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## Old Medical Books in Edinburgh Libraries: The Royal Medical Society Catalogue Project

Geoffrey D. Hargreaves

### Abstract

In the justifiable belief that the older collections of printed medical books in Edinburgh libraries are exceptional in both quality and quantity, the Royal Medical Society has initiated a scheme for the production and, it is hoped, the publication of a composite catalogue of these collections for the benefit of scholars in the history of medicine and science. The institutions currently involved in the scheme are the National Library of Scotland, the Royal Botanic Garden, the Royal College of Physicians, the Royal College of Surgeons, the Royal Observatory, the Royal Society and the University of Edinburgh (including New College). In addition, the Royal Medical Society is, of course, contributing its own residual but important collection of older books withheld from the 1969 sale as being unrepresented in any other Edinburgh collection.

The quality of the Edinburgh collections as a whole may perhaps be adequately suggested by noting their strength in the classics of medical literature. There are, for example, three copies of the *De medicina* (1478) of A. Cornelius Celsus, one of the first general medical treatises to be printed; four copies of the herbal *De historia stirpium* (1542) of Leonhard Fuchs, and three of the anatomical work *De humani corporis fabrica* (1543) of Andreas Vesalius — books which, particularly through the quality of their illustrations, did much to release the study of medical botany and anatomy "from traditional inaccuracies; one of the three known copies of the *Christianissimi restitutio* (1553) of Michael Servetus, which includes the first Western account of the lesser circulation; no fewer than five copies (including one with the errata) of what is generally regarded as the most important work in the history of medicine, William Harvey's account of the circulation in his *De motu cordis* (1628); five copies (including a presentation copy with the plate in colour) of another classic of medical botany, William Withering's *An account of the foxglove* (1785); and a copy of Sir Charles Bell's exceptionally rare *Idea of a new anatomy of the brain* (1811), a pamphlet even more unprepossessing in appearance than the *De motu cordis*, yet — in the context of the nervous system — of comparable importance as an advance in medical knowledge.

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# OLD MEDICAL BOOKS IN EDINBURGH LIBRARIES:

## THE ROYAL MEDICAL SOCIETY CATALOGUE PROJECT

Geoffrey D. Hargreaves

In the justifiable belief that the older collections of printed medical books in Edinburgh libraries are exceptional in both quality and quantity, the Royal Medical Society has initiated a scheme for the production and, it is hoped, the publication of a composite catalogue of these collections for the benefit of scholars in the history of medicine and science. The institutions currently involved in the scheme are the National Library of Scotland, the Royal Botanic Garden, the Royal College of Physicians, the Royal College of Surgeons, the Royal Observatory, the Royal Society and the University of Edinburgh (including New College). In addition, the Royal Medical Society is, of course, contributing its own residual but important collection of older books withheld from the 1969 sale as being unrepresented in any other Edinburgh collection.

The quality of the Edinburgh collections as a whole may perhaps be adequately suggested by noting their strength in the classics of medical literature. There are, for example, three copies of the *De medicina* (1478) of A. Cornelius Celsus, one of the first general medical treatises to be printed; four copies of the herbal *De historia stirpium* (1542) of Leonhard Fuchs, and three of the anatomical work *De humani corporis fabrica* (1543) of Andreas Vesalius — books which, particularly through the quality of their illustrations, did much to release the study of medical botany and anatomy from traditional inaccuracies; one of

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Such classics are supported by the more ephemeral (and thus often more elusive) tracts in particular pharmacological, obstetrical and dietary instruction at a more popular level. Among the earlier works in this category to be found in Edinburgh may be mentioned the *Liber servitoris de praeparatione medicinarum simplicium* (1471) attributed to Albucasis and perhaps the first printed book of a wholly medical character; Aldobrandino's *Le livre pour garder la sante du corps* (c. 1481); the *Secreta mulierum* (two editions, c. 1495-1500) attributed to Albertus Magnus; the *Regimen sanitatis* (1486 and c. 1500) of Magninus; the pseudo-Aristotelian *Problemata de partibus*

*corporis humani* (c. 1500); the *Tractato mirabile contra peste* (1503) of Baverius de Baveriis; and the *Enneas muliebris* (c. 1505) dedicated by the author, Ludovicus Bonaciolus, to Lucretia Borgia. Earlier Scottish medical printing also falls into this category, and is of course well represented with such rarities as Gilbert Skene's *Anc breve descriptionn of the pest* (1568) and Patrick Anderson's *Grana angelica* (1635).

