

Illustrations from the Wellcome Institute Library

Seeking Lister in the Wellcome Collections

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The figure of Joseph Lister (1827–1912), which bestrides the late Victorian medical world like a colossus, is curiously elusive in the collections of the Wellcome Institute Library. In contrast to his near contemporary, Florence Nightingale (1820–1910), over three hundred of whose letters had been acquired by the time of Sir Henry Wellcome's death (and many more since), Lister's was a sporadic and fleeting presence in the documentary collections until quite recent times. In 1981, the acquisition by the Wellcome Library of the most important surviving collection of Lister family papers still in private hands promised to shed new light on the personal life of England's greatest surgeon. But there remained unexplained gaps in the record, and the reluctance of Lister to emerge fully from the archival shadows merits exploration.

In his will (26 June 1908), Lister requested that two of his trustees, his nephews Rickman John Godlee and Arthur Hugh Lister, "arrange [his] scientific manuscripts and sketches, destroying or otherwise disposing of such as are of no permanent scientific value or interest", and bequeathed the "manuscripts and sketches when so arranged to the Royal College of Surgeons of England". His diplomas and medals were left to Edinburgh University, with permission to destroy them if so desired. No particular provision was made for his non-scientific papers, his correspondence, his library or any other of his personal or family effects. A codicil dated 7 December 1909, after the death of his brother and senior trustee, Arthur, authorized the three surviving trustees to dispose of the "personal effects" not specified in the will, taking into account what they believed to be Lister's wishes.¹

The insouciance of these instruments is belied by the much more precise instructions that Lister gave his trustees some time before Arthur Lister's death in July 1908. In a document drawn up by his lawyers, presumably in conjunction with the will, Lister arranged for the distribution of personal and family effects to a wide circle of relatives, professional colleagues and institutions.² Amongst these, his medical books, after selection by his nephews, were to go to the Medical Society of London; the "record of observations" by his father, Joseph Jackson Lister (1786–1869), that "led to the discovery of the Aplanatic Foci", and his father's microscopic drawings, were awarded to the Royal

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¹ Contemporary copies of the will and codicil, WMS 6979/18/1–2.

² 'Directions as to disposal of Lord Lister's personal effects', WMS 6979/19.

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Microscopical Society. Finally, Lister desired (in the turgid legalese of his solicitors) “that all private letters that shall have been in my possession at the time of my decease, both such as were written to or by myself or any other, including the collection left by my father, and also any journals or writings not of a scientific character, may be destroyed unread”. Lister subsequently continued to issue directions to his trustees concerning the disposal of his estate, writing for instance in November 1909 to his nephew Theodore Godlee, following publication of his *Collected papers*, to advise that “four bulky folio volumes of notes (vols. 1 to 4)”, which were “of only temporary interest . . . may be destroyed; as may also the blocks of wood cuts accompanying them which have been reproduced by the ‘Clarendon Press’ in publishing my ‘Collected Papers’”.³

Lister clearly regarded the *Collected papers* as his monument. The only collection of manuscripts in his hands that he seemed especially keen to preserve were his father’s microscopical records, a prized possession that Lister thought worthy of publication.⁴ He could evidently not conceive that posterity would have any legitimate interest in his own or his father’s private or family life. His trustees, however, were less sure. Firstly there was the difficulty of isolating the scientific content of his and his father’s papers.⁵ Secondly, as Rickman Godlee later remarked, “the world had a right to know something of the inner life of one who achieved so much on its behalf”.⁶ Lister’s stated wish that public access to his private life be denied was never seriously entertained by his trustees after his death; they would be the guardians of his reputation, to judge just how much daylight to admit. A H Lister wrote to Godlee soon after Lister’s death: “it is a question to me how far [his] quite clearly expressed desire should be literally obeyed. I do not feel that it should preclude the writing of a Life, but it would seem to me that such a wish would exclude the kind of intimate personal analysis which some biographers deal in”.⁷

