

Sketches of Othistory

Part 2: Origins of Otology in the British Isles: Wilde and Toynbee

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Two men, both born in 1815, William Wilde in Dublin, and Joseph Toynbee in London, were determined to rescue aural surgery from the careless, unskilled hands of the quacks and charlatans who were its major practitioners in Britain and on the Continent. The efforts of the pair (fig. 1) were primarily responsible for initiating the rise of

otology to clinical and scientific respectability during the latter half of the 19th century. Wilde's contributions were mainly in the surgery of the ear, Toynbee's in the pathology of middle ear disease. Each published an influential treatise: Wilde his *Aural Surgery* (1853), and Toynbee his *Diseases of the Ear* (1860).

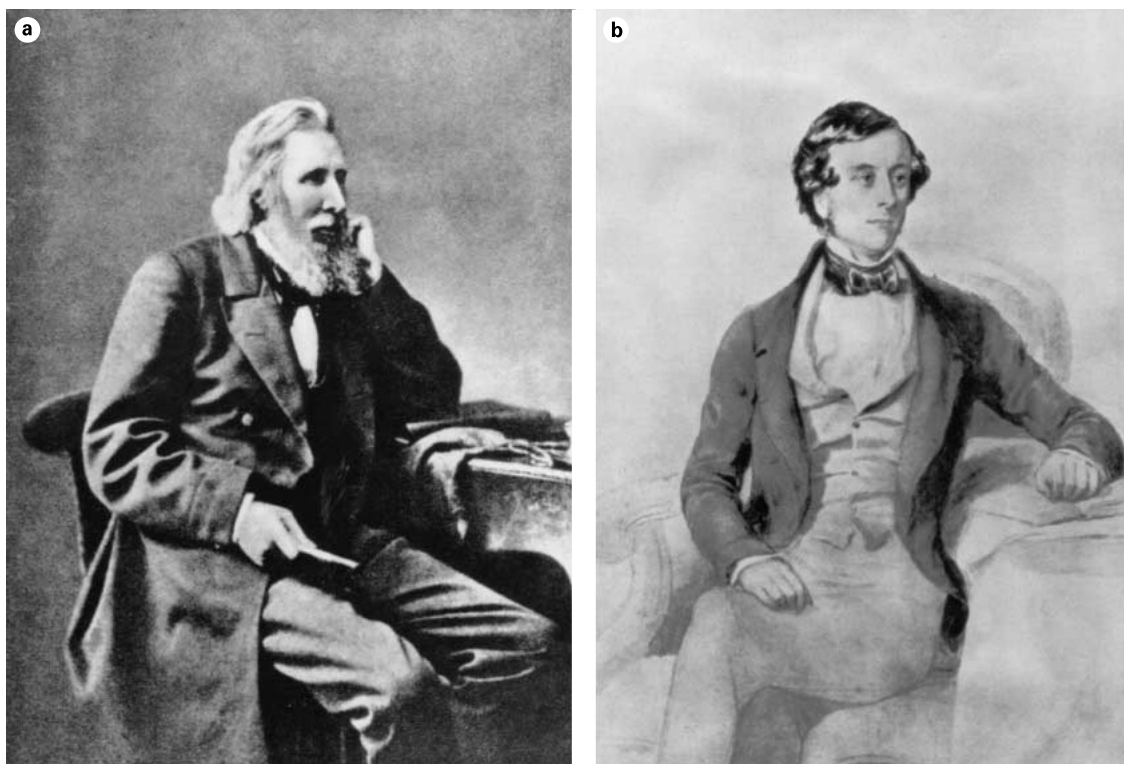


Fig. 1. Wilde and Toynbee. **a** 'Portrait of elderly William Wilde' [from Lambert, 1967, with permission]. **b** 'Portrait of Joseph Toynbee' [from Stevenson and Guthrie, 1949, with permission].

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Fig. 2. Dr. Steeven's Hospital. Drawing by Thomas Ryan [MacLoughlin, 1979, with permission].

