

ILLUSTRATIONS FROM THE WELLCOME INSTITUTE LIBRARY

*MEDICAL SOCIETY OF LONDON LIBRARY**

In 1967, Noël Poynter, Director of the Wellcome Institute from 1964 to 1973, concluded an agreement with the Medical Society of London for the deposit on twenty-year loan of a substantial portion of their fine library. Since then, the Society's books and manuscripts have been available to scholars in the context of the Institute's own extensive collections. Recently, the Medical Society was faced with a need to raise substantial funds. Consequently, in February 1984, the Wellcome Trustees, with the help of six national charities, purchased the deposited materials to ensure their integrity as a collection and make them permanently available to scholars.

The Medical Society of London was founded in 1773 by a group of physicians, surgeons, and apothecaries inspired by John Coakley Lettsom (1744-1815), and it has maintained to the present time its character as a general medical society providing a forum for practitioners of all the specialties. The Society's early determination to found and maintain a Library, following the example of the then popular and flourishing literary and philosophical societies, is evidenced by the appointment of Nathaniel Hulme (1732-1807) as Librarian at its second meeting a few months after its foundation. The Library was increased by purchase and donations. In 1800, the personal collection of the Society's longest serving President, James Sims (1741-1820), was purchased for £500, adding perhaps 6,000 volumes to stock. The largest single donation came in 1912 with Lord Lister's bequest of some 2,500 volumes. A Council resolution of 1776 required that any member who failed to deliver a paper in his allotted turn should either forfeit 5s. or present a book to the Library.

In January 1914, the then Registrar and Resident Librarian, George Bethell, FRHistS, reported in a paper read to the Library Association that the Society's collection comprised some 23,000 volumes "and a unique collection of printed tracts on medical and allied subjects, also about 500 manuscripts, including a collection of Greek MS". (See below, *Further Reading*.) This stock, allowing for natural additions of later publications, more or less comprised the Medical Society Library as it was when first examined by the staff of the Wellcome Institute around 1965. The "more or less" qualification arises from the Library's lending function. Over the years, gaps had appeared on the shelves from the working of the first law of librarianship: given favourable circumstances, readers will always contrive to borrow more than they return.

During the 1960s, the Society's officers became concerned about the security of their books and also anxious for rather more public accessibility than was possible at the Chandos Street headquarters. About 10,000 volumes, including all the tracts and

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the manuscript collection were removed to the Wellcome Institute. In 1967, a twenty-year deposit agreement was signed between the Society and the Wellcome Trustees. Approximately 3,500 of the books remaining with the Society were purchased in 1971 by the Canadian medical philanthropist, Jason A. Hannah. These books are now in the Fisher Rare Book Library of the University of Toronto, although, by an unfortunate confusion, volume two of the revised STC locates them at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario.

The Medical Society of London purchase is clearly an invaluable supplement to the Wellcome Institute's holdings, and must count as the single most important acquisition since Sir Henry Wellcome's death in 1936. In addition, it offers, within its own compass, many attractions to the researcher. The printed materials come principally from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but include up to one thousand items from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries. In spite of past dispersals, it is still possible to perceive the lineaments of the original Georgian medical library, reflecting the reading and interests of the Society's founders and early members.

The earliest printed books are copies of Nicolaus Salernitanus, *Antidotarium*, and Abulcasis, *Liber servitoris*, both printed in Venice by Nicolaus Jenson in 1471. Outstanding rarities include the "second edition" of Hieronymus von Brunschwig, *The vertuose boke of distyllacyon*, translated by Laurence Andrewe and dated 1427 but more probably from 1528; an almost complete set of proof sheets of the 1723 reprint (suppressed) of Michael Servetus, *Christianismi restitutio*, containing his theologico-medical account of the pulmonary circulation; and the only copy in the United Kingdom of Marcello Malpighi, *De pulmonibus* (Bologna, 1661). Nineteenth-century *rarissima* include one of the few surviving copies of Ignaz Semmelweis, *Die Aetiologie, der Begriff und die Prophylaxis des Kindbettfiebers*, (Pest, Vienna, and Leipzig, 1861) in a copy which may have travelled to the Society from the Hungarian physician Lajos Markusovszky via Lord Lister. An incomplete card catalogue of the printed books is already available in the Institute's Catalogue Hall.

The 500 or so volumes of tracts, for which a somewhat primitive handwritten card catalogue must serve as guide for the time being, is a potential treasure house. Some of the volumes are composed of two or three substantial monographs, others may contain sixty or more items. Many problems of identification lurk in the Tract Collection, caused partly by a savage rebinding exercise undertaken before the second world war. Few of the volumes display any subject arrangement, and the whole forms a gigantic bibliographer's and historian's bran-tub.

Warren R. Dawson published his *Manuscripta medica* in 1932, and this remains the principal means of access to the collection of over 160 manuscript volumes ranging from the twelfth to the nineteenth century. The medieval period yields two precious English vernacular MSS, while the Renaissance provides some important Greek MSS. Again, the eighteenth-century core is displayed in a fine group of lecture notes, containing much of interest for the historian of medical education.

To mark the successful conclusion of the sale negotiations, an exhibition of *Books from the Library of the Medical Society of London* was mounted in the Wellcome Institute from 14 January to 3 April 1985. It attracted much attention as a rare



Figure 1. A mould for furnace bricks. H. Brunswig, *The vertuose boke of distillacyon*, London, L. Andrewe, '1427' [i.e. 1528], fols. a3^v - a4^r.

