

Archives and Medicine

To reveal some of the possibilities of investigation and to draw attention to the wealth of material which might be available in archives of various description, the tenth issue of *Archivaria* concentrates its focus on the history of medicine. It marks the first time that any attempt has been made in Canada to bring together in published form the fruits of a wide range of research in this field, where the emphasis is placed upon the substance of investigation rather than upon its results or interpretation. The central aim of *Archivaria* has always been to demonstrate research potential deriving from archival resources and this special theme issue of “Archives and Medicine” is no exception. However, the reader should be warned that the articles contributed are but a taste of the topic and have been selected for their variety of subject and documentation. It is nonetheless interesting that in all cases the authors dwell upon the approaches and interests pursued by Samuel Shortt in his proposition of a new social history of medicine.

Two other aspects might also be noticed: the burgeoning concern with the hospital and the growth of public health systems as part of governmental functions. How have such institutions and programmes affected the lives of Canadian people? What made and makes them tick? The articles have been arranged more or less chronologically from an autopsy in sixteenth century England to “the picture of health” in pre-World War II Ontario. In this manner, there is offered in the following pages a sweeping brush stroke of the road which the student of the history of medicine in Canada might follow.

The record of an autopsy made on two Eskimo captives carried back to England by the explorer Martin Frobisher in 1576 forms the core of Neil Cheshire and colleagues’ study. Their translation from the Latin of Dr. Dodding’s account has enabled them to reveal a good deal of the state of medical knowledge at the time in the context of cultural confrontation—two natives of Canada as prize exhibits in English society. In mid-eighteenth century Aberdeenshire, George Chalmers M.D. kept a meticulous record of his general medical practice and, from surviving accounts amid estate papers at the National Library of Scotland, Rosalie Stott has pieced together the mechanics and daily concerns of the good doctor on his rounds.

Infant mortality was, until relatively recently in western society, the most common of human conditions. Joan Sherwood has worked intensively with the archival holdings of a Madrid hospital in eighteenth century Spain to show something of the concern and care offered by one institution to the citizens of its community in providing for ill, dying or destitute children. Charles Roland looks at the plight of wounded or diseased soldiers in early nineteenth century Canada by examining some of the victims and survivors of limb amputation during and following the War of 1812 between the British forces in Canada and the Americans. What evidence is there of their treatment medically and financially in Upper Canada? Transatlantic emigration held terrible horrors for those who reached Canada, none more so perhaps than for the unfortunate arrivals from Ireland at Saint John, New Brunswick, in 1847—the year of the great migration.

Jim Whalen examines the records of the British Colonial Office and the files of the local newspaper in Saint John to show why and how they fared on Partridge Island in an atmosphere of disease and insanitation.

999 Queen Street, Toronto, was the infamous address of the huge and reputedly modern provincial asylum which forms the subject of Tom Brown's contribution. By using contemporary descriptions, plans, photographs, treatises and correspondence Brown reveals that much of the vaunted splendour and modernity of this nineteenth century institution was misconceived and, in fact, untrue. Wendy Mitchinson turns to another dimension of treatment for the mentally ill of Ontario society. She draws from the extant registers of the London Psychiatric hospital disturbing and detailed data concerning gynecological operations carried out on insane women. What does her research have to say about the attitudes of medical practice in late nineteenth century Canada and the potential uses of hospital case files? Description and evaluation of the available archival sources for studying public health policy and services in Ontario is offered by Heather MacDougall over a fifty year period to 1930 and Janice Sandomirsky shows how the City of Toronto Health Department commissioned photographic records to drum up publicity towards the erasure of slum properties, insanitary conditions and public diseases. Janice McGinnis describes her experiences with the records of tuberculosis located at the Baker Memorial Sanatorium in Calgary and points to some of the issues involved in the preservation of institutional archives. The final article is designed as a visual essay in which the photographs selected by the issue's editors are arranged to allow the critical reader to build their own impressions of health care by assessing the information, or lack of it, in this particular archival medium. From France, Jacqueline Roubert explains what is happening in Lyon hospitals with contemporary medical records and Peter Robertson offers an amusing note on that "all-penetrating" medical discovery—the X-ray.

It will be evident from more than one of the above contributions that dealing with the archives of medicine is likely to be a delicate business. Most of the material which needs recognition and should be preserved if the social history of medicine is to be satisfactorily explored is of an intimate and personal nature. The case file, for example, stored on paper or in electronic medium, is a first class archival record but it is inevitably subject to a variety of use restrictions which must protect the bond of confidentiality between physician and patient. Such matters of privacy are always to be balanced against the archivist's anxiety to discover documentation that can be used and the historian's natural wish to put it to use. It is as well to make this clear in the context of this issue of *Archivaria* for great damage could be done to the preservation of medical archives in Canada by a sudden avaricious rush of archivist and historian alike into the nearest records of medicine outside an archival repository. For the moment, we would advise that reliance be placed on the work of such groups as the Association of Canadian Archivists' Hospital Records Committee or the medical records survey being carried out in Ontario by the Hannah Institute for the History of Medicine which maintains strong professional archives relations. The results of their work should pave the way for a reasoned and careful assessment of the extent to which the archives of medicine need protection.

Editors