

## ILLUSTRATIONS FROM THE WELLCOME INSTITUTE LIBRARY

### SOME RECENTLY ACQUIRED PAPERS OF ROBERT WHYTT (1714–1766), FRS

by

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In November 1991, the Western Manuscripts Department of the Wellcome Institute was offered, and subsequently purchased, a collection of manuscripts which had belonged to the eighteenth-century Scottish physiologist and clinician Robert Whytt. The contents of a single cardboard box were unpacked and examined with some excitement. Here were primary materials on all aspects of Whytt's career, where before researchers had been limited to the study of printed volumes and some scattered letters and papers. It quickly became clear that this was the largest group of Whytt documents to have emerged to date.<sup>1</sup>

Born in Edinburgh, Robert Whytt had a lifelong association with the city and its medical establishment. He made the progression from the university and into general practice after rounding off his education in London, Paris and Leyden, gaining his MD, in 1737. Ten years later, he was elected to the chair of Institutes of Medicine at Edinburgh Medical School, a post he held for the rest of his working life. Whytt's professional expertise was recognised by election to the Fellowship of the Royal Society of London (1752) and to the Presidency of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh (1763). This steady record of achievement disguises an uneasy character: variously accused of hypochondria and irritability in his lifetime,<sup>2</sup> Whytt could be a ready and persistent controversialist, most famously with Albrecht von Haller (1708–1777).<sup>3</sup>

Whytt's reputation as a leading physician rests on his original researches on nervous diseases and vital motions, resulting in the publication of *An essay on the vital and other*

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to those held at the Wellcome Institute (Medical Society of London collection) there are manuscripts relating to Robert Whytt in the following repositories: British Library; Edinburgh University Library; Royal College of Physicians, Edinburgh; Royal Society of London; St Thomas's Hospital, London; Scottish Record Office, Edinburgh. The arrival of these new papers prompted a search for other possible Whytt items in this library with no definite result. One letter by Robert Petrie (c. 1727–1803) dated 1762 and in the Autograph Letter collection *may* be to Whytt.

<sup>2</sup> R. K. French, *Robert Whytt, the soul, and medicine*, London, WIHM, 1969, pp. 1–16.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 63–76.

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*involuntary motions of animals* (Edinburgh, 1751) and *Observations on the nature, causes and cure of those diseases which are commonly called nervous, hypochondriac or hysteric . . .* (Edinburgh, 1765). The former has been described as “a classic of neurophysiology”;<sup>4</sup> in it, Whytt defined reflex action and demonstrated a localized reflex, limited to part of the spinal column. He was guided by the belief that the nervous system or “sentient principle” acted to control the body in an integrated manner. He extended these ideas in the later work in order to reclassify a range of diseases. In contrast to this groundbreaking practical and theoretical work, Whytt’s originality as a lecturer has been questioned. Christopher Lawrence has noted the orthodox Boerhaavianism of Whytt’s clinical medicine and has suggested poor attendance of his lectures.<sup>5</sup> The new papers should allow a further assessment to be made of Whytt as a researcher and as a promulgator of scientific education at a time when the Edinburgh Medical School enjoyed an expanding role in European learning.

The manuscripts, now catalogued as Western MSS. 6858–6880, have been very broadly divided up into areas of activity. There are lecture notebooks from Whytt’s student days; lectures by Whytt himself, as professor of medicine; correspondence and case-notes; drafts of published and other works; commentaries on medical texts; with a few family papers. In all, the collection consists of 36 notebooks and files of loose papers, spanning the period 1699–1765.<sup>6</sup>

The earliest notebooks in Whytt’s hand contain material collected as a student of Edinburgh University Medical School *c.* 1731–34, and their chief interest is as a record of the teaching of Alexander Monro *primus* (1697–1767), first Professor of Anatomy at the University, “much fam’d for a good Professor and . . . his merit equal to his fame”.<sup>7</sup> Monro was a popular lecturer and student accounts of his courses are not uncommon; D. W. Taylor has compiled a detailed bibliography of 40 known texts and has attempted to reconstruct Monro’s curriculum from them.<sup>8</sup> The Whytt notebooks are an interesting addition to the canon, belonging to the earliest period of surviving transcriptions. Within three volumes (MSS. 6858–6860) many individual lectures are clearly dated, for example Monro’s physiological papers given on successive days (excepting the sabbath) 13–22 March 1732. This daily account of attendances is similar in type to other manuscripts in the Wellcome Institute, notably MSL. 74 in the Medical Society of London collection, allowing detailed comparison to be made.<sup>9</sup> Discourses which Taylor notes as being more rare, or more problematic in dates of delivery are also represented, including Monro on tumours. In addition to lectures, the notebooks are a source of information on undergraduate reading.

