

# OSLER LIBRARY NEWSLETTER

MCGILL UNIVERSITY, MONTREAL, CANADA

NO. 12 - FEBRUARY 1973

## THE OSLER LIBRARY RECEPTION COMMITTEE (1920-1928)



The Osler Library was officially opened on May 29th, 1929. That same day, just prior to the formal ceremonies, the Curators of the Osler Library held their first meeting. The Chairman was the Dean of the McGill Medical Faculty, Dr. C.F. Martin. In his introductory remarks,

Dr. Martin explained that preparations for receiving and housing the Library had been the work of a local committee, whose functions had ceased after the arrival of the books and of the Librarian at the end of 1928, and that supervision of the Library was now to be given over to the Curators.\*

The local committee, mentioned by Dr. Martin, had been appointed in October 1920 and therefore had functioned over a period of eight years. Its full name was the Osler Library Reception Committee. The minutes and correspondence of this committee, as well as a record of events leading to its formation, are in the files of the Osler Library and the account presented here has been drawn largely from this source. The story is worth telling. It reveals the roles played not only by several prominent members of the McGill community, but also by Lady Osler. There have been many acknowledgements of her devoted work on behalf of the cataloguing of the Osler Collection at Oxford following her husband's death in December 1919. It is not so well known that she was actively involved in the plans for the Osler Library at McGill University.

The story begins with the receipt of a cable from Lady Osler. Dated March 18th, 1920 and addressed to the Dean of the McGill Medical Faculty, it read as follows: "Sir William Osler bequeathes to Medical Faculty his medical and scientific library as catalogued. Please cable if accepted and write in confirmation. Grace Osler. Oxford." To this the Dean, Dr. H.S. Birkett, replied, "Faculty of Medicine McGill University gratefully accepts Medical Library of Sir William and is proud to have charge of unique gift." Dr. Birkett lost no time in starting preparations for the reception of Osler's magnificent bequest. Within a few days after the arrival of Lady Osler's cable, the Medical Faculty's Executive Commit-

tee authorized Professor Samuel E. Whitnall to visit Oxford in the summer of 1920 as the official representative of Faculty to make preliminary arrangements for the transportation of Osler's books to Montreal. Whitnall was Professor of Anatomy at McGill University, having come to Montreal from Oxford where he had taught anatomy for several years. A scholar with wide interests, an Oxford graduate, and formerly one of Sir William's young colleagues at Oxford, he was well suited to initiate plans for the Osler Library.\*\*

As had been arranged, Professor Whitnall went to Oxford where he viewed Osler's Library, had several discussions with Lady Osler, consulted the staff of the Bodleian Library and sought advice from Harvey Cushing and a number of others who were familiar with the Osler Collection. At a meeting of the McGill Medical Faculty held October 25th, 1920, Whitnall presented a detailed report. In it he made three recommendations. His first was the appointment by the Medical Faculty of an Osler Library Reception Committee "to take charge of all papers, correspondence and matters relative to the Osler Library until it arrives in Montreal." His second (perhaps more a tentative suggestion than a firm recommendation) was that the Osler Collection, although to be accommodated in a separate room of its own, should form part of the Medical Library which would then be renamed the "Osler Medical Library." Finally he recommended that Dr. W.W. Francis, then in Geneva editing the *International Journal of Public Health*, be offered the post of Osler Librarian, a recommendation which Dr. Whitnall stated was supported by Lady Osler and Dr. Harvey Cushing. Faculty approved the appointment of the Osler Library Reception Committee and referred to it Dr. Whitnall's other recommendations.

The Osler Library Reception Committee was a small and select group. Its Chairman was McGill's Principal, Sir Arthur Currie. Professor Whitnall was Secretary. The other members were the Dean of the Medical Faculty, Dr. Birkett, and a Professor of Medicine, Dr. F.G. Finley. Emphasis was placed on the fact that when the Committee eventually disbanded to be replaced by the Board of Curators, some degree of continuity would be ensured since the Principal, the Dean and the Professor of Medicine would become *ex officio* Curators. As might be expected, there were changes in personnel with the passage of the years, but Professor

\*Readers unfamiliar with what is meant by "The Curators" are referred to an article by Nancy Grant entitled "Sir William and the Osler Library's Board of Curators" in the October 1969 issue of the *Osler Library Newsletter*.

The historiated letter which appears on this page is reproduced from *Catalogus impressorum Librorum Bibliothecae Bodleianae in Academia Oxoniensi*, 1738. *Bibl. Osl.* 7244.

