

# ROBERT WILLAN MD FRS (1757-1812): DERMATOLOGIST OF THE MILLENNIUM

Paper read to the joint meeting of Sections of Dermatology and the History of Medicine at the Royal Society of Medicine, 25 February 1999, to select a Dermatologist of the Millennium. Robert Willan was the winning candidate. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 1999; 92:313-318.

**R**obert Willan was born in 1757 at a stone-built farmhouse near Sedbergh, then in Yorkshire, called The Hill. It had belonged to the family for six generations.<sup>1</sup> The Willans were Quakers who attended Meeting nearby in the lovely meeting house at Briggflatts, which dates from 1675. In many records - *the Dictionary of National Biography*, *Munk's Roll of the College of Physicians* and other publications<sup>2 3</sup> - Robert Willan's father has been supposed to have been an MD of Edinburgh who wrote "An Essay on the King's Evil,"<sup>4</sup> published from Scarborough in 1746. This however, is erroneous for the Robert Willan who wrote that book can be positively identified as a bachelor who, after graduation in Edinburgh in 1745, worked first as a physician in Scarborough (where he wrote his book), then became a schoolmaster in Philadelphia and ultimately died there in 1770.<sup>1</sup>

Robert Willan's lineage, however, shows that although his father was indeed another of the many Robert Willans in his family, he was not an MD.<sup>1</sup> Soon after his marriage to Ann Weatherald in 1745 he put a datestone on the building at The Hill, with the initials of himself and his wife - R and AW 1748. Not, as supposed, an MD but a local medical practitioner, he was described by the Friends when he died in 1777 as a 'man-midwife'. He is said to have enjoyed an extensive practice; his character, however, was apparently not flawless for in 1758 his Monthly Meeting drew up a paper on their disunity with him on account of his 'drinking to excess and breaking word'.<sup>1</sup>

His son and youngest child, Robert the future dermatologist, was educated at nearby Sedbergh School, an ancient foundation that dates from 1525. The old schoolhouse where Willan studied is now the school library. At Sedbergh, Willan is said to have become an accomplished scholar, even exceeding his master, Dr Bateman, in Latin and Greek.

Like other Quakers, Willan was barred from the universities of Oxford or Cambridge and therefore, following the example of other dissenters such as John Fothergill, he went to the medical school of the University of Edinburgh, where he matriculated in 1777, the year of his father's death. There he came under the influence of several important teachers.<sup>5</sup> The first was Professor John Hope, who held the chair of botany. A pupil of Bernard de Jussieu in Paris, it was he who introduced the new classification of Linnaeus to Edinburgh. Willan would also have been influenced by the greatest Edinburgh teacher of medicine of that era, William Cullen. Cullen had attempted to arrange human diseases by the method that Linnaeus had successfully employed in the classification of plants and the animal kingdom. It was Linnaeus who introduced the binomial system, in which the first name was the genus, the second the species. Thus we have *Digitalis purpurea*, *Homo sapiens*, *Salmo truttus* (or *thymalis* for a grayling, since it smells of thyme when freshly caught). Following Linnaeus, Cullen described classes, orders, genera, species and varieties of human disease. It was an attempt that equalled in complexity the nosology of Boissier de Sauvages in Montpellier.<sup>6</sup> At that time, however, knowledge of disease was insufficiently developed to permit such a classification and Cullen's nosology, although used until well into the nineteenth century, did not endure.

A further influence on the young Willan as a medical student may have been Andrew Duncan, who worked at the Public Dispensary in Edinburgh. In his records of his medical cases, published in 1777, Duncan complained that there was no satisfactory distinction of cutaneous diseases and he considered it would be of great consequence if 'distinct genera could be formed, especially if proper marks could be discovered according to the causes from which they proceed...'

