

NEWS AND VIEWS

The Father of Modern Dermatology in the Western World

Compiled by Chris Sails, ND

The father of modern dermatology, Robert Willan (born 12 November 1757 near Sedbergh, Yorkshire; died 7 April 1812, Madeira) is the founder of dermatology as a medical specialty. He received his MD in Edinburgh in 1780 and was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1809.

The son of a Quaker physician, whose tombstone is in Sedbergh churchyard, and nephew of physicians, his study of medicine was in the family tradition. He studied in Edinburgh where he obtained his doctorate in 1780. He subsequently went on an educational tour to London, and spent some time in Darlington, Durham county, where he had to represent his uncle, Trotter. In Durham he authored papers on balneology and the sources of the neighbourhood. In 1782 Willan went back to London where he held posts at Carey-Street Dispensary, and later at Finsbury Dispensary.

From 1781 Willan practised medicine in Darlington and then moved to London in 1783 as physician to the new Carey Street Public Dispensary, where he remained until 1803 teaching alongside Thomas Bateman. Willan and Bateman working together provided the world's first attempt to classify skin diseases from an anatomical standpoint.

Willan in 1785 became a licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians. In 1800 he succeeded J. A. Murray, who had died, as physician in the Fever Hospital.

His classification and description of cutaneous diseases was presented at the Medical Society of London in 1790 and earned him the second Fothergillian Gold medal from the

Society. Willan's classification, however, is embarrassingly similar to that of the Austrian physician Joseph Jakob Edler von Plenck (1738-1807). In his book *On Cutaneous Disease*, which was published in 1808, he classified and described many forms of skin disease and some of his terminology is still in use. Willan was the first to use the term wheal for skin lesions that occur in nettle rash. The term is now used for skin lesions in urticaria, serum disease and other allergic conditions. His system was later considerably expanded by his friend, colleague, and biographer, Thomas Bateman (1778-1821), who completed his work *On Cutaneous Diseases*. This book also contains original material by Bateman.

Besides his works on diseases of the skin Willan left epidemiological papers on the epidemics in London during the years 1796-1800, as well as on smallpox immunisation. His name is attached to two conditions: *Lupus vulgaris* is known as Willan's lupus, and *psoriasis vulgaris* as Willan's lepra. In 1790 Willan received the Fothergillian Medal from the Medical Society of London for his classification of skin diseases. In the same year he published an account entitled "A Remarkable Case of Abstinence", which detailed the case of a young Englishman who died in 1786 after fasting for 78 days - one of the earliest accounts of eating disorders in males.

In 1798 Willan described the occupational disease *psoriasis diffusa*, which affects the hands and arms of bakers, and in 1799 first described the exanthematous rash of childhood known as *erythema infectiosum*.

Willan's 1808 book, *On Cutaneous Diseases* is a landmark in the history of dermatology and in medical illustration and contains the first use of the word "lupus" to describe cutaneous tuberculosis.

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For a long time Willan had suffered from tuberculosis. Having exhausted his strengths he went on a convalescence tour, and succumbed to the disease on Madeira. His gravestone is well preserved in an old cemetery wall in Madeira and reads "Sacred to the memory of Robert Willan MD FRS of London who died on this Island 7 April 1812 aged 55 years."

A plaque in his honour was erected on 10 Bloomsbury Square, WC1, in 1949.

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