\*\*Professor Whitnall also had a leading part in the founding of the Osler Society of McGill University. He encouraged the students in their desire to form the Society and became its first Honorary President. During the early years of the Society's existence, the meetings were held in Professor Whitnall's home and some members of Faculty called the group "Whitnall's Society."



Whitnall remained as Secretary throughout the life of the Committee.

The first meeting of this committee was held on December 1st, 1920, with all four members present. Strong approval was given to the proposal to rename the Medical Library, inclusive of the Osler Collection, the "Osler Medical Library" with the Osler Librarian in charge of the whole. At the same time it was recognized that the Osler Collection must be housed in a separate room and the Secretary was asked to refer the question of accommodation to the Medical Library Committee. Lastly, the Secretary was instructed to complete the appointments of Curators and to investigate further the selection of an Osler Librarian.

The question of accommodation was quickly settled. Within a week, the Honorary Medical Librarian, Dr. C.F. Wylde, recommended on behalf of the Medical Library Committee, that the Osler Collection be housed in a room on the same floor as the Medical Library in the Strathcona Medical Building. This room formed part of the Department of Anatomy and was divided into four sub-rooms, all of which were allocated to Professor Whitnall, who readily agreed to vacate them. Arrangements were made for the removal of the partitions, thus converting the four sub-rooms into a single large room.

For a time routine financial details occupied the attention of the Osler Library Reception Committee and then an important step was taken in May 1921 when Percy Erskine Nobbs was engaged to submit plans for the room to house the Osler Collection. Nobbs, a brilliant architect, was Professor of Design at McGill University and a former Director of the McGill School of Architecture. Within a month, Percy Nobbs submitted a series of sketches, copies of which were sent to Lady Osler. One set of these, dated June 10th, 1921, has been preserved in the files of the Osler Library. The sketches bear little resemblance to the final Osler Library room and so must have undergone radical revisions.

Reference has been made to the proposal to rename the Medical Library, inclusive of the Osler Collection, the "Osler Medical Library" and place the Osler Librarian in charge. This proposal had been approved not only by the Osler Library Reception Committee but also by the Medical Library Committee. In October of 1921, Dean Birkett reported to Faculty that he had received a letter from Lady Osler stating that she would prefer to have the name "Osler Library" apply to the Osler Collection only and not include the main library of the Medical Faculty. It was immediately agreed that Lady Osler's wishes be carried out and Faculty apparently abandoned the plan of incorporating the Osler Collection in an "Osler Medical Library" with the Osler Librarian in charge of the whole. The promptness with which this important decision was made may seem surprising. However, the records suggest that it had been assumed from the start that adoption of the plan was subject to Lady Osler's approval and any action taken must have her whole-hearted support. It should be added that since Lady Osler had generously undertaken to pay a substantial portion of the salary of the Osler Librarian, it was only proper that, quite apart from other considerations, she should have something to say about his responsibilities.

In the meantime, the Committee had not neglected the vital task of seeking an Osler Librarian who, in view of Lady Osler's expressed wish, would take charge of the Osler Library but would not be responsible for the Medical Library. Further discussions and correspondence strengthened the view that Dr. W.W. Francis was the best choice and in November 1921 he was offered the post. From his office in Geneva with the League of Red Cross Societies, Dr. Francis wrote Sir Arthur Currie to accept the appointment of "Librarian of the Osler Library" to take effect "when-ever the Library comes" to McGill University.

By the end of 1921, the Osler Library Reception Committee had discharged most of its responsibilities. Dr. Francis had agreed to be Osler Librarian, the Curators had been appointed but would not become active until the arrival of the books in Montreal. Space close by but separate from the main Medical Library had been allocated. Professor Nobbs had been commissioned to design the room and arrangements had been made for the Bromsgrove Guild (Canada) Company in Montreal to execute the design. Since the books did not arrive until the end of 1928, it may seem in retrospect that the Committee had proceeded with commendable but unnecessary dispatch. However, it must be borne in mind that originally it was expected that the Osler Library would be fully installed and in working order at McGill by the end of 1923 or perhaps earlier. It was understood that the books would not leave Oxford until a printed catalogue had been completed, but it was thought this could be done in a matter of months. In 1921, even Dr. Francis, later to become chief editor of the catalogue, greatly underestimated the time required for its preparation. This is indicated by the following excerpt from his letter to Sir Arthur Currie accepting the post of Osler Librarian. Dr. Francis wrote - "I sever my connection with the League of Red Cross Societies at the end of this year [1921] and shall go to Oxford to work in the Library. It was Sir William's wish that a printed catalogue should be prepared before the books were moved, and this will be my principal task. When the work is completed, probably by next autumn, I shall go to Canada with the books and take up my duties as Librarian." As is now well known, the completion of the *Bibliotheca Osleriana* took not a few months but seven years.

