From Osler’s Library to the Osler Library of the History of Medicine, McGill University, Montreal: An Overview

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Abstract. The Osler Library of the History of Medicine was opened in 1929 at McGill University, Montreal, Canada. Sir William Osler (1849-1919), arguably McGill’s and Canada’s most famous doctor at the time, had bequeathed his magnificent library of almost 8,000 historical works in medicine and, to a lesser extent, science and literature to the university. Under the 30-year reign of its first librarian, Dr. W. W. Francis, the Osler Library became famous for its rare books and for its connection with Sir William. Since the 1950s, however, the library has pursued an active collection development policy for both primary and secondary material that has taken it far beyond Osler’s original gift. The library has grown in both the size and scope of its holdings and the services it offers to scholars and students of the history of medicine. These have made the Osler Library a major resource centre for studies in the history of the health sciences. This article looks at the Osler Library today in the hopes of making the range of its collections and services better known to the Canadian and international communities.

Résumé. La bibliothèque d’histoire de la médecine Osler a ouvert ses portes en 1929 au l’université McGill, Montréal, Canada. Sir William Osler (1849-1919), certainement le docteur le plus connu de l’époque, a legué a l’université sa magnifique collection de près de huit cents ouvrages historiques principalement en
médecine, et moindrement en sciences et en littérature. Durant les trente années du règne de son premier bibliothécaire, Dr. W.W. Francis, la bibliothèque Osler a été reconnue pour ses livres rares et sa relation avec son donateur, Sir William Osler. Depuis les années 1950, la bibliothèque a appliqué une politique active de développement de la collection tant pour les matériaux primaires que secondaires, permettant une augmentation considérable du don initial d’Osler. La bibliothèque a évolué tant du point de vue de sa taille que des thématiques de ses acquisitions et des services qu’elle offre aux étudiants et aux chercheurs universitaires en histoire de la médecine. Ces développements ont fait de la bibliothèque Osler un centre d’études en histoire des sciences de la santé des plus reconnus. Le présent article cherche à faire connaître au public canadien et international l’étendue des collections et services offerts par la bibliothèque Osler.

INTRODUCTION

When Sir William Osler died in 1919 he was one of the most famous and influential doctors in the world. He was born in the relative obscurity of Bond Head, Ontario, where his father was the Anglican minister. He received his education in Toronto and Montreal, earning his medical degree from McGill University in 1872. He went on to hold professorships in the faculties of medicine at McGill University (1874-1884), the University of Pennsylvania (1884-1889), Johns Hopkins University (1889-1905), and the University of Oxford (1905-1919), where he was Regius Professor of Medicine. Public recognition came in the form of numerous awards and honorary degrees, not least of which was a baronetcy bestowed by King George V in 1911. Famous in part for his philosophy of treating the whole patient, Osler published many books and articles and was regularly invited to speak at medical schools in North America and England. His highly influential Principles and Practice of Medicine went through eight editions between 1892 and his death in 1919. It was translated into several languages and continues to be published today, albeit in a greatly altered form.

His prolific writing was matched by his love of book collecting. During his lifetime he amassed a library of rare historical works in medicine, such as the first editions of Vesalius’s De Fabrica and William Harvey’s De Mortu Cordis and 136 incunabula. He also collected manuscripts: perhaps the most famous being the beautiful and extremely rare illustrated Arabic herbal by al-Ghâfiqî from the thirteenth century. Osler was a believer in the links between medicine as an art and as a science and also collected many significant works in science and literature, notably those of the seventeenth century author Sir Thomas Browne, whose Religio Medici guided Sir William throughout his life. Though Osler’s collection of books is often thought of as a rare books collection, his library contained many works from the 19th and early 20th centuries. He willed his
wonderful library to McGill University for several reasons. Sir William wrote that “as a young, untried man, McGill College offered me an opportunity to think and to work; but what is more, the members of the Medical Faculty adopted me, bore with vagaries and aggressiveness, and often gave practical expressions of sympathy with schemes which were costly and of doubtful utility.” He was also moved by pride in his Alma Mater and by “loyalty to the country of one’s birth and breeding.”

The books remained in Oxford for 10 years after Osler’s death while the descriptive catalogue of the collection, the Bibliotheca Osleriana, was completed by a small group led by his cousin’s son, William Willoughby Francis and under the watchful eye of Lady Osler. In the meantime, a room to house it was built in the McGill Faculty of Medicine’s Strathcona Building. Percy Nobbs, a noted Montreal architect, designed the library to be simple, yet graceful and dignified: oak was used for the paneling and the book cases, and the coats of arms of the Osler family and the six universities and colleges with which he was affiliated as a student and professor decorated the walls. The central focus was the Osler Niche facing the entrance, which displayed a large bronze plaque of Sir William and where his and Lady Osler’s ashes (she died in 1928) were placed. When the library opened in 1929 Dr. Francis was appointed its librarian, and for the following 30 years maintained, in the rather biting words of one commentator, “the Mecca for Osler devotees, a memorial and museum designed to perpetuate the inspiration which Osler had instilled in his followers.” Because “he kept Osler in the forefront and never allowed the Library to become anything more than Osler’s
it did not develop into a centre for research in the history and social studies of medicine.