Following Lister’s death (10 February 1912), his trustees seem to have carried out his instructions scrupulously, with one major exception. A selection of mainly scientific manuscripts was donated to the Royal College of Surgeons of England.⁸ The medals and diplomas went to Edinburgh, as specified in the will.⁹ Most of Lister’s medical books, about 2,500 out of a total of perhaps 3,000 titles in his possession at death, were presented to the Medical Society of London, the residue being sold on 15 February 1913 by the dealer Henry Sotheran.¹⁰ Joseph Jackson Lister’s microscopical papers were given to the

³ Copy-letter, 20 November 1909, *ibid.*

⁴ See Lister’s article on his father in the *Dictionary of national biography*, London, Smith, Elder, 1893, vol. 33, p. 347.

⁵ One trustee noted against the instruction to destroy all private letters in the directions for disposal of personal effects that the collection of letters to Joseph Jackson Lister had “a scientific interest certainly or almost certainly”, WMS 6979/19.

⁶ R J Godlee, *Lord Lister*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 3rd ed., 1924, p. [viii].

⁷ Letter of 20 February 1912, WMS 6987/3.

⁸ The contents of the Lister collection at the RCS are briefly summarized in the unpublished MAMS (Medical Archives and Manuscripts Survey) report

on the Library of the Royal College of Surgeons, available in the Wellcome Institute Library.

⁹ Most of the Lister memorabilia are now displayed in the Old College of Edinburgh University.

¹⁰ Owen H and Sarah D Wangenstein, ‘Lister, his books, and evolution of his antiseptic wound practices’, *Bull. Hist. Med.*, 1974, 48: 100–28. The Sotheran sale comprised not only printed books, but also Joseph Jackson Lister’s manuscript account books and ledgers, 1807–69, which were purchased by Mr Thomas H Court of Harrow. Four of these were bought from Court by Wellcome in 1919, and the remaining three loaned to Wellcome for the 1927 exhibition. They were eventually returned to Court in 1945.

Royal Microscopical Society.¹¹ Only in respect of Lister's private and family correspondence and papers were his instructions flouted, for these were not destroyed but retained by Godlee for use in compiling Lister's biography.

Godlee's biography of his uncle was published in 1917. The preface makes clear that he had access to private letters and papers, including Lister's correspondence with his father. He had however been restricted in his use of this material, "in which thoughts and reflections far too private for publication are often closely interwoven with the story of [Lister's] discoveries", by his uncle's wish that any biography be "a simple record of what he had done for science and surgery".¹² Lister's direction to destroy his private correspondence and papers unread is naturally not mentioned, and appears to have been immediately forgotten in the climate of Listerian idolatry already prevailing before 1912. When the Lister centenary exhibition was mounted in 1927 at the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum, the exhibits included photographs illustrating Lister's family life, childhood letters and other personalia loaned or donated by relatives, which by no definition could have been deemed of scientific interest.¹³

Until preparations for the exhibition were put in hand, Wellcome had acquired few Lister relics. Three account books and a ledger of Lister's father (MSS 6178-6181) had been purchased in 1919 from a private collector. A few autograph letters had been acquired. Otherwise Wellcome's Lister memorabilia were assembled in 1926-27 for the centenary, mainly from gifts by Godlee's widow. She presented three early letters from Lister's father (MS 6182), two essays, 1843, 1849 (MS 3209), notes of lectures by James Syme at Edinburgh, 1854-55 (MS 6183), class examination charts from Glasgow, 1861-63 (MS 6184), and two holiday diaries, 1892-94 (MSS 3302-3303).¹⁴ There were also a handful of formal congratulatory letters and patents of nobility, acquired from other sources (MSS 6185, 6187-6189). Three letters from Lister to his brother Arthur, acquired in 1927 from Arthur Lister's daughters (MS 6191), do not seem to have been exhibited; nor was a childhood sketchbook, dating from 1831-34 (MS 3298), the immediate provenance of which is unknown. Several Lister family heirlooms loaned to the Museum for the centenary exhibition were subsequently returned, notably sketchbooks and a collection of family portrait silhouettes by J J Lister.¹⁵

With only minor additions, this was the extent of Lister personal and family documentation in the Wellcome collections until 1968. The manuscript collection of the Medical Society of London, acquired in that year, included a volume of notes of physiological lectures by William Sharpey, taken by Lister at University College London

¹¹ See the list given by Brian Bracegirdle in 'Famous microscopists: Joseph Jackson Lister, 1786-1869', *Proc. R. Microscopical Soc.*, Sept. 1987, 22/5, 273-97. The papers are now among that Society's collections in the Museum of the History of Science, Oxford.