From 1922 until the arrival of the books in 1928, the chief preoccupation of the Osler Library Reception Committee was the design and fitting up of the room to accommodate the Library. Although primarily the responsibility of Professor Nobbs and the Bromsgrove Guild, all details had to be approved by the Committee, the members of which acted as advisors to the architect. Lady Osler too was consulted at every stage. She offered many suggestions, one of which deserves special mention. The early plans had called for a bust of Osler to be placed on a pedestal in the Library. It was Lady Osler who vetoed this and recommended in its place the use of a bronze plaque of Osler by Frédéric Vernon of Paris. All who are familiar with the Osler Library will agree that the Osler niche with the Vernon plaque is one of the most attractive features of the room. The details of this niche were worked out by Professor Nobbs in consultation with members of the McGill Medical Faculty, but the basic concept was provided by Lady Osler.



With the installation of the Vernon plaque in late 1928, the Osler Library Reception Committee had completed its work. Finally, as related at the beginning of this account, the books arrived, Dr. Francis assumed his responsibilities as Osler Librarian and the Osler Library Reception Committee was disbanded, to be replaced by the Board of Curators.

E.H. Bensley

*Editor's Note:* In 1965 the Osler Library moved from the Strathcona Medical Building to more spacious quarters in the newly erected McIntyre Medical Sciences Building. With the aid of a generous grant from the John and Mary R. Markle Foundation, the Osler Library room, as designed by Professor Nobbs, was carefully dismantled and installed in its original form in the McIntyre Building, where it is now the "Osler Room" of a greatly expanded Osler Library of the History of Medicine.

### GIFTS TO THE LIBRARY

The Library is grateful to the following who donated books or other gifts during the 1971-72 academic year: W.M. Fitzhugh; Mrs. W.G. Eliasberg; B. Clarke; L.W. Mills; G.W. Northrup; S. Rosenberg; R.V. Christie; Miss M. Fransiszyn; R. Fortune; A. Branch; Mme F. Delisle; A. Athar-i Mili-yi; T. Primrose; A. Sim; M.V. Amasuno; D.G. Bates; J. Harrison; R.M. Kingdon; J.D. Graham; R. Gilbert; Miss N. Bignell; E.H. Bensley; Miss L. George; W. Penfield; Mrs. H. Siteman; G. Cousineau; W. O'Mahoney; J. Key; Mrs. D. Jones; T.G. Osler; S. Szabo; J.A. Del Regato; K.A.C. Elliott; F.L. McNaughton; L. Glesinger; D.B. Price; N.J. Twombly; D.M. O'Sullivan; H. Tartalja; G.S.T. Cavanagh; L.C. Parish; P.S. Gottschalk; R. Beauperthuy de Benedetti; S.K. Hamarneh; S. Leblond; J.S.L. Browne; Miss R. Harvey; F. Rogers; E.G. Dimond; R.L. Richards; R.R. Forsey; A.D. Kelly; Miss S. Gillespie; R. Palmer Howard; M.H. Saffron; J.J. Bulger; C.G. Roland; D.L. Cowen; De Vross; Estate of C.K. Russel; Universitni knihovna; Pliva; American Institute of the History of Pharmacy; Lister Institute; Queen Elizabeth Hospital; Texas Allergy Foundation; Hoffmann-Laroche; Norman Bethune Seminar Committee; Woodward Biomedical Library; University of British Columbia; McGill Student Movement; Royal Victoria Hospital; National Archives, Washington, D.C.; Medical Sciences Library, University of Alberta, Edmonton; Medical Library, McGill; Instituto di Storia della Medicina, Rome; McLennan Library, McGill; Royal College of Physicians of London; Yugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts; Physical Sciences Library, McGill; U.S. Public Health Service; Société belge d'histoire des hôpitaux; McGill University Archives; Library of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia; U.S. Surgeon General's Office; Law Library, McGill; Australian Mutual Provident Society; and an anonymous donor.

