

Book Review

Phyllis Reeve

75 Books from the Osler Library.

Faith Wallis and Pamela Miller, eds.
Montreal, Osler Library, McGill University, Montreal, 2004. 182 p. \$40.

Some libraries possess a sense of place beyond their usefulness as repositories and suppliers of books. T.S. Eliot wrote of Little Gidding: "You are not here to verify,/ Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity/ Or carry report. You are here to kneel/ Where prayer has been valid." In these libraries, books have been "valid". The British Museum Reading Room is only the most famous among those you will call to mind. I think of the Laurenziana Library in Florence, where it didn't seem to matter that I couldn't read Italian; the Boston Public Library where I admit I looked mainly at the pictures; the University of British Columbia's Ridington Room, where I was for many years a bona fide user and which has been inexcusably destroyed in the name of progress; and the Osler Library at McGill University.

When my husband was studying medicine in the early 60s, I would pretend I had a scholarly reason for pausing at the entrance to the Library and inhaling. The benign shade of Sir William Osler (1849-1919), physician, educator, bibliophile, hovered over the Faculty of Medicine, as this book suggests it does still. On Founder's Day of their second year, medical students received a copy of Osler's *A Way of Life*, stamped with the McGill crest and upon graduation, a major pharmaceutical company gave them copies of his *Aequanimitas; with Other addresses to Medical Students, Nurses, and Practitioners of Medicine*. Osler concludes this

work with a list of ten books which should make up the *Bed-side Library for Medical Students*: after the Bible and Shakespeare, he recommends Montaigne, Plutarch, Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus, the *Religio Medici*, *Don Quixote*, Emerson and Oliver Wendell Holmes, a hagiography sufficiently humanist, perhaps, to exorcize nasty karma from psychedelic psychiatrists up the hill.

The book at hand accompanied an exhibition commemorating the 75th anniversary of the opening of the Library. The editors, Wallis a historian and Miller a librarian, invited users of the library to choose books to be exhibited. Their choices: an Aldine edition of Hippocrates, for instance, or a fifteenth century recipe book in manuscript, or Galen, Conrad Gesner, William Harvey, Louis Pasteur and the others - testify to the overlapping histories of medicine and of the book.

Each entry is represented by at least one clear and beautiful plate and at least a page of commentary. There is much to browse here and much to surprise and delight. A figure of the human brain for *Cerebri anatome* by Thomas Williams, 1664, was drawn by Christopher Wren. Francois Nicolas Marquet (1747) offers a minuet based on normal pulse rate as expressed in musical notation. Editor Wallis, who chose about half the entries, in her useful introduction confesses to a predilection for illustrations of the rhinoceros. We of the Alcuin Society might benefit from Samuel Auguste Tissot's *De la santé des gens de lettres* (1775), presented beneath the headline *Desk-diseases of the dysfunctional intellectual*.

Phyllis Reeve is a welcome and frequent contributor to Amphora.