

American Osler Society, Inc. John P. McGovern Award Lectureship

John Shaw Billings as a Historian

James H. Cassedy, Ph.D.



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John P. McGovern Award Lectureships

1. *Our Lords, The Sick* presented by Albert R. Jonsen, Ph.D., April 12, 1986, in San Francisco, California.
2. *To Humane Medicine: Back Door or Front Door?* presented by Edward J. Huth, M.D., April 29, 1987, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
3. *Medicine and the Comic Spirit* presented by Joanne Trautmann Banks, May 3, 1988, in New Orleans, Louisiana.
4. *The 'Open Arms' Reviving: Can we Rekindle the Osler Flame?* presented by Lord Walton, April 26, 1989, in Birmingham, Alabama.
5. *Rx: Hope* presented by E. A. Vastyan, May 8, 1990 in Baltimore, Maryland.
6. *Osler's Gamble and Ours: The Meanings of Contemporary History* presented by Daniel M. Fox, April 10, 1991, in New Orleans, Louisiana.
7. *From Doctor to Nurse with Love In a Molecular Age* presented by William C. Beck, March 26, 1992, in San Diego, California.
8. *The Heroic Physician In Literature: Can The Tradition Continue?* presented by Anne Hudson Jones, May 12, 1993, in Louisville, Kentucky.
9. *'The Leaven of Science': Osler and Medical Research* presented by David Hamilton, May 10, 1994, in London, England.
10. *A Body of Knowledge: Knowledge of the Body* presented by Sherwin B. Nuland, May 10, 1995, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.
11. *Other People's Bodies: Human Experimentation on the 50th Anniversary of the Nuremberg Code* presented by David J. Rothman, April 25, 1996, in San Francisco, California.
12. *The Coming of Compassion* presented by Roger J. Bulger, April 3, 1997, in Williamsburg, Virginia.
13. *Why We Go Back to Hippocrates* presented by Paul Potter, May 6, 1998, in Toronto, Ontario

Cover — Obverse and reverse sides of John P. McGovern Award Lectureship commemorative medal which is presented to each annual lecturer.

The Seventeenth John P. McGovern Award Lecture

John Shaw Billings as a Historian



by



James H. Cassedy, Ph.D.

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John P. McGovern

JOHN P. McGOVERN AWARD LECTURESHIP

Through the generosity of the John P. McGovern Foundation to the American Osler Society, the John P. McGovern Award Lectureship was established in 1986. The lectureship makes possible an annual presentation of a paper dedicated to the general areas of Sir William Osler's interests in the interface between the humanities and the sciences—in particular, medicine, literature, philosophy, and history. The lectureship is awarded to a leader of wide reputation who is selected by a special committee of the Society and is especially significant in that it also stands as a commemoration of Doctor McGovern's own long-standing interest in and contributions to Osleriana.



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James H. Cassedy received his secondary education in Fultonville, New York, his undergraduate degree in American Literature from Middlebury College, and his doctorate in American Civilization from Brown University. After five years in the United States Army during World War II, he served in the U.S. Veterans Administration and in the U.S. Information Agency before beginning an academic career at Williams College. In 1962, he became Executive Secretary of the History of the Life Sciences Study Section at the National Institutes of Health. He later served the National Institutes of Health as Deputy Chief of the European Office in Paris, France. Since 1968, he has been Historian at the National Library of Medicine, where he also edits the *Bibliography of the History of Medicine* and HISTLINE and manages the History of Medicine Seminar Program. Between 1982 and 1984, he was president of the American Association for the History of Medicine. His writings include numerous articles and five books. He lists his avocations as reading, travel, and playing the piano.



I am grateful to those of you who are members and officers of the American Osler Society for inviting me to give the annual McGovern Lecture. It is an honor that I much appreciate. I also value the suggestion of your President, Doctor Longo, that a talk about John Shaw Billings would be appropriate for this occasion.