### FRIENDS OF NORMAN BETHUNE

No less than three delegations from the People's Republic of China visited the Library during the month of November, 1972. The groups composed of members of the All China Medical Association, the Chinese Academy of Sciences, and the Shenyang Acrobat troupe, came to view a small exhibit on Dr. Norman Bethune in the Osler Room. On display were several new "Bethuniana" items: photographs of murals painted by Bethune at Saranac Lake, New York, and presented to the Library by Dr. Harry Bloch last year. Books on the history of medicine in China, Osler's *Principles and Practice of Medicine* in Chinese, and a Chinese copy of the *Nei ching* donated by Dr. Casey Wood, were made available for the visitors' perusal. In the absence of an Osler Librarian, Dr. E.H. Bensley of the Department of the History of Medicine received the medical and scientific groups. He presented an informal talk on the history of the library and answered questions posed by the visitors. Mr. Karl Holeczek took photographs of the first visit, a set of charmingly candid portraits now housed in the Library archives.

Marilyn Fransiszyn

DATE	NAME	ADDRESS	(Delegation of Chinese medical doctors)
9.11.1972	吴蔚然	北京	中国医学代表团
	周冠人	北京	"
	付一斌	北京	"
	彭川清	北京	"
	王连生	北京	"
	陈良纯	上海	"
	张树和	北京	"
	邵清安		Shenyang
	李立心	武汉	中国医学代表团
	巢川侯	北京	"

Signatures of the delegates of the All China Medical Association in the Osler Library Visitors Register.



## EXHIBIT OF ASTROLOGICAL WORKS

A choice of the most attractive and rarest astrological works in the McGill libraries made up the Osler Library display for October and November 1972 — *Urania: Astrological Books from the Osler Library of the History of Medicine*. The items included editions of the better known astrological classics, such as works by Albumasar, Regiomontanus, Fludd and Paracelsus; a yearly prognosticator published in Rome ca. 1483 and believed to be the oldest printed astrological book in Montreal; and a section devoted to astro-medical texts and illustrations showing the human body as part of a larger cosmic process. Among the latter were Sinhalese-Pali manuals, ca. 1600, from the Casey Wood Historical Collection of Sinhalese Materia Medica.

Almost a third of the display was given over to the work of Girolamo Cardano (1501-1576). Although an eminent physician, surgeon and astrologer, Cardano is best remembered today for two great feats of practical ingenuity: he laid down the foundations of probability theory and he is reputed to have invented the universal joint.

The display was set up to coincide with the Third International Symposium on Astrological Research, held last year at L'Estérel, Québec, October 7 to 16.

Axel Harvey  
Vice-President (Canada)  
International Society for  
Astrological Research

## OSLER MANUSCRIPT PUBLISHED

In the June 1972 issue of the *Osler Library Newsletter* it was reported that the Board of Curators of the Osler Library had granted the request of K. Garth Huston of Los Angeles to publish an unfinished manuscript by Osler (*Bibl. Osl.* 7664 — unpublished papers) about Sir Kenelm Digby's Powder of Sympathy (*Bibl. Osl.* 2453). Readers of the *Newsletter* will be interested to learn that Osler's essay, edited, annotated and introduced by Dr. Huston, has now been published by the Plantin Press, Los Angeles.

## FRIENDS OF THE OSLER LIBRARY

Our Friends now number 116 and a total of \$1610 has been raised. The Library is pleased to add the following names to the list of Friends published in the October edition of the *Newsletter* and gratefully acknowledges their support.

L.H. Battersby, Montreal, Quebec  
W.K. Beatty, Chicago, Illinois  
R.F.P. Cronin, Montreal, Quebec  
F.R. Fenton, Montreal, Quebec  
J. Hanaway, Boston, Massachusetts  
F.J. Hogg, Oakdale, California  
H.E. MacDermot, Montreal, Quebec  
W. d'A. Maycock, Bushey, Herts., England  
J.R. Moore, Montreal, Quebec  
A.R. Neghme, Sao Paulo, Brazil  
R. Palmer Howard, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma  
E.T. Peer, St. Catharines, Ontario  
R.T. Shields, Staunton, Virginia  
H. Starkey, Westmount, Quebec  
W.D. Tigertt, Baltimore, Maryland  
R.C. Tilghman, Baltimore, Maryland  
G. Walsh, Vancouver, British Columbia

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

Legal deposit 1/1973

Printed in Canada