<sup>4</sup> *Dictionary of scientific biography*, vol. 14, p. 321.

<sup>5</sup> Christopher John Lawrence, ‘Medicine as culture: Edinburgh and the Scottish Enlightenment’, Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1984, pp. 133–45.

<sup>6</sup> Copies of the full catalogue description are available on request from the Western Manuscripts Department, Wellcome Institute.

<sup>7</sup> Western MSS., Autograph Letter collection, John Roebuck-Philip Doddridge, 26 December 1739. A good summary of the state of Edinburgh Medical School by a near-contemporary of Robert Whytt.

<sup>8</sup> D. W. Taylor, ‘The manuscript lecture-notes of Alexander Monro *primus* (1697–1767)’, *Medical History*, 1986, 30: 444–67.

<sup>9</sup> Warren R. Dawson, *Manuscripta medica: a descriptive catalogue of the manuscripts . . . of the Medical Society of London*, London, MSL, 1932, pp. 94–5.

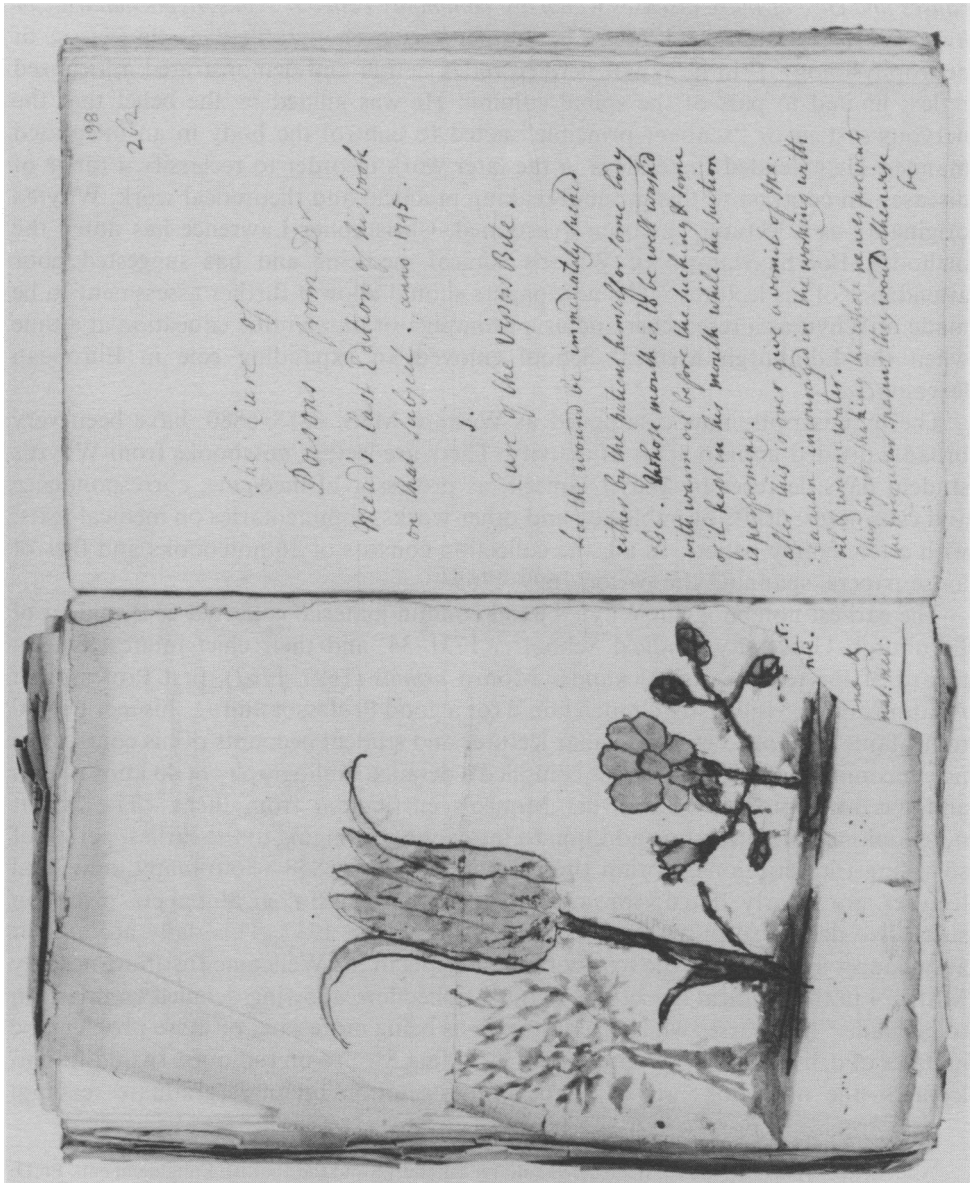


Figure 1: A notebook on diseases including Whytt's commentaries on Richard Mead and others. The child's painting of a flower is one of the many inserted slips. Whytt's son John used a blossom design as a letter seal. WMS. 6869 ff. 197v-198r.

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Whytt's use of his professor's *Osteology* is to be expected, as this was a basic student text, but he extracted and commented upon various authors including James Keill (1673–1719) and Richard Mead (1673–1754). Mead was an authority to whom Whytt returned repeatedly, as other manuscripts in the collection demonstrate.<sup>10</sup>

Whytt's own career as a lecturer seems to have been foreshadowed at an early stage of his life. There are mature papers from the 1760s (MSS. 6863–6865) on fevers and on croup, written when Whytt was effectively nearing the end of his teaching, constrained by ill-health as he admitted to his students: "the severe and long continued indisposition which I have laboured under of late makes it impossible for me to give my whole course . . .".<sup>11</sup> Two volumes of miscellaneous speeches in Whytt's hand from the 1730s (MSS. 6861–6862) are intriguing less for their content than for what they may tell of the importance of medical associations at Edinburgh University. It is generally understood that Monro's establishment of the Society for the Improvement of Medical Knowledge in 1731 (which evolved into the Philosophical Society, joined by Whytt in 1742) inspired the creation of a student equivalent in 1734, later granted a Royal Charter as the Royal Medical Society.