Several years ago, the historian Genevieve Miller wrote a scholarly paper "in praise" of the amateur physician-historians of late nineteenth century America. In her paper, she drew attention to a considerable number of such physicians who, working mainly in their spare time, had made significant and sometimes substantial contributions to medical history: as translators, writers, book collectors, librarians, and sometimes teachers. Dr. Miller perceived John Shaw Billings as one of the most productive and creative of those individuals. She also saw him as a transition figure who helped pave the way for the Garrisons, Sigerists, and other more or less full-time medical historians. In this paper, I will elaborate upon and extend some of Dr. Miller's findings about Billings. In particular, I want to bring out the reasons why and how Billings deliberately limited his activities as a medical historian, thus remaining a part-time contributor to that scholarly field despite opportunities to devote himself exclusively to it.

Apart from Dr. Miller, medical historians have seldom recognized or written about John Shaw Billings's historical pursuits. One major reason for this neglect has been that those activities had unfolded largely in the context of Billings's incredibly broad scientific and professional life and were inevitably overshadowed by the extensive attention given to the various facets of that life. Speakers at his 1913 memorial services recalled some of the highlights: his career up to 1895 as an innovative military surgeon; the pioneering medical library that he had built for the Army; his design of the Johns Hopkins Hospital; his gargantuan labors for the National Board of Health, his collaboration with Herman Hollerith to develop tabulating machines for the United States Census; and, later on,

his shaping of such non-medical landmarks as the New York Public Library and the Carnegie Institution of Washington.

None of the memorial speakers praised or apparently even remembered Billings as having been an historian. Those who did remember doubtless marveled that he had ever found time for the study of history. Yet, up to 1895 he did make time for it, at least sporadically. In fact, during those years, with other like-minded medical scientists, he came to be guided by the assumption that the insights of medical historical studies were or could be little if any less important than the insights from scientific study or laboratory research, at least in the long run. And as this conviction strengthened, it gave force to his initiatives to build up medical history resources or pursuits both for the Army and for the Johns Hopkins University. My remarks, therefore, will mainly divide into two parts focussing respectively on those institutions.

The Billings who joined the staff of Surgeon General Joseph Barnes late in the Civil War was still only 26 years old and apparently had no special medical history interests as yet. But he did have a deep-seated propensity for book learning in general. He thus seems to have pricked up his ears when Barnes began to talk about the possibility of creating a proper medical library for the Army. In the late 1860s, when Barnes decided to go ahead with the project, he appointed Billings to direct it. Over the next quarter of a century, despite periodic changes of Surgeon Generals, Billings remained in charge of the library, which he energetically fashioned into an important and remarkably successful medical institution. Clearly, his increasing involvement in medical history could hardly have occurred but for this extended tour of library duty in Washington.

Billings's appointment as director of the Library did not include an explicit mandate to be a historian as well. However, the position did require him to take active roles in certain library functions that were partly or indirectly historical in nature. The collecting function, for one, took Billings into a fiercely competitive world that included businessmen as well as rare book librarians, historical scholars as well as dealers. By the 1880s, for instance, he was dickering with the book collector John Stockton Hough over potential additions to the Library's collection of medical incunabula. And beginning earlier he started carrying on a vigorous program of exchanging duplicate works, both old and new, with Harvard's James Read Chadwick and other like-minded medical librarians.

Another library service that appealed to Billings was the extending of research assistance to individual scholars. As more historically interested physicians and scientists became aware of the historical resources of the

Library, Billings satisfied as many of their requests for loans as he could. At the same time, he gained plaudits for his willingness to help find answers to their questions. For instance, when Dr. George Engelmann, Jr., of St. Louis, sought assistance in preparing an article on the history of obstetrics, Billings replied promptly and at some length. He could not, of course, perform the actual research and writing for the other man, but as usual he drew together for him an extensive reading list on the subject. Moreover, he promised that, if Engelmann could arrange to come to Washington for a week, Billings and his colleagues would place the Library's collections at the other's disposal and help guide his research.