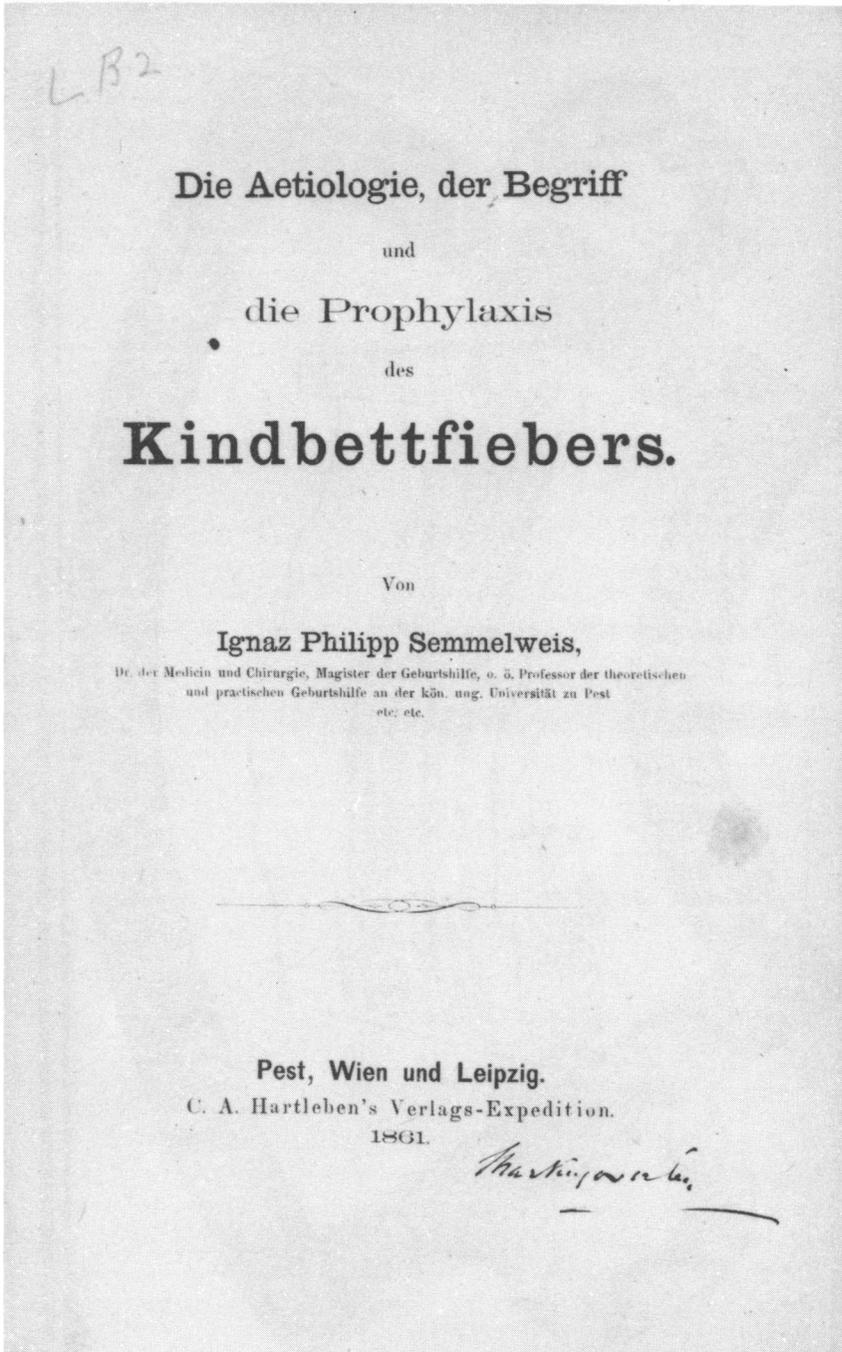


Figure 2. Ignaz P. Semmelweis, *Die Aetiologie, der Begriff und die Prophylaxis des Kindbettfiebers*, Pest, etc., C.A. Hartleben, 1861, title-page.

Illustrations from the Wellcome Institute Library

opportunity to see displayed together some fascinating materials recording the growth and content of this fine collection.

The Wellcome Trustees and the staff of the Wellcome Institute are grateful, first to the Medical Society of London itself for what its then President, Dr Clifford Rose, described as “the friendly and professional relationship” which facilitated the sale. Second, the role of the Friends of the National Libraries, National Heritage Memorial Fund, the Wolfson Foundation, the Hayward Foundation, and the Pilgrim Trust was crucial to the final and happy outcome. The Wellcome Institute Library has been permanently enriched.

Further Reading

George Bethell, ‘An account of the library of the Medical Society of London’, *Trans. med. soc. Lond.*, 1914, **37**: 362-372.

Warren R. Dawson, *Manuscripta medica: a descriptive catalogue of the manuscripts in the library of the Medical Society of London*, London, Bale & Danielsson for the Society, 1932.

F.N.L. Poynter, ‘The Medical Society of London’s Library’, *Trans. med. soc. Lond.*, 1966, **82**: 153-167.

Books from the library of the Medical Society of London. An Exhibition 14 January to 3 April 1985, (introduction by John Symons), London, 1985.