¹² Godlee, *op. cit.*, note 6 above, p. [viii].

¹³ See *Lister centenary exhibition at the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum*, handbook, London, 1927.

¹⁴ The details of provenance given by S A J Moorat in his descriptions of Lister items in

Catalogue of Western Manuscripts on medicine and science in the Wellcome Historical Medical Library, London, Wellcome Institute of the History of Medicine, vol. 2, 1973, are untrustworthy, since he relied on the published exhibition handbook, which is riddled with errors.

¹⁵ One of the sketchbooks, described as a "note-book, small red, containing sketches, etc.", may be WMS 6962, later presented by Mrs Dowrick, who also seems to have acquired most of the silhouettes, now WMS 6964/1-11. Cf. *Lister centenary exhibition*, *op. cit.*, note 13 above, pp. 85, 138.

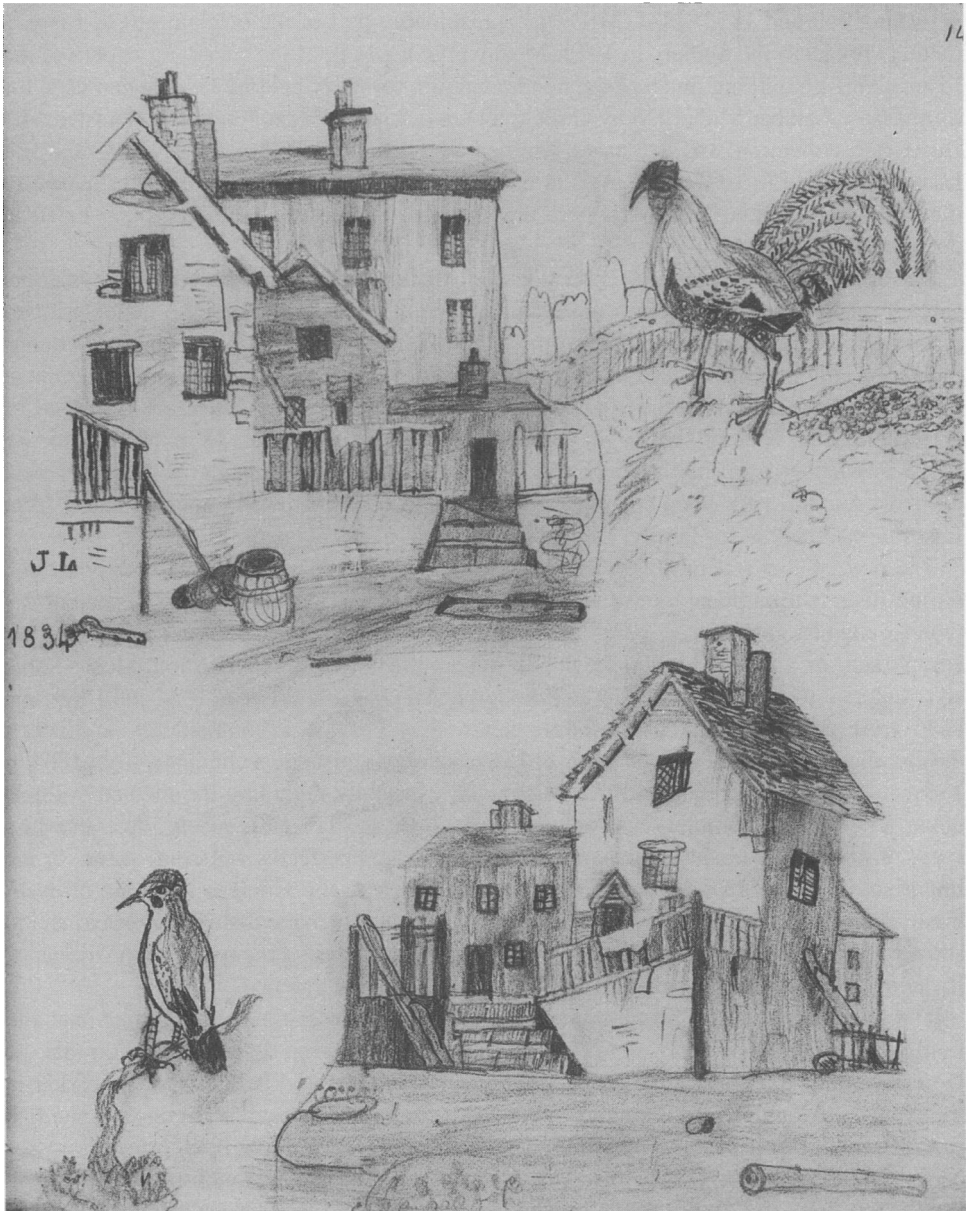


Figure 1: Page 14 of Joseph Lister's sketchbook for 1831–4. Pencil sketch of birds and buildings, WMS 3298. (Wellcome Institute Library, London.)

between 1849 and 1852 (MSL MS 80),¹⁶ presumably part of the original gift of Lister's medical books to the Society in 1912. Meanwhile, the bulk of the surviving papers of the Lister family, including much of the documentation formerly held by Godlee and used for *Lord Lister*, had been inherited by Gulielma Dowrick, a granddaughter of A H Lister. Mrs Dowrick's collection was extensively mined by Richard B Fisher for his biography of Lister, published in 1977.¹⁷ Four years later, Mrs Dowrick presented her Lister papers to the Wellcome Institute Library, where they were in due course catalogued and listed in detail as MSS 6961-6989.

The accession of the Dowrick collection immediately transformed the Wellcome Institute Library's Lister holdings from a mere assemblage of pious relics into the major primary resource for biographical research on the Lister family, particularly its two most famous members, although the collection of the Royal College of Surgeons remained pre-eminent for the study of Lister's scientific contribution. The bulk of the collection consisted of correspondence, notably sixty-eight letters to Lister from his father, 1838–69 (MS 6965), thirty-five letters from his brothers and sisters, 1833–77, including the so-called 'Upton journals' sent to Lister when boarding at Hitchin (MS 6966), and some seventy letters from Lister to members of his family, 1833–1908 (MSS 6967-6969 *passim*).