Before that, in 1881, the Montreal clinician William Osler had already made his own initial two-day visit to the Library. Billings and his assistant Robert Fletcher, true to form, took time out to show him around, particularly among the older works of the collection. This visit led to a permanent friendship between the three men and to their close collaboration in several facets of late nineteenth century medicine. At an early date, Billings also gave Osler borrowing privileges in the Library and began as well to send him copies of the Library's publications. In turn, Osler reciprocated handsomely, first by sending Billings duplicate copies of books from his own library and later searching for copies of past Canadian institutional literature, including old medical college catalogs, health department and hospital reports, and other documents.

One of the largest library tasks for Billings, one that he began working on in the early 1870s, was that of preparing or supervising the preparation of specialty bibliographies and other finding guides to the institution's collections. He started with his large bibliography of cholera in 1875 and shortly afterward committed the Library almost in perpetuity to the indexing and publishing of its entire constantly growing bibliographical record. The two segments of that enterprise, of course, the *Index Catalogue* and the *Index Medicus*, proved to be the principal ingredients in the library's success, but not the only ones. Over the years Billings compiled other short guides, including his 1894 bibliography on the medical effects of alcohol. Moreover, he used some of the guides as partial models for two of the relatively small number of his personal historical publications.

The first of these was a long article that he wrote for the *American Journal of the Medical Sciences* to help mark the 100th anniversary of the country's Independence. The article was basically a bibliographical summary of selected historical holdings that were already in the library, though Billings enhanced the interest of some of the entries with his personal comments. In his introduction, he described the work simply as a

collection of "statistics obtained from a nearly complete list of the medical books published in this country from 1776 to the present time," together with data pertaining to medical societies, libraries, journals, and schools. Really an annotated historical directory, it made no pretense to be a learned historical analysis. And it served its patriotic purposes in an effective and matter-of-fact way, without resorting to flag-waving. Moreover, largely by inference, it also identified a considerable range of medical needs and targets to be expected in America's present and future.

Some twenty years later Billings issued a larger finding guide for another segment of the library's historical collections. Though ambitiously entitled the "History and Literature of Surgery," this work was much like its predecessor in format. It was really a factual listing of the surgeons, operations, and surgical publications of the past rather than a reasoned historical interpretation of that particular medical branch over time. The historian Fielding H. Garrison, writing after Billings's death, had mixed views about the publication as a contribution to history. Substantively, he considered it "the best work on the subject in English," and observed that it displayed a "genuinely critical spirit." At the same time, however, he thought that potential readers must often have been turned off by its mode of presentation. Its long lists of obscure and unimportant names, in particular, made for "a certain dryness." Summing up, Garrison thought it a pity that Billings had chosen this unappealing bibliographical format when his usual personality was that of a "breezy spirit."

Billings's rapid build-up of the historical resources of the Surgeon General's Library, together with his production of bibliographical tools for the Library's historically minded readers, was nearly paralleled, time-wise, by the emergence of opportunities for him to make major medical historical contributions outside the Army. This became possible in 1876, when the Surgeon General made him available as a part-time expert to help launch two large segments of Baltimore's new Johns Hopkins University. In one of these, as planner and medical advisor to the trustees of the Johns Hopkins Hospital, he shaped and brought that large building through to completion in 1889. At the same time, the University's President, Daniel Coit Gilman, invited Billings to be his principal consultant in planning and launching the medical school. This also proved to be a protracted process, one that occupied both men for the next decade and a half. While they had their differences in this venture, they shared a general desire to create a model medical school, one that would be closely integrated with the hospital, committed to the research ideal, and receptive to innovative educational methodologies.

