



WILDER GRAVES PENFIELD 1891 - 1976

TRIBUTE TO DR. WILDER PENFIELD

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The recent death of Wilder Graves Penfield just a few months after his 85th birthday, marks the end of an era in Canadian neurology and the loss of a great protagonist for neurology, neurosurgery and humanism. To his work as a brain surgeon, he brought insight from physiology, microscopic anatomy and neurology. Throughout his long and productive life, Wilder Penfield was remarkably diversified in his interests and accomplishments. At the forefront of these was the foundation of the Montreal Neurological Institute where he directed scientific and surgical teams toward the solutions of many unanswered questions about the brain and particularly about the mechanism and treatment of epilepsy. Many will remember him also for his personal warmth, his insistence on excellence as a teacher and a leader and his physical stamina, whether at work or at play. His influence touched people in many walks of life, extending outside the special field of neurology and far beyond Canada. When Dr. Léon Binet, the Dean of Medicine at the University of Paris, presented Dr. Penfield for an honorary doctorate in 1954 he commented, "Dr. Penfield n'a pas seulement fondé une neurologie canadienne mais il a influencé par son oeuvre la neurologie mondiale".

Dr. Penfield was born in Spokane, Washington, obtained his B. Litt. in 1913 from Princeton and went from there on a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford. Two great medical teachers deeply influenced him at this stage of his career. From Sir William Osler he gained inspiration and the sympathetic approach. From the quiet genius of Sir Charles Sherrington, he learned to observe, document experimental findings and was made aware of the "undiscovered country of the brain in which the mystery of the mind of man might someday be explained".

He completed his M.D. in 1918 at Johns Hopkins, took further studies in England with Sherrington and at the National Hospital, where he came under the kindly tutelage of Sir Gordon Holmes.

In 1917, Wilder Penfield married Helen Katherine Kermott, an attractive young schoolteacher from Wisconsin. They were inseparable companions. Sir George Pickering has put it recently, "Wilder and his wife Helen were deeply in love with one another. What he did, she did. The pair was infinitely stronger than the sum of its components".

From 1921 to 1928, he was associated with surgery at Columbia University and the New York Neurological Institute. He made two important trips to Europe, what Osler would refer to as "brain dusting". In 1924, at Madrid with Cajal and Río-Hortega, he learned the metallic methods for demonstrating the glia and brought these back to New York where he and his new energetic partner, Dr. William Cone, launched a series of studies on tumors and glial scars. In 1928 he spent some months in the clinical laboratories of Professor Otfried Foerster. Here he came to realize that excision of cortical scars presented a means of treating focal epilepsy.

In the same year he came to McGill University with Dr. Cone, setting up a combined department of neurology and neurosurgery. The success of this led to the founding of the Montreal Neurological Institute, supported by the Rockefeller Foundation, matched by donations from the generous citizens of Montreal and by the City and Province as well. The Institute, combining hospital and research resources, quickly gained an international reputation and became a model for others throughout the world. The first neurosurgeon in China, in Norway and in India, to mention a few, were all former Fellows of the Neuro. Graduates in various disciplines came and went from many lands and not least of all the United States, where they began to fill the most distinguished professorial positions and provided the initial team which established the Neurological Section of the National Institutes of Health. One of Wilder Penfield's great qualities was the confidence he instilled in his associates to put their talents to use.

Penfield's studies became classics. The readers of this journal will be familiar with the continuing accumulation of papers on memory, speech, motor and sensory function, derived from accurate observation of the responses to stimulation and recordings from the human brain.

In 1960 Dr. Penfield retired to what he called his "second career". He traveled with Mrs. Penfield to China, bringing to our attention the medical situation and our need for better friendship and communication. He wrote two historical novels, and an excellent biography of Dr. Alan Gregg. He took on the first presidency, at the urging of Governor General and Madame Vanier, of the Vanier Institute of the Family. His most recent book, "The Mystery of the Mind", gave him an opportunity to summarize his research findings on human brain function and to throw out his courageous and provocative views in this controversial area. He was pleased to have completed an autobiography giving the story of his life up to the time of the foundation of the Institute. He was deeply satisfied at the inauguration of an Institute expansion which will be called the Penfield Pavilion.

Few medical men have been so honored as Wilder Penfield. He was awarded the Companion of the Order of Canada, the Order of Merit (which had been bestowed upon Sherrington, Adrian and Dale, his teachers and friends), the U.S. Medal of Freedom with Silver Palm and the Cross of Chevalier of the Legion d'honneur to mention only a few from the long list. Recognized by learned and medical societies of many countries, he was often referred to as Canada's most distinguished citizen.

"If it seems to neurologists today," Dr. Penfield wrote a few years ago, "that the present understanding of the brain and mind of man is hardly more than the beginning of science, it may be reassuring to recall that our task is the ultimate one. The problem of neurology is to understand man himself. We must analyze the means by which man, the creator of science, has done what he has done. This may well be the most difficult, and surely it is the most important, task of all".