The Career of Sir William Wilde, FRCS (I)

William Robert Wilde was born near Castlerea (County Roscommon), in the Irish province of Connaught, the son of Dr. Thomas Wilde and Emily Fynne of Ballymagibbon, County Mayo. After attending Park Street School in Dublin, he was apprenticed to A. Colles for training in surgery at Dr. Steevens' Hospital, where Dean Swift had been a trustee, and Swift's Stella had endowed a chaplaincy (fig. 2). Among his other teachers there were R.J. Graves and W. Stokes for anatomy and H. Marsh for medicine. At the age of 17 he was something of a hero in treating the victims of the cholera epidemic of 1832. He received his licentiate, LRCS (I), in 1837. In that year he also had the opportunity of attending a patient on a yacht trip to Egypt. There he was especially interested in trachoma, as well as in exploration of the pyramids and tombs. Returning to Dublin he practiced medicine and surgery, gave lectures, and prepared his popular travel book, *The Narrative of a Voyage to Madeira, etc.* (1839). His first child was born out of wedlock in 1838. Later, he was father to numerous other 'natural' offspring of various mothers.

In 1839, Wilde learned eye surgery in London with Tyrrell and Dalrymple at Moorfield. The following year he was in Vienna at the Allgemeines Krankenhaus, 'to improve his knowledge of ophthalmic and aural surgery.' There he adopted Gruber's speculum, which made possible a more satisfactory examination of the tympanic membrane and middle ear. Although he was impressed by

Rosas, Skoda, Rokitansky, and Jäger, he was appalled by puerperal fever death rates at the Maternité, despite the efforts of Semmelweis, and by the abuse of the insane at the Irrenanstalt. After visits to Munich and to Berlin, where he paid his respects to Alexander von Humboldt, he returned home to Dublin. In 1845, he published his by no means uncritical account, *Austria: Its Literary, Scientific, and Medical Institutions*.

Established as an eye and ear specialist, Wilde founded his own hospital, St. Mark's, where he carried on a stable and highly successful practice. He also lectured on the eye and ear at the Park Street School. He developed an aural snare and a Eustachian catheter, and treated his patients with a variety of pharmaceutical agents and clinical techniques, including mercury, silver nitrate, quinine, leeches and cupping. Because of his statistical bent, he was appointed Medical Census Commissioner. In his spare time, he carried on his archeological and antiquarian studies of Ireland.

In 1844, without examination, Wilde was made a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of Ireland. In the following year he became editor of the *Dublin Journal of Medical Science*, where he published articles on Irish medical history, and fought vigorously against quacks and patent medicines. The years 1845–1849 brought famine and pestilence to Ireland, with typhus, scurvy, dysentery, cholera, influenza, and trachoma, following a fatal epidemic among pigs and cattle, and the devastating potato blight. Wilde wrote articles on the medical aspects of these disasters for his *Dublin Journal*. Even among physicians

the mortality rate reached 24%. In 1849, despite the troubles he published his books, *The Closing Years of Dean Swift's Life*, and *The Beauties of the Boyne and Blackwater*.

In 1851, Wilde married the poetess and enthusiastic Irish Nationalist, Jane Francesca Elgee of Wexford, who was also known by her pen name, 'Speranza'. Their first son, William Charles Kingsbury Wills Wilde, was born in 1852, their second, Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde, in 1854. A daughter, Isola Francesca, was born in 1858, but died in 1866.

In Dublin, when the Wildes were seen in society, they must have seemed a most odd couple. Professor Tyrell of Trinity recalled for Frank Harris, 'that Sir William Wilde was a pithecooid person of extraordinary sensuality and cowardice (funking the witness box left him without a defender!) and that his wife was a high falutin' pretentious creature whose pride was as extravagant as her reputation founded on second-rate verse-making ... even when a young woman she used to keep her rooms in Merion Square in demi-darkness; she laid the paint on too thick for any ordinary light, and she gave herself besides all manner of airs.'