To start his work for Gilman, Billings prepared and in 1877 present-

ed a unique and highly crucial academic course. This was a series of twenty lectures that were intended to stimulate support for the new medical school among the university trustees and faculty as well as among Baltimore physicians and the public. As justification for what was clearly to be a radical school, Billings drew extraordinarily heavily from the historical record. In fact, he devoted thirteen of his twenty lectures to a comprehensive review of the medical lessons of the past. Eleven of them covered the historical roots of western medicine and medical education from antiquity through the eighteenth century, while two others dealt with the early United States. Four lectures were then devoted to reviewing the existing medical schools, medical legislation, and related matters in mid-19th century Europe, while three concluding lectures provided the details of Billings's recommendations as to "the Course to be pursued by the Hopkins University."

The course of twenty lectures was presented in a rented hall in Baltimore as one of the earliest academic events of the new university. For Billings, the writing of the lectures was a tour de force, carried out at white heat in a remarkably short time. They could not have been prepared at all without his easy access to the holdings of the Surgeon-General's Library.

Billings's biographers have concluded that here, as in other public appearances, he made an excellent impression as a speaker and that he was forceful, direct, and fluent in style. They have, however, given surprisingly little attention to the scholarly content and quality of the thirteen historical lectures, considered as a unit, even though it constituted one of the most comprehensive American reviews of the world's history of medicine undertaken up to that time. Sanford Larkey, who examined the presentations in manuscript form, used far more of his short 1938 commentary on the lectures to assert Billings's greatness as a historian than to analyze the lectures' intellectual substance. He did, however, find the lectures to be engaging in their narrative style and competent in fitting the details of medical history together chronologically.

Fielding H. Garrison, considering these historical lectures in 1915, found them "carefully prepared" and deserving of being published as a monograph. He seems to have found no sign of the arid bibliographical format that bothered him about some of Billings's other historical works. And substantively, he was impressed that the lectures reflected the German historical medicine of the day. However, Garrison did not specify any particular scholar who may have influenced Billings in this respect. An interesting hypothetical case might be argued that historian Herbert Baxter Adams, whom Gilman had brought to Hopkins at the

same time as Billings, could have exerted such influence. But, I have found no specific evidence to support the notion of any direct influence by Adams or any other general historian.

Whatever intellectual influences he may have been exposed to, Billings, as he began the project, did not believe that he would be able to produce anything of much originality or intellectual merit in the short time available. Recognizing this, he warned Gilman in 1876 not to expect anything of very high caliber. Rather, he perceived the historical lectures he was working up as being commonplace in nature, aimed mainly at medical men, and divested "of all technicalities." As he proceeded with the work he became increasingly dissatisfied with this approach and regretted not having been able to prepare a different type of lecture series. He became convinced that a series on what he called the "philosophy of the history of medicine," and which, by blending medical knowledge with that of philosophy, government, science, and religion, for instance, would clearly make for "a higher and better type of [historical] work." Realistically, however, Billings was forced to conclude that he himself could never find the time needed for writing such a work. "I could only do it by putting about a year's reading and reflection into each lecture, since I must know much besides Medicine, to do it."

Billings thus refused to consider publishing the completed historical lectures unless some unlikely opportunity to drastically rewrite them presented itself. As he reminded Gilman, there was already an overabundance of uninspired writings on the subject, "mostly copied one from another, even as these lectures must be in the main." Accordingly, when he finished presenting the course, these particular manuscripts were filed away in Billings's office, virtually in limbo so far as Gilman and the university were concerned. Apparently no steps were taken to ask Billings to give his original history of medicine lectures again, let alone to prepare and deliver a different course. And he himself was not about to volunteer.

On the contrary, about this time Billings drew a line as to how much history he could or wanted to fit in. With his heavy load of scientific and medical undertakings, he remained far too extended in the years after 1877 to think of keeping his medical-historical initiatives at Hopkins going on a regular or even frequent basis. Clearly, his main commitments with Hopkins itself were to get the hospital and medical school built. To help spread knowledge about the latter project and to expedite the planning for it during this period, Billings and Gilman thus decided to publish an edited version of Billings's last three public lectures, those non-historical presentations that contained his detailed proposals for the school.

