

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES: HIS BOOKS

BY  
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Seventy-five years ago today, Oliver Wendell Holmes, who had just retired as President of the Boston Medical Library, was given a reception in honor of the presentation of his private medical library to the Association, as it was then called. We may consider at this time the occasion, the books, and their significance.

The meeting took place in the library rooms at 19 Boylston Place on January 29, 1889. The hall was a handsome room, two stories in height, lined with books, and with a circular staircase leading to a balcony and the reading space for doctors. The reception was a gala affair, for Holmes, a dapper little man of eighty, was alert and witty in his address, and his friends matched him with light-hearted and complimentary remarks. No one, however, could equal Holmes on occasions such as this.

The building also has a certain nostalgic atmosphere for us seventy-five years later. The Library occupied the former residence of Samuel Gridley Howe, a distinguished physician and philanthropist, who apparently was best known at the time as "the husband of Julia Ward Howe." Perhaps we should say, with more accuracy, that the Library was located in Mrs. Howe's former residence. Boylston Place was a cheerless, dead-end street, with a rather unsavory reputation in later years, now purified by the Tavern Club, still housed at the lower end. When the Library was there, however, the alley was quite respectable, with Motley, the historian, as a quiet neighbor, but enlivened by the more ebullient students of the famous Hopkinson Private School for boys, also near at hand. The building was already jammed full of books, and Chadwick, the Librarian, must have been hard pressed to know what to do with the nine hundred and sixty-eight books added to it by its former President. But Chadwick was skillful in handling these matters, and he no doubt stored some of them for the time being in the basement of the Harvard Medical School where he had a depository, or possibly put some in the crematory at Forest Hills, as he had access to this admirable storehouse, having reorganized the New England Cremation Society only a few years before. But this

\* Read at the Boston Medical Library, January 29, 1964.

problem did not seem to bother the Librarian at the meeting, and I have an idea that even if the versatile Chadwick had found the "grapes of wrath" stored in the basement of Mrs. Howe's former home, he would have known how to dispose of them to make room for his books. No Battle Hymn seems to have echoed through the hall on this occasion and all was serene as Holmes parted with his "little mob of volumes," which had marked the progress of his studies for more than fifty years—"the stepping-tones of my professional life." As Holmes was saying, in his gay manner, "good bye" to his books, many of his audience must have felt, with a touch of sadness, that this moment was also their "good bye" to Holmes, the genial doctor they had known and loved so well.

The books themselves were an accumulation of a doctor's office covering fifty or more years. They hardly, therefore, could be called a 'collection' in the sense that we use that term now. Most had been bought for teaching purposes. No man ever used books better than Holmes, for the ideas gained from these volumes sprang out in every lecture that he gave at Harvard Medical School to more than a generation of students. Holmes had the supreme faculty of penetrating the misty, foggy desires of the most obtuse authors and often found shining through their obscurity a truth which, when polished by his intellect, he would exhibit for admiration and imitation. Only a genius with a poetic mind could have dug so much gold from the trash heap of discarded, outdated writers. He had, moreover, produced in 1883 in his *Medical Essays* what Garrison has called "the most important book dealing with the history of medicine up to its day."

Holmes was not a collector in the sense that he gathered around him first editions, books with fine bindings, uncut copies, a complete set of any one author, or even any one subject, or books of a particular class, except possibly for his volumes on anatomy. The most precious part of his library consists of the association volumes given to him by his friends, many of them signed, as a token of their affection. A few of the books have his Chambered Nautilus bookplate, but none seem to have been specially bound or particularly well preserved, as was the custom in most gentlemen's libraries of that era. Holmes therefore can not be said to have been particularly interested in books as books, but he was vitally interested in what they had to say. Any workable edition was sufficient for him, and it need not be the first edition or a particularly fine copy.

When the Library moved to its present location in the Fenway, the books must have been taken out of storage, sorted, and roughly catalogued. Most of the accession dates are about 1903. Then Chadwick had to make

the decision whether he would carry out the desire expressed by Holmes to keep the books together as a unit. Even in Chadwick's time this was an age old problem for librarians. Most living donors, such as Holmes, expressed the wish to keep their books together—a sort of monumental urge. Doctors' widows seldom have such strong feelings. Indeed, they are cleaning house and glad to get rid of the doctor's apparatus, including his books, his old instruments, his Civil War uniform and sword, apothecary jars, pictures, memorabilia and trivia of many types. Legal advisers who wish to wind up estates have no compunction at all about a librarian breaking up a library or even selling it. Chadwick saw that Holmes' books were not really a unit and, as he could save out a token collection in memory of Holmes, he decided to put the others in the general collection. This indeed was a wise decision, for it led to a procedure of significant importance to the Library.

Holmes, for instance, had a copy of the *Anatomy* of John Bell in one of the later editions. This was sufficient for his purpose and was one of the first books that he remembered owning. To him it was important, but by itself in the Library it only meant another copy of a relatively common book. What it led Chadwick to do, however, was to use this book as a focal point to collect all the other editions of Bell and indeed all his writings. So the seed planted by Holmes grew into thirty or more volumes, and this indeed became what we would now know as a 'collection,' for it reflects the entire work of a single author. Thus Holmes' copy of Bell's *Anatomy* acted as a catalyst, and this reaction is one of the main reasons why the Library is so strong in its historical collections.

As another example, Holmes owned an edition of Avicenna, the great *Canon* that was so influential in the Middle Ages. His copy was not a very fine example of fifteenth century printing or binding, and indeed it was the eleventh published edition of this book and could hardly be considered as a rare incunabulum. But its influence on the Boston Medical Library extended far beyond anything that Holmes ever could have anticipated, for from this book and one or two others in the general collection grew our great gathering of fifteenth century books which extend along the shelves behind Holmes' portrait and contain now almost as many books in this one class, as Holmes had in his whole library.

But a medical library is more than just a collection of books or even a group of ideas. It is a set of values, a constellation of ideals. No one knew this better than Holmes. If he were with us today, he would no doubt have considered it fitting to quote from the simple statement of Robert Frost:

They would not find me changed from him they knew—  
Only more sure of all I thought was true.

When we move the material possessions of our rich heritage to a new home in 1965, may we take with us also a set of values, as Holmes would have desired. He taught us seventy-five years ago, if I read the story right, not only to be worthy, but informed with counsel, to use an old expression, how to be worthy.