The founders of dermatology: Robert Willan and Thomas Bateman

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Robert Willan (1757–1812) (Fig 1) has been chosen as dermatologist of the millennium for his achievement in being the first person to 'arrange diseases of the skin in a clear and intelligible manner, and to fix their nomenclature on a satisfactory and classical basis'. In doing this he was following the precedent set by Carolus Linnaeus (1707–1778), who had classified plants and the animal kingdom, and William Cullen (1710–1790), who had extended this classification to human disease. In this article we describe some important material, including dermatological drawings relating to Willan's work, which is held in the College Library.

Willan has been described as 'the individual who first brought order into what had been a clinical subject of extraordinary confusion and uncertainty...' Born and educated in the Sedbergh area of Yorkshire, he undertook his medical training in Edinburgh. Coming from a family of Quakers, he did not attend the Anglican Universities of Oxford or Cambridge and therefore was not eligible to progress beyond the status of Licentiate within the College.

After Edinburgh, Willan moved to London, on to Darlington and then returned to London, where he was appointed physician to the newly established Public Dispensary in Carey Street. (Some of the Dispensary's records from this period have been deposited with the Library.) Willan presented his classification of skin diseases to the Medical Society of London in 1795 and five years later the Society awarded him the prestigious Fothergillian Medal for his work. Willan's classification was made up of eight 'orders' and in 1798 he started to publish each of these under the title Description and treatment of cutaneous diseases. Only four parts had been published by the time of his death, the orders papulae, squamae, exanthemata and bullae. These were reissued in 1808 as the first volume of his book On cutaneous diseases.

One of Willan's students at Carey Street was Thomas Bateman LRCP (1778–1821), who succeeded him as the Dispensary's physician. After Willan became seriously ill and left London for Madeira in 1811, Bateman was recognised as the leading expert on skin diseases.

In 1813, Bateman published A practical synopsis of cutaneous diseases according to the arrangement of Dr

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Willan, which included all eight of Willan's orders, Bateman having added the orders *pustulae, vesiculae, tuberculæ* and *maculae* to those published by Willan. In his preface to the book, Bateman stated that the first half was an 'abridgement' of Willan's work but the second was derived from his personal experience and research as well as from his work with Willan. This publication has been described as "... the most influential textbook of dermatology of the 19th century." It became a standard work and was translated into French, German and Italian. Even the Russian Emperor requested a copy.

Another of Bateman's publications, *Delineations of cutaneous diseases* (1817), is particularly important because it contains descriptions of herpes *iris* (now known as erythema multiforme) and eczema due to external irritation. It also includes the first description of molluscum contagiosum with Bateman's own drawing (Fig 2).

Following Willan's death, Bateman acquired the originals of some of the drawings used in *On cutaneous diseases* (Fig 3). Bateman subsequently employed many of them in his *Delineations* (Fig 4). He noted in his preface:

In order, however, to fulfil the wishes of the profession by the completion, ... of the series of engravings begun by Dr Willan, I have purchased the copyright of that work, together with the drawings and engravings procured by him, and have now brought that series to a conclusion.

The Library has some important examples of Willan's and Bateman's work, including a collection of their watercolour drawings and Bateman's handwritten manuscript for the *Delineations*. The drawings were made between 1792 and 1814: 78 of them are bound together and more than 80 others are grouped in one of Willan's eight orders, for example, *bullæ* and *vesiculae*. Many of the drawings have never been published; some were produced by Bateman himself and are signed 'TB'. Handwritten notes by Willan and Bateman can be seen on several, eg 'To be embodied in one drawing'; 'The inflammation of the whole disease is much faded and must be heightened considerably'. Comparison of the originals with the printed editions shows how the engravers followed such instructions.

The manuscript of Bateman's *Delineations* was purchased by the College in 1906 and includes several pages headed 'General remarks on the source of the following eruptions' and ends with notes from Alibert's *Description des maladies de la peau*. Apart from these additions, the manuscript is exactly the same as the 1817 printed edition.

Besides the published editions of Willan and Bateman's main works, the Library holds printed books illustrative of their other interests. Amongst them are Willan's *On vaccine inoculation* (1806), and *Diseases of London* (1807), and his *Miscellaneous works*, which includes *An inquiry into the small-pox, measles and scarlet fever* (published by a relative, Dr Ashby Smith, in 1821). The Library also holds Bateman's *Reports on the diseases of London* (1819), and *A succinct account of the contagious fever* (1818, 2nd ed. 1820).

 Fellows and Members are welcome to consult any of the
above publications when they visit the Library. The RCP Library is open Monday-Friday, 9am to 5pm. Enquiries should be directed to extension 312 or 313 or email info@rcplondon.ac.uk.

References

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Fig 3. Rubeola sine catarrho. Plate XXI from Willan’s On cutaneous diseases.

Fig 4. Impetigo figurata. Plate XXXIV from Bateman’s Delineations of cutaneous diseases.