There were also several letters from Agnes Lister to her sisters-in-law, mainly written during Lister's triumphant tour of Germany in 1875 (MS 6972), and correspondence of R J Godlee, mainly about Lister, 1878–1927 (MSS 6984-6985 *passim*, 6987). The letters from Joseph Jackson Lister to his son are the outstanding feature of this collection. Most—some sixty letters—were written to Lister in Edinburgh and Glasgow between 1854 and 1869, and apart from conveying the usual family news, they provide a commentary on Lister's developing career. In the earliest years of Lister's use of antiseptic techniques, from 1864 to 1869, his father was a major source of support, especially regarding the medico-political arena. The style of commonsense advice in which he specialized is nicely illustrated in a letter of 1868: "I probably understand the matter but imperfectly, but what seems to me important is . . . not to defend the Germ Theory, which might be left to take care of itself, but to describe distinctly the *Treatment* adopted by thee (which the theory *suggested*) and to show by *Cases* the remarkable results of thy treatment with its progressive improvements, in *contrast to* those results which follow the *usual* course of practice".¹⁸

The satisfaction in thus bringing together the greater part of the surviving personal and family correspondence and papers of Lord Lister was tempered by the realization that the Dowrick collection constituted only a proportion of the material held by Godlee earlier in the century. Although Mrs Dowrick seems to have passed over everything that she had recently made available to Richard Fisher, there appeared to have been grievous losses earlier in the collection's history. In particular, the series of letters from Lister to his father, used extensively if with discretion by Godlee, had vanished, leaving only Joseph Jackson Lister's side of the correspondence, and that with many gaps. Some letters from Lister to other family members, notably his brother Arthur and brother-in-law Rickman Godlee

¹⁶ See Warren R Dawson, *Manuscripta medica. A descriptive catalogue of the manuscripts in the library of the Medical Society of London*, London, John Bale, Sons and Danielsson Ltd, 1932, pp. 87–8.