Wilde published his *Aural Surgery* in 1853 (fig. 3), with harsh criticisms of the German aurist Kramer and milder remarks about the contributions of Yearsley and others, but for Toynbee he expressed only approval. Among the subjects treated were mastoid surgery, including 'Wilde's incision', and middle ear infection as the source of brain abscess. At this time he was appointed Surgeon Oculist in Ordinary to the Queen in Ireland. In 1854, he compiled and published his medical report of some 600 pages on the famine years, with an analysis of the 1851 census, and a tabular history of Irish medicine since the earliest times.

The family moved in 1856 from Westland Row to an elegant residence at No. 1 Merrion Square. Wilde was prominent in preparing the Dublin meeting of the British Association, and led the members' visit to the Aran Islands in 1857. He finished part I of his monumental *Catalogue* for the Royal Academy, with complete descriptions of objects of archeological interest in its Museum. Later he gave a guided tour of the museum for the Prince of Wales, later Edward VII. Parts II and III of the *Catalogue* appeared in 1860 and 1862.

In his medical practice Wilde was assisted by his natural son Henry Wilson, who had been trained in Dublin, Vienna, Heidelberg, Berlin, and Paris. Wilson's presence enabled Wilde to visit Scandinavia, where he received an honorary degree from Uppsala, and was welcomed in

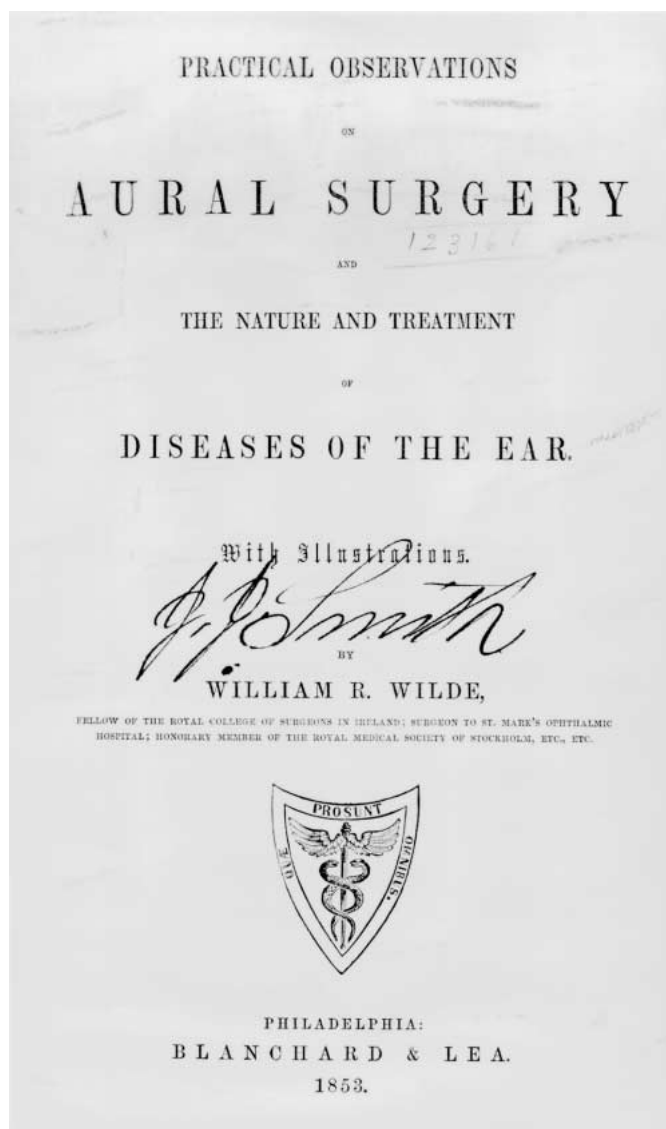


Fig. 3. Wilde W: *Aural Surgery and the Nature and Treatment of Diseases of the Ear*. Philadelphia, Blanchard & Lea, 1853, title page.

