



Fig. 1 WJE Wilson, © Natl. Libr. Med., public domain.

Wilson amassed a fortune within a few decades and spent it for noble purposes. He bequeathed a professorship at the Royal College of Surgeons, another (in 1869) for Dermatology which he eventually assumed himself. He volunteered to bring over the Needle of Cleopatra, an Egyptian obelisk from about 1500 BC. Costs of £5000 were estimated. Due to adverse weather conditions the metal cylinder harboring the obelisk sank in the Bay of Biscay and the transport expenses eventually amounted to £20000, collected by a public campaign. Several seamen died during the rescue of the sunk vessel.

In dermatology Wilson is remembered for his textbook which went through five editions. Under his tutelage (together with Hutchinson) the translation of Hebra's textbook was made by the New Sydenham Society, five volumes. In 1855, his dermatologic atlas was published, a fine collection of excellent paintings masterly executed by William Bagg. Lichen ruber is the diseases which carries Wilson's name as an eponym and whereby he is immortalized in the discipline. He founded the Journal of Cutaneous Medicine and Diseases of the Skin, at the time the only competitor to the Giornale Italiano di Dermatologia, founded in 1866. Unfortunately, Wilson's journal ceased to appear after few years. Wilson was married but had no children. His wife outlived him by only two years. 200.000 Pounds were left to the Royal College of Surgeons, an enormous sum indeed. Hebra came to London, Wilson was in Austria and the dedication to Mme. Hebra of his scamp as much as to Hebra himself in his textbook is testimony of their close relation.

Before and after mid century up to his late years he was the leading figure in British dermatology, a good parallel to Hebra who predeceased him by four years. One of the most informative papers reminiscing Wilson is the one by R M Hadley (The Wix Prize Essay paper, 1958) which appeared in Medical History 1959; 3(3):215-247.

...now Hebra cuts the Gordian knot. Eczema he calls eczema, lepra, lepra; and that very common affection which we at present term lepra, he calls psoriasis. The change is simple, the reason for it important. We cannot do better than adopt it."

Fig. 2 Wilson in "Diseases of the Skin", 1863, complimenting Hebra.

\*\*\*

... "il n'y a pas d'histoire inactuelle"  
 (Louis-Jules Gernet 1882-1961)  
 French græcist and archæologist

## ERASMUS WILSON 1809 – 1884

(Sir) William James Erasmus Wilson was born on 25th November 1809 in London. His father was a fleet surgeon, native of Huntly in Aberdeenshire, his maternal grandfather, Erasmus Brandsdorff, came from Norway. Early education he had in Dartford, Grammar School, Kent, later was taught in the arts privately, and, still an adolescent, helped his father as an apprentice in general practice of medicine. Soon his father sent him to London to be with George Langstaff at the Crippled Dispensary for a while. Thereafter he went to Paris to attend lectures by the French celebrities of the day. Back in London he attended various private medical courses, eventually passing the Licentiate exams at the Society of Apothecaries and became member of the Royal College of Surgeons, age 22. Subsequently he perfected his abilities as an anatomy dissector and tutor of medical students, also assisting students in the Apothecaries Hall and preparing for the Royal College of Surgery exams. After a stint in Holland he opened a private anatomy school in London and by 1840 was appointed lecturer in anatomy and physiology, published a treatise on anatomy and became interested in skin diseases. His father was an acquaintance of Thomas Wakely, editor of the Lancet. Soon Erasmus was assistant editor of the Lancet, was also Consultant Surgeon at the Marylebone Infirmary.

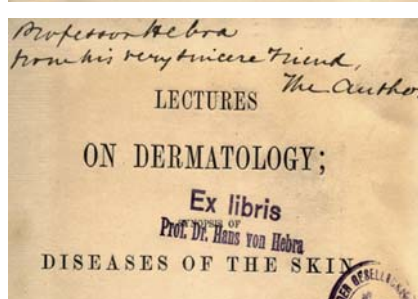


Fig. 3 "Scamper through the Spas of Europe", 1858. Fig. 4 textbook, 1871, © College of Physicians & Inst. Hist. Med., Vienna.



Fig. 5 Johanna Hebra, courtesy of the late Professor Hans Urbanski von Ostrymiecz, Hebra progeny.



Fig. 6 Wilson with Cleopatra's needle in "Punch", © Photos.com.

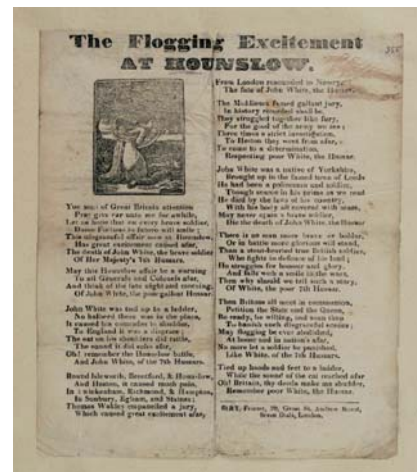


Fig. 7 Pamphlet to arouse public attention after the so called Hounslow flogging case in 1846.

On 15th June 1846 Private John White of the Queen's 7th Hussars received 150 lashes with the cat-o-nine tails for attacking his sergeant. No food or drink the day before, none on the day itself. He had to "walk" back to the barracks. He died one month after; his death was not related to the punishment according to the military coroner. Wilson engaged himself heavily in this matter and eventually a second autopsy did establish a causative relation to the brutality. The above pamphlet was printed to make the case aware to wider circles. Abolishment of this punishment was attempted, shortly after also formally achieved but enacted only in 1881.

In the Imperial Austrian Army, canes were used and 100 strokes were not uncommon, with similar results, presumably. This punishment was abolished in 1848, revised in 1855, definitely abolished in 1865 and as gossip has it, secretly carried on till WW I.

Wilson was Fellow of the Royal Society and was knighted in 1881. He always had a heart for the poor and the above incident shows, also for the underprivileged, who came into the maelstrom of authoritative systems.

**Karl Holubar, Wien**  
 em. Professor of Dermatology and of the History of Medicine, Medical University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria, karl.holubar@meduniwien.ac.at