¹⁷ Richard B Fisher, *Joseph Lister, 1827–1912*, London, Macdonald and Jane's, 1977. *Medical*

History's reviewer asked rather wearily whether "yet another" biography was really necessary, a somewhat unfair comment since Fisher's was the first since Godlee's to be founded on unpublished sources (*Med. Hist.*, 1978, 22: 117).

¹⁸ Letter of 20 March 1868, WMS 6965/59.

(1804–1871), survived, but only fragments of the original whole. Most of the surviving Lister autographs were letters of his youth or old age. Other gaps that can be readily identified include Lister's school essays, his correspondence and travel diaries when a medical student between 1848 and 1853, and Lady Lister's diary for 1891, a page of which was reproduced in facsimile in *Lord Lister*.¹⁹ Far from placing the mature Lister centre-stage, the Dowrick papers provided a wealth of oblique insights and secondhand views, a picture of Lister as reflected in the words of his family rather than in his own.

The wholesale disappearance of Lister's own letters from the family archive suggests something more than merely the random attritional loss suffered by most collections of papers in private hands. The possibility that Godlee, in a tardy access of conscience, destroyed his uncle's letters is highly unlikely, after having quoted from them extensively in print. Nor does it seem much more likely that they were sold to autograph dealers or collectors; although Lister autographs have always been in demand, the writer is unaware of any instance of a Lister family letter appearing on the open market. It remains possible that the missing letters and papers survive in the hands of unknown Lister relatives, but difficult in such circumstances to account for the several dozen Lister autographs left behind in the family archive. Whatever the fate of the absent material, Godlee's biography will probably remain the only account of Lister's life and work to be based on a full range of the subject's letters and papers.

The absence of Lister's student correspondence, while regrettable, is hardly critical; Godlee noted that Lister's letters at the time were alternatively the "merest scraps" or "rather stilted and the matter not very interesting".²⁰ The loss of Lister's letters to his father from Edinburgh and Glasgow between 1853 and 1869 is by contrast a disaster. It is evident from the biography that they were both frequent and often substantial, and although Godlee quotes from them at some length, much remains hidden. Lister's relationship with his father was close and somewhat exclusive. From a relatively early age communication between the two tended to marginalize other members of the family.²¹ After Joseph Jackson Lister's death in 1869, his younger brother Arthur became Lister's closest confidant, apart from his wife Agnes. There seems to be no surviving correspondence with the latter, since the Listers were rarely apart for any length of time. There is barely a handful of letters by Lister to correspondents outside his family dating from before 1870 in the Wellcome collections, and probably very few elsewhere.²² The disappearance of almost all his letters to his father is therefore fundamentally damaging.

There is one minor source for Lister's Glasgow years (1860–69) in the Western Manuscripts collection that was not available to either Godlee or Fisher. These are some thirty-five letters to his family from Marcus Beck (1843–1893), later professor of surgery at University College London, mainly written between 1860 and 1863 when he was a medical student at Glasgow and living in Lister's house (MS 5142). They were presented to the

¹⁹ See Godlee, *op. cit.*, note 6 above, pp. 13, 26 and 512.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 20, 26.

²¹ "During this time [as a medical student] he used to be extremely engrossed with his studies and often his conversation was addressed to my father rather than to us", reminiscences of Jane Harrison, Lister's younger sister, [1910], in WMS 6985/6. See also Thomas Hodgkin's recollections, 1911, of Lister

"dwelling apart" from others, WMS 6985/11.