In addition to the texts, the provenance and associations of the books often reflect the history of Scottish medicine and science in general and of the Edinburgh Medical School in particular. Some examples are the works on medical botany acquired during a continental tour in 1670 by Patrick Murray, Laird of Livingstone, whose collection of plants formed the basis of the Royal Botanic Garden; the extensive collection of medical books of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries formed by Sir James Young Simpson; and the copy of the *De motu cordis* (1628) owned by Professor Alexander Monro tertius. But the owners of medical books have not always been medical or scientific men, especially in the period before 1700. The Edinburgh copy of the 1527 edition of Avicenna's monumental exposition of Arabic medicine, the *Canon medicinae*, is preserved in a fine binding for John Hamilton, Archbishop of St. Andrews from 1546; the Drummond Collection features several rare ephemeral medical tracts owned by the poet William Drummond of Hawthornden (1585-1649); while John Gray, minister at Aberlady in 1690, was another owner of an Edinburgh "Harvey". In these ways the Royal Medical Society's project is likely to establish links with a wide range of Scottish studies.

If the quality of the collections is inviting, their quantity is daunting. The involvement of two major general libraries makes it essential that the project should work to a fairly strict definition of a "medical" book, especially for the period after 1700. Even so, sampling techniques suggest that there are at least 50,000 "medical" books in Edinburgh printed before 1851, the terminal date set by the Royal Medical Society for an "older" book. It should therefore be clear that the project must ultimately be of a long-term or multi-staffed nature, possibly both. The initial three-year term sponsored by the Society must be essentially an exploratory effort, aimed at covering no more than a suitable early portion of the scheme in addition to assessing its long-term

requirements. At first it was hoped that this early portion might extend as far as 1600 or even 1640, but experience in attempting to co-ordinate a project spread over eight separate libraries, where the appropriate books have first to be isolated from the general stocks, has now shown that this is impracticable. The Wellcome Historical Medical Library and the United States National Library of Medicine both commenced publication of their catalogues with a separate account of their fifteenth century books. It is doubtful if Edinburgh's "medical" (as opposed to "scientific") incunabula are sufficient in number to justify separate treatment, but the addition of the "post-incunabula" (books printed up to about 1540 or perhaps 1550) would seem to offer a unit of sufficient scope for publication and of considerable subject and bibliographical integrity, covering a period when both medical knowledge and the printed book remained to a large extent at "the cradle stage". Accordingly it is here that the efforts of the project are currently concentrated.

A particularly important feature of the project is the presence in Edinburgh of more than one copy of many of the books involved. The ravages of time and readers, coupled with the technical vagaries of book production, have ensured that many copies of early books (and indeed some copies of more recent books) are physically incomplete and textually imperfect. In these circumstances, the complete copy often has to be reconstructed from an examination of several individual copies, all of which may be more or less defective in themselves. In many cases, therefore, the Edinburgh collections can make a significant contribution to this process, and if the reconstruction is recorded in sufficient detail to indicate the full contents and make-up of a complete copy, the resultant description can be of great value to scholars, who may, for instance, find themselves reading what appears to be an incomplete copy and wish to ascertain how much is missing.

There are other ways in which a fairly detailed description can be of value to scholars in the history of medicine and science. They may be interested in the popularity and success of a work, and a useful indication of these is available in the number of separate editions called for, as the printer would not normally go to the trouble and expense of resetting type for a new edition unless the work was in demand. Distinct identification of editions is

therefore required, and since they may be very closely related and (especially in the case of popular works) undated or of the same date, detailed description is often necessary if the distinguishing features are to emerge. Again, scholars may be particularly interested in printers who specialised in medical and scientific printing, such as Bonetus Locatellus (fl. 1500) of Venice and Heinrich Sybold (fl. 1530) of Strassburg, who was himself a Doctor of Medicine as well as a printer. But Locatellus and Sybold, like many other printers before and after them, did not always indicate clearly in their books that they were the printers of them, and indeed many books carry no clear indication of printer, place or date. In these cases, it is desirable to present the identifying evidence of such features as printers' types and devices (this can also assist in the identification of editions), or at least to provide references to existing treatment of the problem.

