Historical Note

The Kinnier Wilson Library in Edinburgh

Kinnier Wilson (1878–1937), like Ferrier before him, had come from Edinburgh to London to work at both King’s College Hospital and at the National Hospital, Queen Square. Wilson’s library of some 1500 books and many more reprints was stored around Oxford after the death of his medical son, A. Bruce Kinnier Wilson (1917–1978), latterly in the Cairns library at the Radcliffe Infirmary. In 1996, thanks largely to the late John Potter, it was given to the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, which had had a great medico-historical library for over 300 years (see fig 1).

Kinnier Wilson’s life and his great contributions to neurology have been described elsewhere. Briefly, he qualified in Edinburgh in 1902, and after two years in Paris with Pierre Marie and J Babinski, and in Leipzig with P Flechsig, he moved first to Charing Cross Hospital and then to King’s College Hospital, London, where he overlapped with Ferrier, and to Queen Square where he benefited from the wisdom of J Hughlings Jackson in his last years. His 1912 Edinburgh MD thesis on hepato-lenticular degeneration remains the nosographic template of what is known as Wilson’s disease, the treatable metabolic cause of which was found after his death.

Wilson died aged 59 in 1937 as he was completing his great Neurology text, published posthumously in 1940. Wilson apart, the two neurological giants concerned in the Kinnier Wilson library are Jackson and Ferrier; who interacted more than either did with Wilson. Both were quirky as well as great.

Figure 1 Facade of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh circa 1951 by John Piper C.H. (1903–1992) © The Piper Estate.

Figure 2 Hughlings Jackson’s inscription to SA Kinnier Wilson on reprint from West Riding Lunatic Asylum Reports for 1873.
Ferrier’s ‘monographs’ in the library

Besides seven books inscribed to Ferrier by the authors, the main identifiable Ferrier component of the Wilson library are 24 bound volumes of monographs of around 700 pages each, each with between four and 20 items, mostly French and German in the early volumes. The range of his interests is very wide indeed; there is no thematic or chronological order. The first of the four items in volume I of the monographs is inscribed by himself “David Ferrier Edinburgh 1865”, the year he started the study of medicine: Seele und leib (soul and body), a posthumous German translation from the Dutch anatomist, alienist, and vitalist JLC Schroeder van der Kolk (1797–1862). Seele is there best considered as soul, rather than mind or psyche, as van der Kolk argues for its existence from the rallying of the dying mind, on occasion, in anticipation of dissolution. The second in this volume is a philosophical treatise La logique de l’hypothèse, the third Du froid en thérapeutique, and the last J Traube’s 1867 lectures on cardio-respiratory diseases. Volume II still contains a skull shape study by Rieger (1882) based in Traube’s 1867 lectures on cardio-respiratory diseases. Volume II still contains a skull shape study by Rieger (1882) based on phrenology, but subsequent volumes become more neurological and psychiatric. There are many early French texts: Lucas-Champonnie as early as 1892, and included many reports.

Flechsig and others feature at length on the brain–mind relationship, and Ferrier’s own Croonian lecture on cerebral localisation was included in French. This is also the topic of 316 pages on coordination by O Forster 10 years before he shifted from neurology to neurosurgery. Neuroanatomical papers are by the young Sherrington (1892) on the lumbo-sacral plexus, and by Ramón y Cajal on the medulla (1896), the optic chiasm (1899), the motor (1900), and on the auditory cortex (1902). Disease descriptions are Charcot and others in early contributions on motor neurone disease; an illustrated 310 page monograph on acromegaly is dedicated to Ferrier; there are many long treatises on neurosyphilis. Freud’s psychology features in the later volumes but there is also his early neurological monograph of 1893 on cerebral diplegia. Ferrier was one of the organisers of the second international congress of experimental psychology in London in 1892, and included many reports.

The beginning of neurosurgery is exemplified by two long illustrated French texts: Lucas-Champonnière as early as 1878, and Chapault and Lande (1897), the latter with the new x ray pictures. There are quite a few oddities among Ferrier’s monographs: almost 500 pages on Lustyseuche (sexual plagues) in antiquity by J Rosenbaum in a fifth edition of 1892—but mostly left uncut; a Paris 1887 text Les courants de la polarité dans l’aimant (magnet) et dans le corps humain by Chazeraud where magnetic and galvanic stroking serves as a panacea; and a less bizarre handbook on manipulations by Naegeli (1898); also books on Mormonism and witchcraft.

