

Surgical pamphlets

[Slide: introduction]

Introduction

‘The Library [of the Royal College of Surgeons] being strictly professional does not contain many bibliographical curiosities.’ That was the verdict of our librarian, James Blake Bailey, in 1889. But even as he wrote, the Library was beginning to assemble a series of tracts and pamphlets of surprising scale and scope. Today I’d like to introduce you to this little-known collection: to give you an idea of what we have, and why it might be of interest to you, whether as a researcher or as an information professional.

The College and its Library

[As Simon has described,] The Royal College of Surgeons of England gained its Royal Charter in 1800 and the Library began to collect books shortly afterwards. It served as a reference library for practising surgeons and the staff of the Hunterian Museum, and was open to all doctors, not just surgeons. Since that time, the Library has acquired rare books printed before the College’s foundation, and we purchase books, journals and CD-ROMs to support surgeons in training today. Together, these form a continuous collection on the historical and modern practice of surgery.

The project

[Slide: picture of tracts]

Now, pamphlets have been defined as that class of literature that doesn’t stand up on the shelf. For this reason, the pamphlets, or tracts, as they’re called, have been bound up in rather unprepossessing publisher’s cloth and shelved as a separate sequence of 2,872 volumes.

[Slide: ‘Catalogue cards’]

They have been catalogued, but the catalogue cards are extremely brief and hard to read, and the tracts were rarely used. So the Library applied to the Wellcome Trust for a grant from the Research Resources in Medical History scheme to recatalogue the pamphlets from scratch. We also identified a small number of volumes for conservation work. I was appointed as project cataloguer for two years starting in 2002, and we subsequently made a successful bid for a further two years’ funding.

The pamphlets

[Slide: ‘Medical pamphlet collections’: Royal College of Surgeons of England: 28,000 items / John Rylands (Manchester): 8,500 / Whipple (Cambridge): 5,200 / Bristol: 4,750 / Birmingham: 4,000]

We didn’t actually know at first how many individual pamphlets we owned. The initial project bid was to catalogue 9,200 items, which we expected would make up somewhere between one third and one half of the total. It now appears that there are over 28,000, making ours one of the largest assemblies of medical pamphlets in the country.

[Slide: 'Tracts collection']

The tracts were collected over a period of 50 years starting around 1887. The majority date from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, though the oldest items were printed in the 1500s. Because the tracts were put together by height, rather than by subject, or date, or language, the bound volumes are very difficult to browse – another benefit of cataloguing them online.

Subjects

[Slide: Small-pox t.p.]

So what do we have? The bulk of the collection, of course, covers the full range of surgical techniques, including orthopedics and obstetrics, along with the supporting disciplines of anatomy and physiology. There is a considerable amount from the wider field of non-operative medicine, too, including anaesthesia, vaccination, sanitation, military medicine and diseases such as cholera, tuberculosis and syphilis. The work of the College museums is reflected in pamphlets on natural history, including medical botany and zoology, anthropology and palaeontology. There is less material than one might expect on dentistry and veterinary medicine, and much more than expected on unorthodox practices such as electrotherapy and homoeopathy, both for and against.

Types of material

Having said that, our pamphlets tend not to be polemics, although there are commentaries on the medical reforms of the time. Individual case reports appear most frequently, particularly reprints from journals, often with revisions and annotations by the author. There are several runs of dissertations from universities in France, Germany and the Netherlands, and there are decades more waiting to be catalogued in our basement stores. Speeches delivered to medical students and medical societies are also common.

Provenance

[Slide: Endoscope t.p.]

An advert for the *Journal of Anatomy and Physiology* in 1881 announces that 'authors will receive 25 copies of their communications gratis'. Many of these offprints made their way into the Library, either directly from their authors or via a third party. Other pamphlets were published at the author's expense, without the intervention of an editor, expressly for distribution to friends, colleagues and libraries. Where possible, I've made a record of presentation inscriptions and indexed the recipient's name to emphasise links of provenance between our printed books, personal manuscripts and objects in the museum.

Duplicates

It's hard to tell whether some of the pamphlets would have been purchased if they hadn't been donated, or indeed if they were ever read once they entered the Library; it appears that no gift was ever refused and no pamphlet ever discarded. There are many duplicates, sometimes in the same volume: for instance, we have five copies of 'Professor Volkmann on antiseptic osteotomy'. This policy of collection rather than selection makes it difficult to find common themes in the pamphlets, but has led to the survival of lots of otherwise marginal material.

Examples

[Slide: 'Unusual items']

Let me list some of the more curious topics. The titles give a flavour: 'A statement of the case of Wm. Dempster, a juggler who died in consequence of having swallowed a table-knife' (published in Cheshire, 1824); Alexander Graham Bell writing 'Upon the electrical experiments to determine the location of the bullet in the body of the late President Garfield'; 'Is belief in spiritualism ever evidence of insanity *per se*?'; 'On the absolute necessity of encouraging, instead of preventing or embarrassing the study of anatomy : with a plan to prevent violating the dormitories of the defunct'.

Languages

Those are some English-language examples, but just as the pamphlets range over subjects and centuries, they also range across the globe. There are six tracts on the deficiency disease beriberi and they are published in Paris, Amsterdam, St Petersburg, Madras, Brazil and Tokyo. So it's not surprising that barely half of the pamphlets are in English, with significant numbers in French, German and Latin and handfuls in a dozen other European languages. This diversity accounts for the fact that only half of the pamphlets appear on the CURL database.

Co-operative cataloguing

[Slide: WebCat]

CURL, for those of you unfamiliar with it, is the Consortium of Research Libraries in the British Isles, which administers a union catalogue called COPAC. Being able to share high quality records created by other libraries has dramatically increased the amount of cataloguing we can do and allowed us to concentrate our efforts on the material that only the Royal College of Surgeons holds. Our work follows a number of other projects which catalogued pamphlets, the results of which are now available through COPAC, and we hope to be able to upload our records in turn.

Increased usage

[Slide: website]

The pamphlets collection is now accessible via our website to the research community and the wider world. Most of the volumes are in good physical condition, but the conservation element in the grant has been useful for anticipating the effects of increased use. We have no plans at the moment to digitise the pamphlets, but I have linked to other digitisation projects where I can be confident they represent the same item.

Thank you

The support of the Wellcome Trust, and the professional and technical advice from CURL, have been essential to this project. Without it, the tracts might have continued to languish in obscurity. There has already been a noticeable increase in the number of requests to see the tracts, and we hope this will continue. Please visit our website, where you can search the catalogue and make an appointment to use the historical collections.

What's next?

The pamphlets cataloguing project will finish in March next year, by which time we hope to have added at least 25,000 records to the catalogue. We hope that this will provide a base for cataloguing the Royal College of Surgeons' significant library of rare medical books. We have also begun to catalogue our archives and manuscripts, and my colleague Beth McNeice will introduce you to these.