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History, Recollection and Conjecture

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Abstract

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HISTORY RECOLLECTION AND CONJECTURE

The RMS Library has long played a central role in the history of the Society. Dr. JJC Cormack M.D. (Honorary Librarian) takes a look back on how the Library has shaped the present day RMS.

Imagination has to fill in the gaps (and there are many) of recorded history. Even recorded history may not be accurate, but imagination can lead one seriously astray. In researching Library Committee minutes while preparing my dissertation many years ago I remember finding that in the years 1917 - 19 the business of the Library was incorporated with that of the other Committees in a conjoint Committee due to the small number of members available during the First World War. "There was a suggestion that the society should not meet during the hostilities, but research into old records revealed that the Society had continued to meet during the battle of Prestonpans in 1745 and this was considered to be due and sufficient precedent." This serves, it seems to me, to place the early days of the Society in some sort of historical context - or should have done so

had I not realised very recently that in my mind's eye the members of the Society were debating during the stirring days of the Jacobite uprising in the green and gold Hall at Melbourne Place - a completely anachronistic picture as the Society in 1745 had no settled home, or if it had it was in a room in the Old Infirmary and not by any stretch of the fancy in Melbourne Place. Such tricks does the imagination play.

Was the society, one wonders, riven with political controversy between adherents of the doomed but romantic Jacobite cause, like its early member Sir Stuart Threipland, physician to the Young Pretender, and ardent Hanoverians like the estimable Andrew Duncan who was later to write some execrable poetry in praise of the Germanic monarchs who had inherited the throne of Scotland? Which side, from today's perspective, would we have sup-



ported? Or were such differences sunk in shared interest in the art and budding science of Medicine and the knowledge that both Stuarts and Hanoverians shared some of the genes of Robert the Bruce? Another anachronism - our founding fathers knew of inheritance but nothing of genes.

So where did they meet, these eighteenth century students whose spiritual genes at least we inherit in the RMS? They met at first, of course, as we all do as medical students, over a corpse. What a strange bond of shared experience is this macabre but necessary ritual which stretches back down the years and generations.

The annals of the Society's foundation read "After having finished our dissection in which we employed the greater part of that month, we agreed to spend a social evening at a tavern." Where the tavern was we have not been told so here the imagina-

tion (and perhaps a touch of whimsy) must fill the gap. In 1977 I was invited to talk at a joint meeting of the Royal Medical Society and the Scottish Society for the History of Medicine in the RMS meeting hall in Bristo Square on the subject of the origin of the RMS - a talk I entitled 'There is a Tavern in the Town'. It was at this meeting that I drew attention to the taverns which existed in the early eighteenth century in the suburb of Easter Portsburgh just south of the city wall and close by the College's buildings. "It would be quite natural for this group of six friends on the evening of their last day in the anatomical theatre to have left the College by its western gate, proceed through the Potterow Port a walk of some two or three minutes up the Potterow to the tavern, perhaps on this very spot (the site of the present RMS meeting hall). Maybe this is but idle speculation, but it seems to me a

pleasing thought, that the Royal Medical Society might by chance have returned to its original spiritual home.

From this academic and scientific beginning (the hours spent in the anatomical theatre) and the convivial gathering of the founding sextet in that Edinburgh tavern sprang the idea of a permanent society, which was formally constituted in 1737. In August 1736, shortly before the formal constitution of the Medical Society, King George II granted a Royal Charter which incorporated the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh: at that time the 'little house' at the head of Robertson's Close. Sometime between its opening and 1753 the Managers of the Infirmary granted the use of one of its rooms to the Medical Society, thus giving it its first permanent home. Gray records that "an entry in the Infirmary minutes of the year 1753 shows that a library was being accumulated there with the funds which had previously paid for the tavern accommodation." Thus history appears to be silent on the question of where it was that the members of the Society met during the battle of Prestonpans: a tavern or a hospital room - we shall probably never know and imagination can have its freedom, but possibilities are narrowed down.

The accumulation of a library and the patronizing of taverns need not be mutually incompatible activities and one suspects that our predecessors happily engaged in both. The Society's library was to continue to influence decisions about the Society's accommodation for years to come.

What books did the Society collect to form its library in these early days? Again, alas, history is silent although the classic works of Hippocrates, Celsus, Galen, Vesalius and Paré must have featured along with more recent works by

Boyle, Newton, Willis and Sydenham. Whatever books it was that the Society acquired, it was noted in 1771 that the library was "not in such a situation as could be desired either with regard to conveniency or preservation", and this was adduced as one of the reasons for appealing for funds for the Society to build its own Hall. It was in 1775 that William Cullen lay the foundation stone of the Medical Hall which was to stand for nearly eighty years as the Society's first (and only purpose-built) home, on the west side of Surgeon's Square, part of the old Blackfriars' Monastery site and abutting High School Yards. Shepard's print and at least one fine painting remind us of this gracious and elegant building, the only known relic of which remaining to us being that foundation stone, which currently rests by the platform in the Meeting Hall.