The 1500 books

Fewer than 50 books antedate the start of Ferrier’s medical studies in 1865. He may have been a bibliophile, Kinnier Wilson more probably so, but not in the Osler or Cushing class, to judge by what remains. J Abercrombie’s 1836 third edition of Pathological and practical researches on diseases of the brain and spinal cord has Gowers’ name inscribed, and below that, Wilson’s, and may have been bequeathed, or bought from Gowers’ estate in 1915. The earliest title is a beautifully illustrated Croonian lecture to the Royal Society on Physiognomy in 1774 by J Parsons (1742–1785), the Oxford anatomist. Sir Charles Bell’s third edition (1844) of The nervous system of the human body, surprisingly inscribed by Professor R A Kölliker of Zurich and Würzburg (1817–1905) above the initials “SAKW”; R Holland’s Chapters of mental physiology of 1852, noted as having been bought (?) by Ferrier) at a Sotheby sale in 1873. There is an inscribed item from F Batten’s collection by W Erb (1840–1921) on progressive muscular dystrophy. There are seven books identifiable as having belonged to Ferrier, and seven to Sir William Gowers, in particular an 1896 book inscribed as a gift to Gowers, Borderline studies by G M Gould of Philadelphia, anticipating the title of Gowers’ famous Borderlands of epilepsy of 1907.

Most of the 1500 books of course always belonged to Wilson, written by his distinguished contemporaries: Adrian, Babinski, Bastian, Batten, Byrom Brainwell, Charcot (eight books, one inscribed to Ferrier), Duchenne, von Economo, Foix, Guillaume, seven by Gowers, Head, Pierre Marie, Weir Mitchell, Oppenheim, Osler, Romberg, and Tinel.

Psychiatric texts abound, with a penchant for the topic of hysteria, with many early ones from the Salpêtrière in Charcot’s time to Babinski in 1917. There are several on shell shock during and after world war one. Seven books are by Freud, and many about him and about psychoanalysis, but only one by Jung. Many titles by Cushing, Dandy, Foerster, Olivcrona, and Penfield document evolving neurosurgery, and books by Sicard and Moniz the advent of myelography and angiography, respectively. In neuropathology there are long tomes by Sir Frederick Mott and shorter titles by van Bogaert, Obersteiner, Spielmeyer, and others.

The profusion of books later than 1920 stems from Wilson’s editorship of his own journal, the Journal of Neurology and Psychopathology, which took the place of the Journal of Neurology and Psychiatry, started in Edinburgh in 1902 by Wilson’s father-in-law, Alexander Bruce. After Wilson’s death the name was changed again to the current Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery, and Psychiatry.

Lastly, the library contains his own writings: the excellent short Aphasia of 1926, but not his interesting Modern problems in neurology of 1928. But there are the two posthumous editions of his Neurology,1 published by his brother-in-law Ninian Bruce in two volumes in 1940, and re-edited in three in 1954, with an important section on aphasia by Russell Brain. It remains a splendid source book for the early history of neurology.

The Edinburgh Royal College of Physicians also holds Ninian Bruce’s own collection of about 500 titles, mostly neurological, but much less distinguished than the Kinnier Wilson library, which allows insight into some of the interrelations of the great in neurology in a great era, and into the apostolic succession in British neurology from Hughlings Jackson to Ferrier and Sherrington on the scientific side, and on the clinical side to Gowers and Kinnier Wilson.

Acknowledgements

I am obliged to the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh for permission to use the 1951 John Piper pen-and-ink and gouache picture of the College, purchased in 1991 by John Richmond, the then president; also to Iain Milne, the librarian, and the library staff for much help. James Kinnier Wilson, of the Cambridge Faculty for Oriental Studies, was a source for the peregrinations of his father’s library. Dr Charles Whitty (1913–1996) compiled a card index of the books, with brief comments, during the library’s stay in the Cairns Library at Oxford.

References

7 Holmes G. The National Hospital, Queen Square 1860-1948 Edinburgh: Livingstone, 1954.