For the incunabula and post-incunabula at least, some attempt has been made to take these considerations into account in the descriptive method currently being employed for the main entries, of which an outline is appended to this survey. These entries inevitably represent a compromise between the fullest standards of bibliographical description, as reached for instance by Allan Stevenson in the Hunt Catalogue of eighteenth-century botanical books, and simplified listing, which denies to historians and bibliographers alike so much of the information that they require. Even so, eventual publication may have to be confined to a selection of the information compiled, but it seems important to base this information as widely as possible in the first instance so that the largest possible number of options are kept open for the final product. This procedure also allows for the provision of full added entries and indexes of subsidiary works and persons, including editors, translators, illustrators, dedicatees, printers and publishers.

Finally, it is appropriate to emphasize that progress of any kind could hardly be made without the existing resources and organization of the participating libraries for the exploitation and retrieval of their collections in general. Many of these are covered by invaluable printed catalogues, and all individual items are readily available to the visiting student. It is also fitting to acknowledge the kind co-operation of the authorities of the participating libraries, and a pleasure to thank their libra-

rians and the many members of staff who, despite the pressure of their normal duties, are generously providing both practical help and technical advice.<sup>1</sup>

1. Thanks are also due for their help and support to Dr. Gweneth Whitteridge, Professor William Beattie, Dr. H. A. Feisenberger and Mr. R. O. MacKenna.

## APPENDIX

### *Descriptive formula (main-entry) for incunabula and post-incunabula.*

*Heading.* Normally includes author, short title, imprint (translated and given an arabic numeral date where necessary) and format. The form of the author's name follows the usage of the Edinburgh libraries themselves as far as possible; "established" usage is taken as the co-ordinating feature.

*Transcription.* In this period the information normally found on the title-pages of later books tends to be scattered throughout the book on title-pages (if provided) and in headings, incipits, explicits and colophons. Information is accordingly transcribed from these features, retaining the spelling, capitalization, punctuation and line-endings of the originals. The amount of information transcribed varies with each book in a flexible formula, the aim being, as far as possible, to let the book speak for itself in support of the heading and in respect of the subject interest. Title-pages and colophons are generally transcribed in full, but no attempt is being made to rival (or duplicate) the intensive descriptions already available for certain incunabula.

*Collation.* Given by signatures (Greg-Bowers formula) to indicate the precise make-up of a complete copy and provide reliable reference notation in preference to foliation or pagination, which are either not present or are very erratic at this period. If present, foliation or pagination is noted after the signatures in a simplified formula. (In a few very early books, as in many modern books, the gatherings are unsigned; this does not prevent the construction of a formula to indicate make-up, but reference in these cases is by supplied true foliation.)

*Typography, illustration, contents.* The number of lines to a (typical) page and the standard of measurement of twenty lines of type on that page are given to aid identification (of the edition and/or printer) and also visualization. There follows a note of any illustrative features (including printers' devices); "full-page" woodcuts are distinguished from those "in text". A simplified contents note seeks in particular to bring out any features (works, persons) of a complete copy not clarified in the transcription. Brief discussion of authorship and attribution problems may be added if necessary.

*References.* Normally given to sources which either treat the book in a bibliographically useful way, locate other copies of it, or provide notes on its subject matter and importance. Followed as required by notes on bibliographical problems.

*Copy or Copies.* Location of the Edinburgh copy or copies examined, with notes on individual variation, defect, or special features (association, annotation, binding, etc.) as appropriate. (It is important to emphasize that apparent "duplicates" in Edinburgh are rarely proving, on close examination, to duplicate each other in every significant feature).

# THE ROYAL MEDICAL SOCIETY TRAVEL FUND

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October 1972

All Medical Under-Graduates and Pre-Registration Doctors are eligible to receive awards from the R.M.S. Travel Fund, to finance travel for the furtherance of their medical education. The amount of each individual award will vary with the merit of the project to be undertaken, but will not exceed £150 in any one instance.

Applications should be made by 10th February 1973, for projects up to 1st October 1973; and 10th September 1973, for projects up to 1st March 1974. They should be sent in writing, giving details of the proposed visits to :

THE SECRETARY,  
ROYAL MEDICAL SOCIETY TRAVEL FUND,  
3 HILL SQUARE, EDINBURGH EH8 9DR