²² For an exception to this rule, see C Robert Rudolf, *Eight letters of Joseph (Lord) Lister to William Sharpey*, Bristol, John Wright and Sons Ltd, 1933. These letters are now in the Library of the Royal College of Surgeons; dating from 1857 to 1864, they form part of a once larger series from which WMS 6199/1 (letter from Lister to Sharpey of 31 March 1859) is another stray survivor.

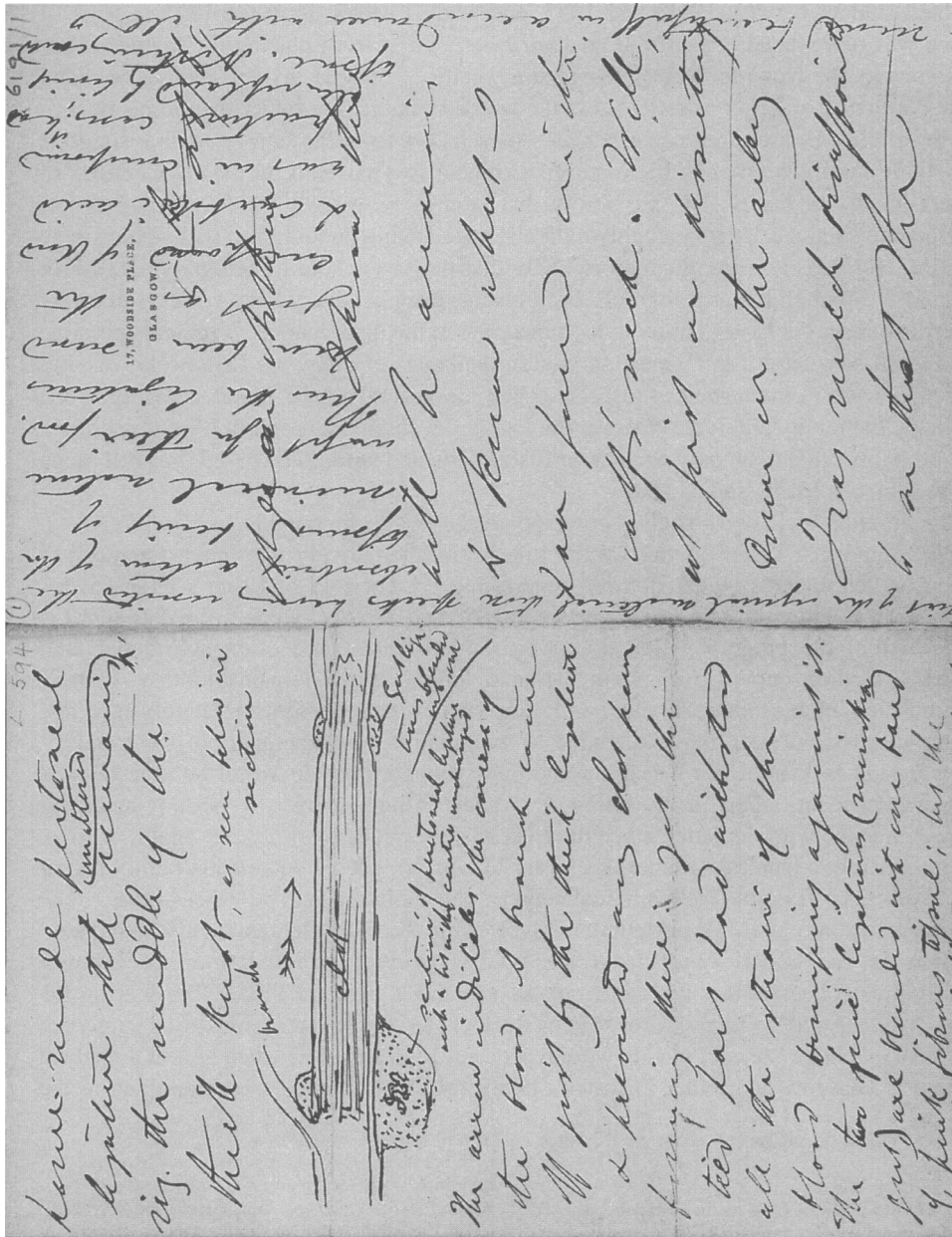


Figure 2: Letter (dated 1869) from Joseph Lister to his brother Arthur (d. 1908) describing the result of an experiment with catgut ligatures applied to the artery of a calf, WMS 6191/1. (Wellcome Institute Library, London.)