Moreover, in 1883, in order to extend and formalize Billings's advisory role to the medical school, Gilman appointed him lecturer in hygiene, one of its first five faculty members.

During the ensuing period, before the school was ready to accept regular students, the faculty was well aware that Billings's overall recommendations in 1877 had included the eventual provision of some sort of substantial academic program in the history of medicine. His justification of this revolutionary proposal was fairly concise. In the case of "ordinary" medical schools, Billings was certain that special programs in medical history would not be appropriate, since most of the students who went to such institutions planned to become general medical practitioners and simply did not have the time for very much exposure to history. For the Hopkins medical school, however, the circumstances were expected to be entirely different. Billings anticipated that much of its student body would be composed of individuals planning to teach, write, or carry on research. Accordingly, courses in medical history would be essential for them, not only as a "stimulus to thought" but in providing a "means of culture." These courses, of course, would need to be supplemented by thorough instruction in bibliographical methods. For such methodology, he saw, would be pre-requisite to the competent ultimate functioning of the well-trained medical historian, whether he was doing research into the roots of past medical innovations or tracing the replications of erroneous medical theories and practices over the centuries.

Not surprisingly, Billings's medical history proposal had little chance of gaining much priority during the Hopkins Medical School's organizational period. Billings himself never seems to have expressed interest in playing a permanent academic role in bringing it about. And, apart from him, there was no other commanding figure or scholar in the United States who could organize and take over such a program. There were also few anywhere else. Moreover, in 1892, when the Medical School finally opened, it had no visible means of financing such a program. Nevertheless, possibly in the hope that Billings might ultimately help launch it, the school appointed him to a lectureship in the History and Literature of Medicine, one that he retained until 1905. Actually, however, during that period he never found time to present a full course of lectures in any one year and only rarely gave more than three lectures.

For some time after 1905, the Hopkins school failed to find anyone to continue the history of medicine lectureship. However, Billings's vision of a substantial, professionally based program or department for the subject, though quiescent, was somehow kept alive in the School, at least in the spacious mind of William H. Welch. And ultimately it came to

fruition with the buildup of the Institute of the History of Medicine in the 1920s and 1930s.

Meanwhile, Billings's innovations at the nascent Hopkins medical school were attracting attention elsewhere. For a time, in fact, individuals at two other educational institutions tried to enlist Billings to do something in medical history for them. In 1886, Henry P. Bowditch invited him to present a series of six lectures on the subject at the Harvard Medical School. However, the two were apparently unable to agree upon dates; at least, I have found no record that Billings ever delivered such a series at Harvard. Possibly to take their place, he shortly agreed to present a series of eight public lectures on medical history at the Lowell Institute of Boston. Apparently basing these at least to some extent upon his 1877 lectures, he seems to have delivered all eight by early 1888. However, only the first of them, the one dealing with the medical concepts of primitive peoples, was ever published. Once again, presumably, he was unable or unwilling to find the time necessary to put the other seven lectures into a historiographical and literary shape that he or an editor could accept.

In 1889, medical history in the Johns Hopkins community itself took a new turn with the opening of the hospital and the arrival of Osler. Billings, of course, was one of the members of the top-level Hopkins cabal that lured Osler away from the University of Pennsylvania. The plotters had also included President Gilman, Dean William H. Welch, and Francis T. King, head of the hospital board. Officially, they wanted Osler for two positions, as Physician in Chief of the hospital and as Professor of the Theory and Practice of Medicine in the medical school. But it was never much of a secret that, with the acquisition of Osler, Hopkins was also getting a competent though still part-time medical historian. And Billings, as he ended his tour as the hospital's medical advisor, was well satisfied with this arrangement.

With Osler aboard, then, the hospital and ultimately the medical school personnel began to get exposure to medical history on a virtually continuing basis. In his clinical teaching, Osler not only introduced substantive historical material into his presentations but involved his students in the process of searching for original medical-historical sources. At the same time, with Howard Kelly, Welch, and others, he organized the Johns Hopkins Hospital Historical Club, whose monthly meetings generated much interest among faculty and students alike.