Andrew Duncan must have been one of the most familiar figures visiting the Medical Hall which he was largely instrumental in planning and where he must have overseen the Society's accounts as its treasurer and frequently offered advice and counsel to his younger colleagues as one of the Society's oldest and firmest friends. Here it was that the discussions must have taken place which culminated in the Petition for the Royal Charter which included the phrase: "That the Society, by contribution of the Members, have gradually made a collection of Medical Books, which is daily increasing..." The Charter was granted in 1778: it is the Society's title to its privileges as a corporate body - it does not, as it is sometimes thought entitle the Society, properly called the Medical Society of Edinburgh, to call itself the Royal Medical Society, although the latter title is sanctioned by long usage and custom.

The Medical Hall's immediate



Above: Shepard's print (1829) of the South-West corner of Surgeons' Square. On the right is the original Hall of the Royal Medical Society. On the left is Surgeons' Hall, while the building with pillars in the centre contained the Lecture Rooms of the anatomists Barclays and Knox. Previous page: The former Royal Medical Society Library at 7 Melbourne Place.

neighbour on the west was the Royal High School and the Society's minutes record many complaints made to the Town Council demanding payment of the cost of repairing windows broken by the boys. Imagination might allow us to wonder if some shattering of glass might have originated from the youthful hands of Walter Scott, Henry Cockburn, Francis Jeffrey, Henry Brougham or Alexander Monro Tertius. Perhaps some of history's tantalising gaps are best left unfilled.

Addison, Bright, Hodgkin, Hastings, Simpson, Syme, Christison and Darwin all knew the Medical Hall, but before Lister's name was added to the roll the Society had

moved to a new home. The Society was 'about to be hemmed in by the Infirmary improvements; the access had become intolerable, and there was no longer space for [its] admirable library ... now amounting to 14 000 volumes selected with care unexampled in any other institution.' By now the Society's library would include works by its own members and teachers, many of them donated and suitably inscribed - volumes by and from William Cullen, James Gregory, Charles Bell, Benjamin Rush, Andrew Duncan, Mark Roget and William Withering among them.

In November 1852 the first meeting was held in 7 Melbourne Place, a tenement

building on the site of Gourlay's House in Old Bank Close. The exterior was surmounted by a fine stone eagle, still in the Society's possession and alleged to have been a relic of earlier use of the premises as Prussian Consulate. Here in Melbourne Place (the site now covered by Lothian Region's Council offices, but suitably marked by a wall plaque) the Society's business was carried on by Lister, the Bramwells, Chiene, Phillips and Dunlop and many other men of lesser fame but perhaps of equal worth.

In the early 1960's (shortly after women were first admitted to membership of the Society) 7 Melbourne Place was subject to a compulsory purchase order and the Society was forced to move out of the Hall it had inhabited for more than a hundred years. Thanks to the generosity of the Royal College of Surgeons premises were made available at 3 Hill Square, and here the Society moved in 1966. The Society appealed for funds to acquire a new home but the proceeds of that appeal, though generous, along with the money raised from the sale of Melbourne Place, were insufficient for the purchase of a new building.

An ad hoc Library Committee was set up to discuss the possibility and indeed the advisability of selling the library in order to raise further funds. It was finally decided that the Library should be auctioned by Sothebys in London.

A number of important conditions were made : the unique and valuable collection of Dissertations (some 168 volumes) was to be retained, along with any volumes not duplicated in any of the medical libraries in Edinburgh, and in addition a small collection of 300 or so books to represent the core of the Library of which we were about to dispose was to be kept. This small

historical selection was to mirror as far as possible the history of the Society.

The auction of the RMS Library went ahead at Sothebys in 1969 and the six day sale, which was one of the most important sales of medical books on record, raised the very large sum of £120 000, thus effectively securing the Society's move to a new home.

The Society moved to its new home in the Student Centre in Bristo Square in 1975. The residual historical collection of books was stored in the University Library until in 1979 the RMS Trust generously provided three handsome lockable book-cases for the Low Room and underwrote an extensive programme of rebinding so that the books could be returned to their rightful home in a condition which enabled them to be handled, admired and cherished as part of the heritage of the Society. A number of volumes, unique to Edinburgh, continue to be held in the University Library on permanent loan. The books in the Society's rooms, though small in number, is still an important historical collection, the representative of our once very extensive library. The Collection now consists of our Dissertations and 334 volumes in our own care, with a further 51 volumes in the University Library.

In 1977 the Society kindly invited me to succeed Dr Robin Thin on his resignation as Honorary Librarian. This continued and continuing association has given me immense personal pleasure in the opportunities it has provided for making new friendships and reviving old ones, and that, along with continuing to be a student and decent conviviality are what I think the Society should be all about. I still can't decide which side I'd have supported at Prestonpans!