Stockholm by Retzius, among others. King Karl XV of Sweden conferred on him the Nordstjärneorden (Order of the North Star). His knighthood he received at Dublin Castle in 1864, from Lord Lieutenant Carlisle – not for his medical or literary contributions, but for his statistical work with the Irish census.

Speranza became increasingly eccentric, and Wilde continued his pursuit of other women. His downfall began with attacks in doggerel by a former mistress, Mary Travers, who had come to him 10 years earlier as a patient at the age of 19. When discarded, she claimed that he had chloroformed and raped her. When she later sued for

libel, Wilde became embroiled in a bitter and widely publicized courtroom battle that had a late 20th century, quasi-American flavor. In the end, Mary got only one farthing in damages. Wilde did not testify, but he had to pay £ 2,000 in court costs, and was disgraced for life.

Following the trial and scandal, Wilde went into obvious decline. He turned over his medical practice to Henry Wilson, who was interested in eyes, but not in ears. He continued his work in archeology, but withdrew for a time to Moytura, near Cong, in the highlands of Connemara. Some years earlier he had built a house there on property that had belonged to his aunt, Miss Fynne.

After Sir William completed his Report on the 1871 census and volume IV of his *Catalogue*, he worked on his *History of Irish Medicine*, *Irish Fairy Lore*, and a *Memoir of Gabriel Beranger*, but he did not finish them. He died in the spring of 1876. Speranza stayed for a time in Dublin, then moved to London to be near her sons. Her Wednesday and Saturday receptions were attended by famous people, mainly for their son Oscar's sake. She died after he was sent to prison.

Wilde's sons had both attended Portora School and Trinity College, Dublin. Willie took a degree in law, but later forsook the Irish bar and lived in London as a journalist. Oscar won prizes for classics and poetry, both at Trinity College, Dublin, and at Magdalen College, Oxford, including the all-important Newdigate prize. He made a lecture tour of America, where on arrival he got through customs with his modest admission, 'I have nothing to declare except my genius.' In London society, he established his reputation as a wit, an aesthete, and a playwright. He married and had two sons, but his long, disastrous love affair with Lord Alfred Douglas, son of the Marquess of Queensberry, led to his famous trial and his 2-year sentence to Reading gaol, followed by self-imposed exile to the Continent. There Oscar Wilde did no work, caged money from friends, drank absinthe, and died in 1900 in Paris of meningitis, as a sequel of otitis media.

The Career of Joseph Toynbee, FRCS, FRS

Joseph Toynbee, descended from an old Lincolnshire family, was born in that county in 1815, on his father's large farm. After several years of private tutoring, he attended King's Lynn Grammar School. At 17, he was apprenticed to Mr. William Wade of the Westminster General Dispensary in Soho. At the same time, he became an eager student of anatomy under Mr. Dermott, and showed skill in making fine dissections. During further

studies at St. George's and University College hospitals he became particularly interested in the ear. His letters to *The Lancet* on aural anatomy and physiology, signed J.T., first appeared in the mid-1830s. They represented the start of his campaign to rescue aural surgery from the quacks that infested the field, which was almost unanimously avoided by legitimate practitioners of surgery.

After becoming a member of the Royal College of Surgeons in 1838, Toynbee was appointed an assistant curator of its museum, under the famous zoologist Richard Owen. In that same year he was elected a surgeon of the St. James and St. George's Dispensary. He was made FRCS in 1842, among the very first group chosen after the College obtained its charter (fig. 4).

Appalled at how little was known about the functioning of the ear and the nature of its afflictions, Toynbee devoted himself to dissection of all the temporal bones he could obtain, whether diseased or normal, so long as the medical histories were known. Despite a very large practice, over two decades he managed to dissect some 2,000 ears, many of them from patients of the Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb, whom he himself had examined. Colleagues supplied others, with notes about their cases. In 1860, he published his book, *Diseases of the Ear*. In time, his papers, appearing in the *Medico-Surgical Transactions* and elsewhere, came to number about 60. He published a descriptive catalogue of the specimens in his own museum, illustrating diseases of the ear, which appeared in 1857.

