

William Willis's Connection with the University of Edinburgh

Tom BARRON, MA PhD

Director, International Office, University of Edinburgh

Until recently, the University of Edinburgh had little knowledge of William Willis. He was regarded here simply as a medical graduate who had spent some time in Japan and then returned to pursue a medical career in England and Northern Ireland. We did know that his service in Japan involved him in working with the British embassy there and in particular with British military forces. Service with the army was not unusual amongst graduates with an interest in surgery at that time.

Most of the research work which brought Willis to the University's attention was done initially in Japan and in particular by Dr. Hachiro Sato of Kagoshima University. It was not really until he biography by Sir Hugh Cortazzi, the former British ambassador in Japan, that that work became widely known. Cortazzi had approached the University to ask what materials it had on Willis and through this approach a search was made of University archives.

This revealed only a small amount of extra information. We discovered from his class records the Willis had lived at 17 St. Patrick Square, very close to the Old College of the University (built 1783-1820) and even closer to the Royal College of Surgeons Building. St. Patrick Square still has some nineteenth century buildings but the East end of the square, where Willis lived, has been redeveloped and rebuilt, so that the present number 17 may look quite different to what it did in his day.

Every student at Edinburgh at the time of Willis's graduation was required to write a Doctor of Medicine dissertation. Willis's dissertation is preserved in the University Library. Unfortunately, it is too delicate to be removed for photocopying. It is entitled "Theory of Ulceration". We know that it was well received by the examiners since their approving comments are still scrawled on the top page. It is some 36 hand-written pages long but was not necessarily in Willis's hand of course, since amanuenses were often employed. In content, it is purely a survey of the then published literature. No experimental work was possible for under-graduate students. Most of the sources quoted are English-language sources though Willis also shows knowledge of German scholarship. This is interesting since the debate in the Meiji court over whether to follow British or German models of medical scholarship was ultimately resolved in favour of the latter. Willis had begun his medical studies in Glasgow and transferred to Edinburgh for the final part of his degree. This was not at all uncommon. Nor was it unusual for students of this period to attend not only University classes and lectures but classes and lectures given elsewhere in the city, particularly in the Royal College of Surgeons building nearby.

The University also has a record of the examinations Willis took and passed in 1859 (and of his teachers and examiners) and this also records that he was required to pay £20/16/ in order to graduate (£10 of this being a government tax). In modern terms, this sum might be multiplied by 40.

Willis became a member of the Royal College of Surgeons in 1858. It seems likely that he was purely a reader of student there. His brother (George Willis) had become a Licentiate of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh in 1850 and it may well be this connection which brought William to Scotland and to Edinburgh. Much later, on returning from Japan, William joined the Royal College of Surgeons of England (there are several Royal Colleges in the UK and Ireland) as a Fellow in 1881 and he became a full Member of the Royal College of Physicians of England in the same year.

His career has two particular interests for the University of Edinburgh. Firstly, his career seems to reflect the teachings of Sir James Young Simpson, who first demonstrated the medical properties of chloroform as an anaesthetic and thus helped greatly to extend the range of what surgery could achieve (earlier the pain was too great to allow for surgical intervention). And secondly, he was almost certainly influenced by Sir Joseph Lister, the great pioneer of aesthetics, who was Professor of Clinical Surgery at the University of Edinburgh and who moved

there from Glasgow at roughly the same time as Willis did. Lister recognised that infections were caused by bacteria and not by air-borne contacts. Both those scholars left mementoes to the University which are now on display in the Old College building.

Willis is by no means unique in having laid the basis for University medical education in a city in another country. Edinburgh graduates were similarly involved with several Canadian and American universities. But today his achievements as one of the pioneers of modernity in Japan are increasingly recognised in his almamater.