History

Journey of a book

Jane Wickenden

Recently retrieved from the Monckton House basement in INM, and added to the catalogue of the Historic Collections Library, is the following small book: *An account of a contagious fever, which occurred amongst the Danish and American prisoners of war at Chatham, in the years 1813, 1814.* by Sir Wm. Burnett [...], Medical Commissioner of the Royal Navy. London: Burgess and Hill... , 1831.

The book itself is rather insignificant, consisting of only 52 pages and bound in dull, rather stained, violet cloth, though the interior is clean and in good condition. It has, however, taken a very roundabout path to the Historic Collections, and accumulated several small mysteries on the way.

To begin with, the book is Sir William Burnett’s personal presentation copy, with his inscription “from the Author” to H Parkin. While one Henry H. Parkin submitted his M.D. thesis, “Inaugural dissertation on spasmodic cholera” to the medical faculty of the University of Edinburgh in 1834, it seems more likely that the recipient was the Henry Parkin who first appears in the Navy List in 1796. He was roughly contemporary with Sir William Burnett, perhaps a few years older, and was serving as a medical officer with the Royal Marines in 1834. By 1849 he had risen to Inspector of Hospitals and Fleets. His death is reported in the Navy List for June of that year, in the section “Officers whose Deaths have been officially reported since 20th March 1849”.

On the title page is the stamp of the Royal Marines Infirmary Library, Woolwich. This library was founded no earlier than 1855, and was in operation until the barracks transferred to the Army in 1869. Possibly the book was given or bequeathed to one of Henry Parkin’s fellow medical staff in the Marines, before being presented to the Infirmary Library.

After the closure of that library in 1869...
there is a seven-year lacuna in the book’s history. The next clue is the stamp of the Melville Hospital Chatham Medical Library, of which there are two examples on the flyleaf, above and below the original presentation inscription. The stamp is dated by the inscription on the half-title page, which reads, in a neat 19th-century hand, “Medical Library, Melville Hospital Chatham Received 8th Sept’r ’76.” The Melville Hospital was built in 1827, so one may assume that the book led a more settled existence for the 29 years between its arrival in 1876 and the closure of the hospital in 1905. There is no stamp of the Melville’s successor, the Royal Naval Hospital Chatham (1905-1961, now the Medway Maritime Hospital) nor of the Royal Hospital Haslar, although the book must, to judge by the context in which it was found, have reached INM from Haslar.

Finally, tucked into the front of the book is a clue to who was using the book - and so, possibly, where it was - on 10th August 1937. This is the date stamped on the back of two small portrait photographs of a man in civilian dress, themselves enclosed in an envelope of the Strand branch of Jerome Ltd “for perfect portraiture”, a photographic firm who had branches all over the UK as well as in Amsterdam, Paris and Dublin. There is, however, no name, and no identifying uniform, although the subject of the photo may be wearing a military tie.

For interest, and in the very remote hope that a reader of the Journal may recognise the subject of the photograph, it is reproduced here.

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Address for correspondence: Mrs J V S Wickenden, MA (Oxon) Dip Lib, Historic Collections Library, Institute of Naval Medicine, Alverstoke, Gosport, Hampshire PO12 2DL. e-mail: INM-CS-InfoHistLib@mod.uk

NB: The collections are available for research or visiting by interested parties, whether civilian or forces, during normal working hours by arrangement with the Librarian.