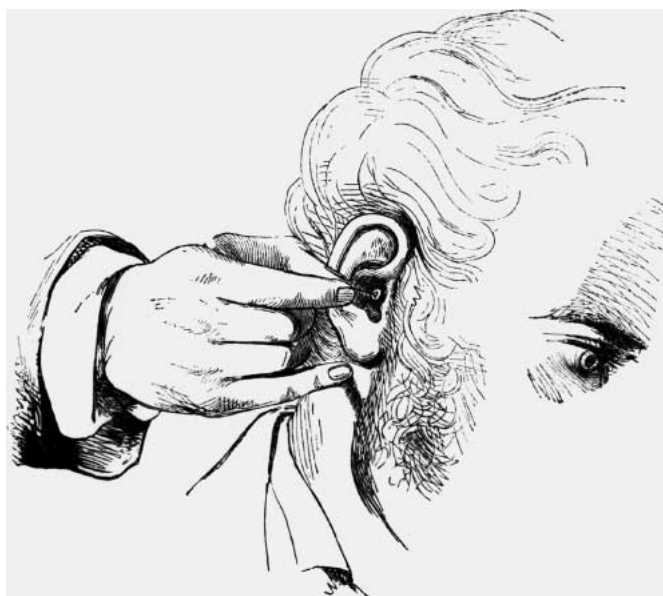
When St. Mary's Hospital was established in Paddington, Toynbee was elected as aural surgeon and lecturer on ear diseases. His course of clinical lectures was published in 1855 and 1866. Being much interested in the condition of the retarded and the deaf and dumb, he devised methods of teaching some of the latter group who had residual hearing to speak. He studied the function of the Eustachian tube and the structure of the tympanic membrane, for which he devised an artificial replacement to be used when it had been severely damaged (fig. 5). In many of his dissections of deaf ears, he observed ankylosis of the stapes.

In contrast to Wilde, Toynbee seems to have been the soul of domestic virtue and personal integrity. Outside the clinic he devoted himself to medical philanthropy, and was especially concerned with public health and welfare, and with making better housing available to London's poor, and provision for proper ventilation. He also promoted their education and recreation, and the formation of museums of natural history in local communities for their further enlightenment.

Fig. 4. The Royal College of Surgeons of England. Souvenir of the Centenary of the Royal College of Surgeons of England 1800–1900. London, Ballantyne, Hanson & Co, 1900, frontispiece. Copyright: The Royal College of Surgeons of England. Reproduced with permission.



Fig. 5. Surgeon introducing the artificial membrana tympani [from Toynbee J: *The Diseases of the Ear: Their Nature, Diagnosis, and Treatment*. Philadelphia, Blanchard & Lea, 1865, p 194].



Tragically enough, Toynbee's zeal for clinical experimentation went too far, and brought him an untimely death. Seeking to help his patients by devising a treatment to allay their tinnitus, he conceived the idea of introducing a mixture of chloroform and prussic acid into the tympanum by means of the Valsalva maneuver. When he made the first trial, with himself as subject and no one else

in attendance, his servant found him dead on his sofa, with his notebook and two bottles beside him, one of chloroform, the other of HCN. Either or both must have killed him.

Toynbee's death in 1866 was mourned throughout the scientific and medical world. His practice was continued by his associate James Hinton, a skilled surgeon who

edited and completed the second edition of *Diseases of the Ear*, but later became even more esteemed as a philosopher than as a medical man. Toynbee left behind him a wife and 9 children, one of whom was Arnold Toynbee (1852–1883), the renowned social reformer, who contin-

ued and greatly enhanced his father's work for the poor in the East End of London. After the end of his all-too-brief life, the latter was said to have died from overwork. The late Professor Toynbee (1889–1975), the theoretician of history, was Arnold's nephew.

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