<sup>12</sup> MS. 6861 commences with 'Of the nourishment of the foetus *in utero*: a discourse had in ye club . . . 1st December 1732'. The confident style of the lecture suggests a more experienced author than the young Whytt, and so this may be a Philosophical Society event which he attended and recorded. The next collection of four speeches on lung disease (MS. 6862) is more deferential in tone, perhaps Whytt addressing his peers: the manuscript contains corrections and additions, indicating that these essays may be Whytt's own. If so, and if as the text suggests, he was addressing a student body, then what kind? Whytt is not known to have belonged to the Medical Society<sup>13</sup>—was this a rival student gathering?

The chronological gap between the notebooks of the 1730s and the lectures of the 1760s is filled by manuscripts intended for publication, and by the raw material of case-notes and commentaries that went into their making. By far the largest single manuscript is Whytt's commentary on Hermann Boerhaave's *Institutiones medicae* (MS. 6874). This is very incomplete, comprising only those reflections by Whytt on paragraphs 235–694 of Boerhaave's great work. The opening has been lost, and it is clear from a final note on the text that Whytt wrote a continuation from the point at which this document concludes. The residual text runs to a huge 655 folio pages; in its original state the commentary must have been comparable to that of Whytt's predecessor in the Institutes chair, Andrew St Clair (1697–1760).<sup>14</sup> It is not possible to judge whether the author ever intended publishing the full commentary, but its form argues against this idea. The manuscript is a working copy, completed in a fair hand in 1747, but continually revised by inserting corrections and new observations

<sup>10</sup> For example, WMS. 6869.

<sup>11</sup> WMS. 6878/9.

<sup>12</sup> Roger L. Emerson, 'The Philosophical Society of Edinburgh 1737–1747', *BJHS*, 1979, 12: 154–191.

<sup>13</sup> Lawrence, *op. cit.*, note 5 above, p. 202.