Willan graduated MD in June 1779 with a thesis entitled *De Jecinoris Inflammatione* which was published in Edinburgh. Aged 23, he then went down to London to seek the help of Dr John Fothergill, family friend, fellow Quaker and alumnus of Sedbergh School and Edinburgh graduate. Fothergill urged him to settle in the capital but sadly his death from prostatic obstruction at Christmas that year deprived William of his patron.<sup>7</sup> Willan, hearing soon afterwards of the death of an elderly relative in Darlington, decided instead to start a practice in the north in 1781. Here he became interested in the waters of a small spa at Croft, near Darlington, and he wrote a book to extol its virtues.<sup>8</sup> He recommended the waters, as was the custom of the time, for all manner of diseases but he seems, even at this early stage of his career, to have evinced a particular interest in skin

diseases, 'Why are the nations of the north', he asked, 'and especially this kingdom, more liable to cutaneous affections?'

By early 1783, however, Willan had decided once more to seek his fortune in the capital. On this occasion, he was much helped by John Forthergill's formidable sister Ann, who had been the doctor's housekeeper,<sup>9</sup> and by John Coakley Lettsom, who had founded the first General Dispensary at Aldersgate more than a decade earlier. Through Lettsom's influence Willan was at once appointed physician to the newly founded Carey Street Dispensary, of which Lettsom, now well established in the capital, was a governor.

The dispensaries attracted the benevolent support of the great and the good from their first foundation. Whilst the first President of Lettsom's Aldersgate Dispensary, founded more than ten years earlier, was the Earl of Darmouth, the Earl of Sandwich occupied the same position at Carey Street. He had been a tolerably incompetent First Lord of the Admiralty in Lord North's administration until its fall in 1782. Popularly known as Jemmy Twitcher, after Macheath's Judas in the *Beggar's Opera*<sup>10</sup>, one can only hope that he did better for Willan's Dispensary than he had for the Royal Navy.

Willan in 1783 joined the staff of the Carey Street Dispensary which he was to serve for 20 years. His practice there must have provided him with a dermatological goldmine - proximity, filth, squalor and the lack of baths or bathing leading to all manner of conditions beyond the ever-present itch. Willan, through his work at the Dispensary was, like Lettsom, familiar with the grinding poverty of his patients. He wrote:

It is perfectly true that persons of the lowest classes do not put clean sheets on their beds three times a year; that even when no sheets are used they never wash nor scour their coverlets, nor renew them until they are no longer tenable; their curtains, if unfortunately there should be any, are never cleaned but suffered to continue in the same state till they fall to pieces; lastly, from three to eight individuals of different ages and different sexes often sleep in the same bed - at the same time - there being in general but one room and one bed for each family...<sup>11</sup>

By 1790, after 7 years at the Dispensary, it seems that Willan, who by now would clearly have had considerable experience of cutaneous diseases, decided to attempt a Linnaen-based classification. It was an idea that no doubt owed much to his mentors in Edinburgh, but Willan recognised that cutaneous disease, being entirely visible, lent itself particularly to an arrangement similar to that of Linnaeus for plants, which were classified according to the appearance of their

parts. He was now encouraged, probably by Lettsom, to submit his work to the Medical Society of London, the intellectual forum for the increasing number of London doctors who were dissidents, often graduates of the University of Edinburgh, and who were debarred from bastions of privilege such as the Royal College of Physicians. It was they, like Lettsom and Willan, who staffed the increasing number of London dispensaries. They occupied a lowly position in the medical hierarchy of the day. Unlike the distinguished French dermatologist, Baron Alibert, senior physician at the Hôpital Saint Louis in Paris and royal physician,<sup>12</sup> Willan never served on the staff of a famed hospital. Nor as a Quaker would he ever have accepted a national honour or have been, like Alibert, among the great who might have been considered as candidates for the post of royal physician.