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Wellcome Institute Library by Mrs Ashworth Underwood in 1980. The letters are substantial and lively, and provide a sidelight on Lister's work and social life, with some vivid first-hand accounts of operations in the Infirmary and elsewhere. They also open a window onto the life of a Victorian medical student, torn between the competing claims of study and cricket. From the first, Beck, who was Lister's second cousin, was an enthusiastic and uncritical admirer, liable to damn Lister's rivals in characteristically adolescent terms; James Morton, surgeon at the Infirmary and a later sceptic about antiseptics, was dismissed as a butcher: "the boy he performed on died in 4 days of peritonitis from the effects of his ignorance and bad surgery", Beck complained; "I would have the beggar scragged".²³ Beck returned to visit his cousin after graduating, by which time Lister's reputation was beginning to spread worldwide. He noted the arrival in Glasgow of the Danish Professor Saxtorph and two American surgeons in 1868, who were invited to dine: "all men who come and show a reasonable interest in carbolic acid are immediately invited to dinner. Lister tries to convince them by means of wine and food. Anyone who wants to save his hotel dinner has nothing to do but come and appear greatly interested and ten to one he gets fed".²⁴

There remain two further significant primary sources in the Wellcome Library for the life of Lister, both of which were either unknown to or little used by his biographers; these are lecture notes by his students, and letters by Lister acquired among recent archival accessions, notably the records of the Lister Institute of Preventive Medicine in 1985 and the papers of Sir Thomas Barlow in 1991.²⁵ The lecture notes by various students date from 1871 to 1877, when Lister was professor of clinical surgery at Edinburgh (MSS 3300-3302, 5014, 5018, 5356-5358). The importance of Lister's lectures is discussed by Godlee in an appendix to his biography, in which he describes a set taken by W S Anderson in 1868-69.²⁶ This set did not find its way into the Dowrick collection, nor apparently was it presented by Godlee to the Royal College of Surgeons, although there are other sets there covering the years 1863 to 1873. The current whereabouts of the Anderson lecture notes is unknown. Other Lister lecture notes are in the library of King's College London.²⁷ The Lister autograph letters in the Lister Institute archive date from 1889 onwards and are largely connected with the foundation and administration of that institution. The Lister letters in the Barlow papers are occasionally personally revealing—Barlow was Lister's physician for a time—but generally unremarkable.

In view of the wide dispersal of the Wellcome Library's Lister-related holdings, a union guide to all such material in the Western Manuscripts collections, with indications of related sources in other places, has been compiled and can be consulted in the Library reading room (Western Manuscripts handlist no. 25). Despite the losses outlined above, the Lister papers and related materials in the Wellcome Library are one of the two most important such collections in existence, rivalled only by that of the Royal College of Surgeons, and provide one of the principal foundations for any re-evaluation of Lister's life and work.

²³ Letter of 15 June 1862, WMS 5142/19.

²⁴ Letter of 15 July 1868, WMS 5142/33.

²⁵ See Lesley Hall and Neil Morgan, 'The archive of the Lister Institute of Preventive Medicine', *Med. Hist.*, 1986, 30: 212-15, and Richard K Aspin, 'The papers of Sir Thomas Barlow, Bt, KCVO, FRS, PRCP (1845-1945)', *ibid.*, 1993, 37: 333-40.

²⁶ Godlee, *op. cit.*, note 6 above, pp. 660-6.

²⁷ See 'Guide to sources for the study of the history of science and medicine at King's College London', unpublished list available from the College archivist.