczygiel, Editorial Assistant.

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Friends of the Osler Library

The appeal to the Friends for the 1994-95 academic year concluded at the end of May. The Library gratefully acknowledges the support it has received from Friends, both old and new, who have responded to the appeal for funds this year. Over the year, 315 Friends have given a total of approximately \$26,982. Most of the contributions have come from Friends in Canada and the United States of America. However, very welcome contributions have also come from Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Chile, Germany, Japan, Mexico, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

The names of Friends whose contributions were received after January 31, 1995 are listed below.

The appeal for the 1995-96 academic year will be made in the October Newsletter.

- † Anonymous
- Michael Ashby
- * Gary F. Bacon
- Abel E. Berland
- † Winifred L. Birkett Estate
- † Robert F. Committo
- † Audrey Copping
- † George S.M. Cowan, Jr.
- Nicholas Dewey
- Peter S.B. Digby
- * Martin Edelstein
- † Robert Forsey (In memory of Dr. E.H. Bensley)
- * Palmer H. Futcher
- † John R. Hogle
- * Charles Knirsch
- † Teresa K. Kus
- Wilfred Leith (In memory of Dr. E.H. Bensley)
- † Joseph W. Lella
- Harry H. Marsh
- J.E. McAuley
- * Wayne McShane
- † Tom Middlebro'
- * Linda Ordogh
- † Robert Z. Perkins
- † Leo Plouffe, Jr.
- John Marshall Pogue
- Luis E. Quiroga
- * L. Barth Reller
- † H. Rocke Robertson
- * Pierre M. Senécal
- † Peter J. Stephens
- † Alex and Lorna Stewart (In memory of Dr. E.H. Bensley)
- * Philip M. Teigen
- University of California, San Francisco
- * Jack W. Wilkerson
- † Patron
- * Supporting

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