It was presumably Lettsom who ensured that the John Fothergill Gold Medal of the Medical Society was bestowed on Robert Willan in 1790 for his studies of cutaneous disease. The Society was so impressed by Willan's presentation that they encouraged him to publish his work. It was not easy, however, to find a publisher and Willan wrote later that 'The publication has been delayed much beyond the Author's intention, in consequence of the difficulties experienced in a subject entirely new'.<sup>13</sup> He clearly recognised the novelty of what he was doing.

By 1797, living in Red Lion Square, Willan had defined seven different orders of skin disease. He now published his work in three parts, in paper covers.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, few of these volumes survive to this day. Part I, dated 1798, dealt with his first order, the papulae. It also included a list of Willan's seven different orders. It was at once translated into German and published at Breslau. Part II appeared in 1801 and was concerned with scaly diseases. Part III followed in the year of Trafalgar and comprised Willan's third order, the rashes.

By now Willan, responding to criticism, had increased his order to eight, the papulae and the bullae being separated. As an example of Willan's different genera, the squamae included four - *Lepra*, *Psoriasis*, *Pityriasis* and *Ichthyosis*. These were subdivided into different species. *Pityriasis* the genus (following Linnaeus' binomial system) included three species - *capitis*, *rubra* and *versicolor*. Willan's arrangement was a remarkably complete classification of cutaneous diseases that in many ways we recognise today.

Clearly the paper-covered tracts were not entirely satisfactory as separate publications and Willan in 1808 published his *Cutaneous Diseases*, Vol I,<sup>15</sup> an authoritative account of the first four of his orders - the papulae, squamae, exanthemata and bullae. This was a noble

quarto volume, liberally illustrated with plates made from water-colour drawings.

There is limited evidence in Willan's method of practice. A letter from Willan to Lettsom, however, dated 12 January 1810, and written from his home in Bloomsbury Square, is preserved in the Wellcome collections. It shows that he might be sent a drawing of a particular skin condition and he would reply giving his opinion: 'As far as I can judge by your drawing which is on a reduced scale', wrote Willan, 'the complaint is the Lichenose eruption succeeding in some persons to the use of Mercury either internally or externally'.

Willan had always intended to publish a second volume of his *Cutaneous Diseases* dealing with the remaining four of his orders, the pustulae, vesiculae, tubercula and maculae. Unfortunately, the work was not completed in his lifetime. In late 1811, he had a haemoptysis while attending a patient. Thought to have tuberculosis, he went to Madeira in search of a milder climate but died at Funchal on 7 April 1812, at the age of 55. His tombstone is preserved to this day against the wall of the churchyard.<sup>15</sup>

After Willan's death, his casebooks, notes and manuscripts passed into the hands of his future son-in-law, Ashby Smith, who had been present at his death in Madeira. Ashby Smith edited and published in 1814 *A Practical Treatise on Porrigo or Scalded Head, and on Impetigo*, by the late Robert Willan.<sup>16</sup> This was the only work ready for the press that Willan left.

It was, however, to be Thomas Bateman who ensured Willan's dermatological immortality. Bateman, a fellow Yorkshireman who had been born in Whitby in 1778, graduated in Edinburgh in 1801. He became a pupil of Willan at the Carey Street Dispensary when he removed to London in the same year. He went on to succeed Willan as Physician to the Dispensary in 1804.

Bateman was, as Beswick has put it, almost fanatically devoted to Robert Willan. After his death he at once bought the copyright of the books as well as purchasing all the drawings and engravings that Willan had amassed. In 1813 he published his *Synopsis of Cutaneous Disease according to the arrangement of Dr Willan* with coloured plates.<sup>17</sup> The book was a comfortable octavo that might fit into an early nineteenth century pocket, but it lacked the quality of the plates in Willan's Part I of 1808. The book's only illustration was a conglomerate of different skin lesions. Nevertheless, it was to achieve remarkable success, going through five editions before Bateman's premature death in 1821 and achieving an eleventh edition as late as 1850.

