

Preface

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THIS VOLUME'S ORIGIN DATES TO MAY 5, 2008, when the American Osler Society held a special session in the Ether Dome of the Massachusetts General Hospital. Charles S. Bryan, co-editor of *The Quotable Osler*, spoke on “‘The Greatest Brahmin Among Them’—Osler’s Perspective on Oliver Wendell Holmes.” Perhaps with tongue in cheek, Bryan compared the revered William Osler with the comparatively forgotten Holmes on their respective medical, literary, and philosophical merits—and found in favor of Holmes on all accounts. In this telling, Holmes—from his roles as investigator of the contagiousness of puerperal fever and proponent of therapeutic rationalism, to those as savior of Old Ironsides, best-selling author on both sides of the Atlantic, and forerunner of depth psychology—remained, in Osler’s words, “the most successful combination which the world has ever seen, of the physician and man of letters.” Afterwards, Charles suggested to me that there ought to be a *Quotable Holmes*.

Mind swimming with Holmesian fish-related epigrams, I took the bait. Imparting a sense of urgency was the observation that the year 2009 marks the bicentennial of the births not only of Darwin and Lincoln but also of Holmes. Given Holmes’s roles as founding president of the Boston Medical Library and dean of Harvard Medical School (from 1847 to 1853), the Center for the History of Medicine at the Countway Library of Medicine (which represents the union of the Boston Medical Library and Harvard Medical Library) seemed the proper venue for drawing attention to, and further catalyzing, Holmes-related scholarship.

I write “drawing attention to,” for scholarship on Holmes as both medical and literary figure already enjoys something of a renaissance. John Harley Warner, in *Against the Spirit of System: The French Impulse in*

Nineteenth-Century American Medicine, places the entire nineteenth-century American turn to therapeutic skepticism—of which Holmes would be perhaps the most articulate, if not original, spokesman—in historical and conceptual perspective, depicting a generation of American physicians and their formative experiences in “system”-exploding Paris. William Dowling, in *Oliver Wendell Holmes in Paris: Medicine, Theology, and the Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table*, focuses attention upon Holmes specifically, tying Holmes’s therapeutic skepticism and belief in the healing power of nature (the *vis medicatrix naturae*) to a deeper *religio medici*, a belief in God’s immanence in nature, which would further characterize Holmes’s reception and articulation of Darwinism itself. Yet Holmes would perceive himself as an iconoclast—and indeed, society’s own productive evolution as critically dependent upon such iconoclasm—and Peter Gibian, in *Oliver Wendell Holmes and the Culture of Conversation*, generalizes Holmes’s skept-



Group photograph of members of the Boston Society for Medical Improvement (undated, but likely taken between 1846 and 1854). Holmes, seated second from the left, had delivered his lecture on “The Contagiousness of Puerperal Fever” before the BSMI in 1843. From the collection of the Boston Medical Library in the Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine.

ticism to his literary and cultural work, as evidenced most clearly in the Breakfast-Table series, which brought Holmes a massive readership on both sides of the Atlantic. And finally, Michael Weinstein, in *The Imaginative Prose of Oliver Wendell Holmes*, examines Holmes as a proto-psychologist and philosopher who wrestled with the medical and moral consequences of individual freedom and responsibility.

It's thus our overarching goal to offer a balanced perspective on Holmes the physician and Holmes the man of letters. After Charles Bryan's biographical sketch, John Haller, Amalie Kass, and Charles Rosenberg dissect Holmes's three most influential medical essays: "Homœopathy and its Kindred Delusions," "The Contagiousness of Puerperal Fever," and "Currents and Counter-Currents in Medical Science," the latter being the apotheosis of Holmes's therapeutic skepticism in which he famously declared that "if the whole materia medica, *as now used*, could be sunk to the bottom of the sea, it would be all the better for mankind, and all the worse for the fishes." Then, Peter Gibian and Michael Weinstein examine what seem at first the "non-medical" aspects of Holmes, namely, his role as literary figure, philosopher, and forerunner in the development of depth psychology.

We follow these essays with Charles Bryan's original suggestion: a *Quotable Holmes*, broken up into approximately 250 medical quotes and 250 non-medical quotes. Drawn from nearly all of Holmes's published prose and poetry, and some of his unpublished material, the quotes have been selected and organized to provide an overview of Holmes's work *in toto*, yet to reflect on their individual topics of concern and their frequent relevance to today's concerns, medical and otherwise. Holmes wrote that "it takes a generation or two to find out what are the passages in a great writer which are to become commonplaces in literature and conversation," and it is doubtful he foresaw that such terms coined by him as "anesthesia," "white plague," "Hub of the solar system," and Boston "Brahmin" would join the daily lexicons of later generations. Yet Holmes would also caution his readership, as he did in "The Contagiousness of Puerperal of Fever," that "this is a proper place to warn the student against skimming the prefaces and introductions of works for mottoes and embellishments to his thesis. He cannot learn anatomy by thrusting an exploring needle into his body. He will be very liable to misquote his author's meaning while he is picking off his outside sentences." And Peter Gibian has pointed out the very intention of Holmes to provoke and to stimulate; excerpts from the Breakfast-Table series, for example, must be read with the understanding that Holmes often uses his characters as devil's advocates rather than stand-ins for his own convictions. Thus, one reads many of these quotes in isolation at one's own risk, even if nodding, laughing, or scowling in the process. And certain quotes

have been purposely excluded, on account of insufficient context or irony-proofing. We follow the quotes with the unedited (though annotated) transcript of Holmes's previously unpublished 1879 lecture to the incoming first-year class at Harvard Medical School, a lecture that epitomizes Holmes's style and overall emphasis upon therapeutic skepticism.

We came to realize, and perhaps should have anticipated, that one really can't separate Holmes the physician from Holmes the man of letters. Holmes's importance as a medical writer stems from the literary, rhetorical quality of his writings and talks (as will be seen in Amalie Kass's essay, woe to the Philadelphia physician who characterized Holmes's account of puerperal fever as "the jejune and fizenless dreamings of sophomore writers"!), while he introduced his medical concerns into each of his Breakfast-Table books and "medicated" novels. And as recent scholarship has shown, Holmes infused his works with interrelated concerns about the healing power of nature and divine immanence, the validity of received dogma and the reliability of the marketplace, and predestination as manifested in hereditary tendencies on this earth rather than in the afterlife.

In sum, we've predicated this volume on the belief that there is a great deal to be gained, in the twenty-first century, from a close investigation of Holmes's contributions in the nineteenth century. Much remains to be said and written about Holmes—for example, about his positions on race, gender, hereditary predispositions, or comparative anatomy and evolution. One of our hoped-for outcomes of this volume is to stimulate such research on this multifaceted personality. Indeed, during his presentation in the Ether Dome, Charles Bryan asked the audience rhetorically: "Why are we meeting as the Osler Society rather than as the Holmes Society"? We view this volume as a potential entry point for such exploration.