Invited to become an honorary member of the Club, Billings went up from Washington for the meetings when he could, and sometimes he presented short papers or commentaries. On occasion, he would bring along

one or more of the rare medical books that he had just acquired for the Surgeon General's Library. And with these impressive physical evidences of the past in hand, he would deliver short bibliographical descriptions of the tomes, summaries of the lives and times of the authors, and perceptive interpretations of the medical contents. Not a few members of the club, particularly those who were book collectors, are on record as having been influenced as much by these informal but knowledgeable presentations by Billings as they were by the more finished and literary historical profiles that Osler tried out on the club members.

Billings himself enjoyed the meetings of the historical club as much as anyone. He was comfortable being with Welch, Osler, and other like-minded faculty members who participated. These were, of course, occasions when they could bask in the early fruits of the idealistic medical ambiance that they had been creating. Moreover, in their own ways, they took satisfaction in being surrounded by medical students, particularly at the point when the latter were beginning their attempts to augment their understanding of current medicine by their studies of medical history.

After Billings retired from the Army and moved to New York City, most of his previous involvements in medical history came to an end. At the New York Public Library he found neither time nor opportunity for substantial personal initiatives in this field of study. And, for the most part, the same was true in his capacity as an official of the Carnegie Institution. However, his co-sponsorship of that institution's Department of Historical Research did associate him significantly with what was a pioneering foundation commitment of funds to stimulation the elevation of history in the United States.

Also in New York, during the years after 1898, some modest aspects of Billings's past career as a historian were recreated when he became a member of the recently established Charaka Club. Membership in that organization was composed of physicians, including such personal friends as Osler, Pearce Bailey, George F. Shradly, S. Weir Mitchell, and others, who met socially and gave occasional short papers to each other on the literary, artistic, and historical aspects of medicine. The club's meetings had already taken on an easy-going and undemanding character, apparently due to an implicit agreement of the members to deliver papers that would be interesting to their colleagues rather than aiming to impress by the depth of their scholarship. The club thus offered a relaxed and encouraging environment for those physicians who had only limited time for the pursuit of medical history. For Billings at any rate that seemed to be an ideal arrangement in the early twentieth century.

Selected Readings

1. Genevieve Miller, "In Praise of Amateurs: Medical History in America Before Garrison," *Bull. Hist. Med.*, XLVII, no. 6 (1973), pp. 586-615.
2. Fielding H. Garrison, *John Shaw Billings, A Memoir* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1915).
3. Carleton B. Chapman, *Order Out of Chaos: John Shaw Billings and America's Coming of Age* (Boston: Boston Medical Library, 1994).
4. A. McGehee Harvey and Susan Abrams, "John Shaw Billings: Unsung Hero of Medicine at Johns Hopkins," *Maryland Historical Magazine*, 84, no. 2 (1989), pp. 119-134.
5. Sanford V. Larkey, "John Shaw Billings and the History of Medicine," *Bull. Hist. Med.*, VI (1938), pp. 360-376; and Sanford V. Larkey, "Two Letters by John Shaw Billings on the History of Medicine," *Ibid*, pp. 394-398.

John P. McGovern Award Lectureships

14. *Health Care in the Next Millennium* presented by John D. Stobo, M.D., May 5, 1999, in Montreal, Canada.
15. *"Writ Large": Medical History, Medical Anthropology, and Medicine and Literature* presented by Gert H. Brieger, M.D., PH.D., May 17, 2000, in Bethesda, Maryland.
16. *Reflections on American Medical Education* presented by Kenneth M. Ludmerer, M.D., April 18, 2001 in Charleston, South Carolina.
17. *John Shaw Billings as a Historian* presented by James H. Cassedy, Ph.D., April 24, 2002 in Kansas City, Kansas.