In addition to his own work, which throughout all its editions

acknowledged its indebtedness to Willan, Bateman succeeded in completing Willan's *Cutaneous Diseases*. In 1817 he brought out Willan's promised Part II, in a handsome quarto edition that matched Part I of 1808.<sup>18</sup> The work dealt with the four orders that Willan had been unable himself to complete - the pustulae, vesiculae, tubercula and maculae. It included plates made from Willan's own collection of water-colour drawings; many of the originals are now preserved in a splendidly bound volume in the Library of the Royal College of Physicians. In some instances they are inscribed with comments made in Willan's characteristically crabbed hand.

Willan's posthumous reputation is attested by the many editions of Bateman's work and the translations in at least five different languages, all of which gave credit to Willan's classification. In France, Baron Alibert had his own system but Willan's classification was introduced to Paris by a Swiss physician, Dr Biett, who was *médecin adjoint* at the Hôpital St Louis, a position he owed to his chief, the influential Professor Alibert. Biett made a visit to England some time after Waterloo and returned *entièrement converti au système du médecin anglais Willan* which he considered *plus claire, plus facile et plus nouvelle*. He went on to abandon the classification of his teacher Alibert and developed a new system *qui était celle de Willan conjugée et augmentée*.<sup>12</sup> This was to be widely accepted in France.

As to his personal life, Willan married Mary, the widow of a Dr Scott, in 1800, and they lived in Bloomsbury Square, where there is a plaque to his memory on the house, now the Bloomsbury Hotel. He was a man of many interests. He wrote on vaccination, smallpox and its history; he recorded unusual and informative cases of all sorts; he was interested in hygiene and the public health, the design of chimneys and garden stoves, the cure of alcoholism and chlorosis; and he joined Lettsom and other eminent London physicians in planning a Fever Hospital, following the precepts laid down in Chester by his fellow Dalesman, Dr John Haygarth, who had also been a pupil at Sedbergh School. He published a *History of the Ministry of Jesus Christ* and wrote on the ancient words used in 'The mountainous district of the West Riding of Yorkshire'. Some of these, such as brant, cowp, mappen, roogle or wrydden will be lost on all but the most accomplished scholars of north country dialect.<sup>2</sup> He retained throughout his life his love of classical tongues and called his horses after heroes of the distant past. He wrote in 1803 to his elder brother Richard, a life-long bachelor living at the family home at The Hill, 'My old horse Achilles is well nigh demolished and young Telamachus seems very thin and tottering'.<sup>2</sup>

At his death the *Gentleman's Magazine* recorded that:

In addition to his great merits as a physician, and as an accurate and classical writer, he was one of the most amiable of men, a sincere friend, a good husband and an affectionate father. He was in truth a model of the perfect human character; a benevolent and skilful Physician, a correct and sound philosopher, and a truly virtuous man.<sup>19</sup>

That modest Quaker, Robert Willan, would have no doubt been embarrassed by such eulogies; nor would he have ever imagined that he might be nominated for the title 'Dermatologist of the Millennium'. But as the individual who first brought order into what had been a clinical subject of extraordinary confusion and uncertainty, whose influence was to be felt far beyond his native land and whose work has endured, he fully merits that distinction. Dermatology in his native land has, until recently, recognised his contribution by printing his portrait on the cover page of *The British Journal of Dermatology* each month. The members of the Dermatology Section of the Royal Society of Medicine have erected a glass screen with an engraved portrait in the Library. At the Royal College of Physicians, where, as an Edinburgh alumnus he was never more than a licentiate, there is a Willan Room. The Willans are also remembered in that remote area of the north from which he hailed. The tombstone of his elder brother Richard, with whom from London he maintained a lively correspondence, stands against the wall of Sedbergh Church. He had left the Friends on amicable terms some years before his death in 1820 and was the last Willan to live at The Hill. And on a wall of that ancient farmhouse near Sedbergh, where Robert Willan was born two years before the capture of Quebec, there is another memorial plaque placed by his greatest admirers, the dermatologists of today.

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