<sup>14</sup> St Clair's commentary is held at the Royal College of Physicians, Edinburgh. C. J. Lawrence, 'Early Edinburgh medicine: theory and practice' in R. G. W. Anderson and E. D. C. Simpson (eds), *The early years of the Edinburgh Medical School*, Edinburgh, RSM, 1976.

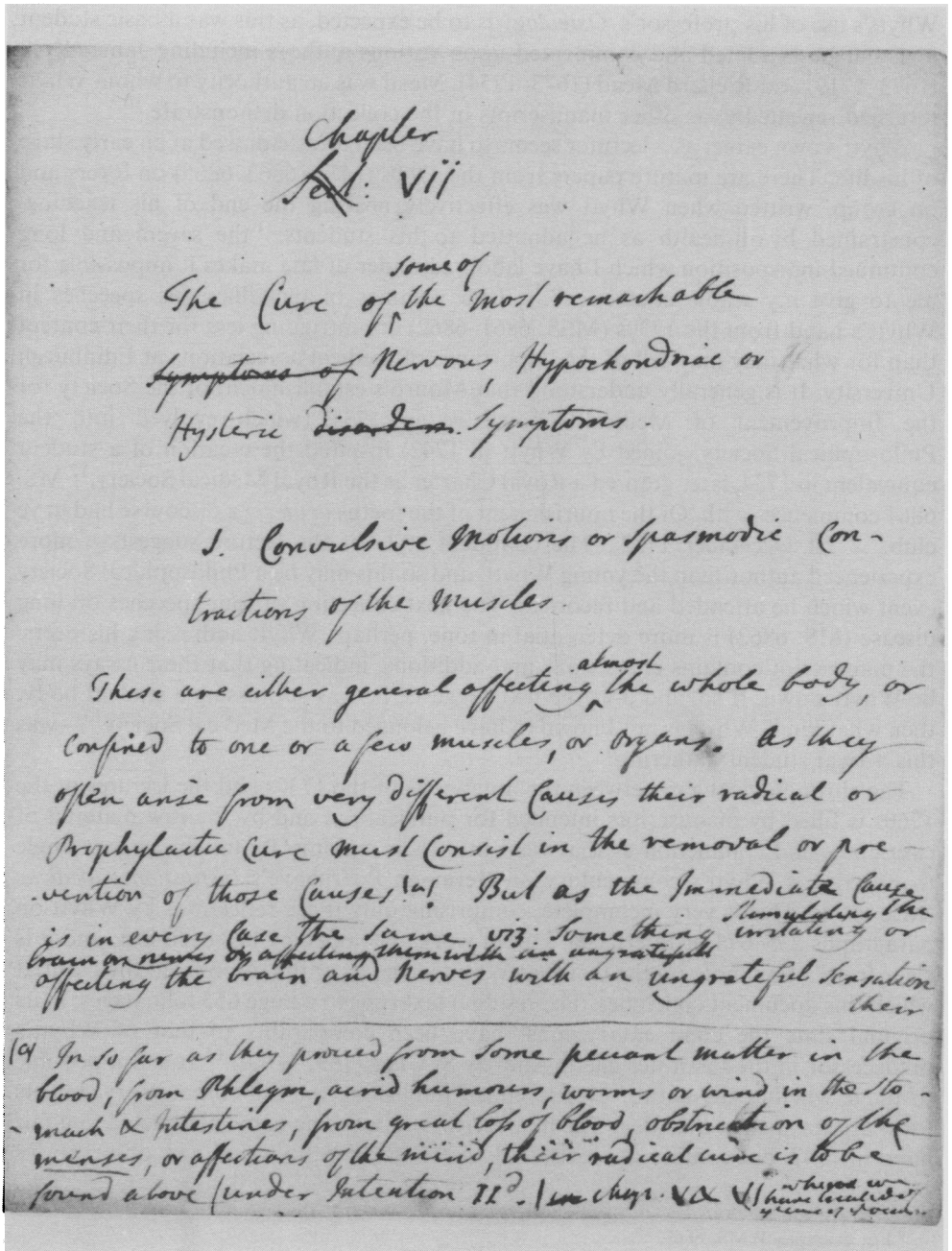


Figure 2: Manuscript draft of Robert Whytt's *Observations on the nature . . . of those diseases . . . called nervous, hypochondriac or hysterie*. Many of the corrections were recommended by Sir John Pringle, most obviously here the substitution of "chapters" for "sections". WMS. 6877/4.

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on slips of paper, a practice kept up until at least 1762. It may be significant that this is the year assigned by R. K. French as the date that Whytt changed from Boerhaave to Hieronymus Glaubius' *Institutiones pathologiae* as a main teaching text. If this is correct, then one may infer that MS. 6874 was the discarded lecture tool, so that until 1762 it was a basic source of instruction for mid-century Edinburgh medical men.<sup>15</sup>

The major published work in manuscript form is in an even more fragmentary state. The *Observations on . . . diseases . . . called nervous, hypochondriac or hysteric* (MS. 6877) has survived in five parts, from a single folio to a 129 folio segment. The pages are heavily corrected and contain much that was omitted from the eventual printing; this was due in part to the advice of Sir John Pringle (1707–82), who offered detailed criticisms of an early draft which he received in 1759. Whytt's fellow-Scot later assisted in the publication of his friend's posthumous works, so his editorial methods are of interest. Pringle commented on the medical content and mode of expression of Whytt's essay in equal measures, and his tart observations on books by Ebenezer Gilchrist (1707–74) and Sir Edward Barry (1696–1776) contrast with his reported role of making Whytt's papers "less controversial".<sup>16</sup> Suppressions, where they appear, are limited to inadvertent *double entendres* ("Gentle rubbing of the lower belly—This expression may raise a waggish laugh") and to matters of language. The note of praise given by one contemporary reviewer that Whytt's writings were "free . . . from the least peculiarity of the Scottish idiom" was deliberately earned.<sup>17</sup>

Pringle's letters, "freedoms" received in a "good natured manner", form the largest group from 26 missives written by various individuals (MSS. 6867–6868). Many of them describe specific medical cases, and it was Whytt's habit to annotate such pleas for assistance with his prescriptions and other recommendations. These few surviving letters and their associated case-notes give the impression of an eminent clientèle: Whytt treated General James St Clair (d. 1762), for example, and conducted a post-mortem examination of William Adam (d. 1748) founder of the architectural dynasty. Physicians who consulted Whytt and are represented here were men of some professional standing, not only in Great Britain, but overseas, including the Americas.<sup>18</sup> Rather surprisingly, given Whytt's European reputation, there are no specimens of letters from continental scholars or doctors. However, it is difficult to make any meaningful assessment of the range of Whytt's medical contacts from such scanty resources. One point which is evident from some additional whole letters and many scraps of correspondence which appear as correction slips within the *Observations* and other manuscripts, is that a proportion of the papers were mutilated or destroyed by Whytt himself.

The overall impression given by the collection, is of a variety of professional papers from which it is possible to sample Whytt's activities—almost as if a selection had been made. Thus, in addition to the manuscripts noted above, there are odd volumes from

<sup>15</sup> French, *op. cit.*, note 2 above, p. 9, although mildly challenged by Lawrence, *op. cit.*, note 5 above, pp. 134–5.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> Whytt received letters from George Cleghorn (1716–89) professor of anatomy at Dublin; Ebenezer Gilchrist (1707–74), physician of Dumfries; John Morgan (1735–89) Founder of the Philadelphia Medical School; and James Vaughan (1740–1813) MD of Leicester.

larger sets (MS. 6869) or by other members of Whytt's family (MS. 6880); together with non-medical essays and stray printed volumes (MS. 6878/2 and 11). What remain of Whytt's manuscripts are presumably representative, but incomplete, whether by accident or otherwise. It is known that his papers were divided at least once after his death "by a physician in Glasgow who had got hold of some of them by the imprudence of one who had access to them".<sup>19</sup> There is little information associated with the Wellcome collection that would allow scholars to deduce its provenance. The manuscripts were supposedly discovered in an attic in Edinburgh; they arrived at the Wellcome Institute with two letters by Arthur Wing Pinero (1855–1934) to a Dr Smith, possibly bearing on their former history. To date, no progress has been made in tracing what may be a previous owner. It is to be hoped though, that the Robert Whytt collection, now available to scholars in the Wellcome Institute Library, will provide an abundance of information on Scottish medical education in the eighteenth century, and perhaps stimulate a new biographical study of an important and relatively neglected figure.

<sup>19</sup> French, *op. cit.*, note 2 above, p. 15.