There are, of course, many people who are still devotees of Sir William, and with good reason. The library continues to attract visitors who wish to pay their respects to the man who had a profoundly positive influence on their professional work and personal lives. There are also those who come to study both Sir William’s life and to consult the items that he collected and often annotated. The Osler Library, however, has changed much since the days of Dr. Francis. It has grown in size and has not only been moved to the McIntyre Medical Sciences Building (in 1964-65) but had a major renovation in 2001-02 that provided better and more secure storage conditions and expanded user areas. Physical growth allowed for an increase in the collection, not least of which has come from the transfer of older material from McGill University’s Life Sciences Library (formerly the Medical Library). The Osler Library is now a major resource centre for studies in the history of the health sciences and is heavily used by researchers and students in a variety of fields seeking information in diverse areas such as medical knowledge and research; public health; visual perceptions and representations of the body; literature; architecture; and sanitation; as well as Sir William Osler and other specific individuals. The purpose of the rest of this article is to briefly point out some of these resources, as well as to indicate some of the other repositories at McGill University that are useful to the study of the history of the health sciences.
Once the decision was taken to expand the library beyond “Osler’s books,” one of the first efforts to develop the research collection was the purchase of more secondary material and reference works in the field of medical history. Rare books continue to be added (in addition to donations, a few are bought every year) but these are now greatly outnumbered by the current secondary works that the library acquires. Though the library always had small endowments, the initial funds for this expansion came from a multi-year grant from the Wellcome Trust, starting in 1957. This gave the library money to buy many new books. In recognition of this generosity, the Osler Library named its new reading room the Wellcome Camera when it moved from the old Strathcona Building to the McIntyre Medical Sciences Building. Today, the Osler Library’s collection of secondary works on the history of medicine numbers about 35,000 volumes, with approximately 1,000 being added each year. The collection development policy is to be as comprehensive as possible in obtaining scholarly works in the practice of medicine and its specialties; surgery; institutions and agencies; biographies of medical and health practitioners; and, continuing the Oslerian tradition, medicine as it is represented in the arts and literature. The library also collects material on the history of basic biomedical sciences, such as anatomy, bacteriology, epidemiology and public health, as well as nursing and dentistry. Though most books are in English, the Osler collects in numerous languages with no geographical or chronological constraints and buys extensively in French, German, and Spanish. Canadian material is sought to the extent that even popular, in the sense of non-scholarly, biographical, institutional, and local history works are obtained. The library also subscribes to almost 200 current serials on the history of the health sciences or newsletters published by historical organizations, libraries, or museums. As it is a component of the McGill University Library, the Osler benefits from the institutional licensing of electronic material and has access to e-journals in the history of the health sciences and many electronic sets, like Early English Books On-Line. It is not surprising that the library also acquires reference works in medical history, such as bibliographies and encyclopedias. It also has older reference material that still provides useful information; an illustrative example of this is the long runs of Canadian, American, and British medical directories from the 19th and early 20th centuries, with more current editions in the adjacent Life Sciences Library. These provide a wealth of demographic and genealogical information on doctors, as expected, but often include information on medical schools, organizations, governmental bodies, and legislation. Many also have interesting advertisements for medicines, services, spas, and health resorts. Sometimes even
more unexpected information shows up, such as the suggested schedule of fees for general, obstetrical, and surgical practices printed in the 1920 Canadian Medical Directory. The Osler Library has also created an electronic biographical reference source, The Canadian Health Obituaries Index Files, which is located on the Osler Library website. This searchable database was designed by McGill’s Emeritus Librarian David S. Crawford and indexes obituaries listed in a variety of Canadian medical journals from the early 1800s to 2000. Information on all printed books and serials is listed in the McGill Library Catalogue.

The library also continues to build on Sir William’s initial bequest by acquiring historical primary material about all aspects of medicine published up to 1913. The desire, insofar as resources allow, is to collect material regardless of time period or geography. Currently, the collection of primary material exceeds 22,000 volumes. This growth has been due in no small way to the transfer of all monographs published before 1851 held in the Life Sciences Library. Founded in 1823, the Life Sciences Library is the oldest medical library in Canada. In the late 19th century it was among the largest medical libraries in North America, and the largest in Canada; the Osler thus inherited a significant collection of historical material from it. The Osler has also received a considerable number of early medical journals, usually complete runs, from either the Life Sciences Library or by purchase or gift. There are approximately 200 Canadian, American, British, and European journals from the 18th and early 19th centuries. These historical serial holdings are considerably strengthened by the vast 19th- and 20th-century holdings still held in storage by the Life Sciences Library. To help identify Canadian serials, David S. Crawford has compiled an electronic Bibliography of Canadian Health Science Periodicals, which is available on the Osler Library website. This work is based on Charles Roland and Paul Potter’s Annotated Bibliography of Canadian Medical Periodicals, 1826-1975, but is expanded and also includes Canadian dental and nursing periodicals. The Osler also has a number of printed annual reports of various institutions and agencies, such as the Report on the Sanitary State of the City of Montreal issued by the Montreal Board of Health since its creation in 1877.

In addition to this material, the Osler Library has been developing or has purchased several notable collections. Thanks to grants from the Social Studies and Humanities Research Council’s (SSHRC) Special Research Collections program, the Osler Library was able to purchase a significant amount of primary material on tuberculosis. The library already owned material on TB as part of Osler’s bequest, as he was interested in the medical and social aspects of the disease. Much material was also inherited from the Life Sciences Library. It was felt, however, that given the resurgence of tuberculosis and interest in its history, the collection should be extended, especially with North American and European works from the
19th and early 20th centuries. The library has built up a collection of close to 2,000 primary items, making this one of the largest collections on the subject in North America. In addition to monographs, there are theses and journals devoted to the disease. There are also reports from TB hospitals, sanatoria, research institutes, and government and non-governmental bodies. This collection complements an earlier SSHRCC assisted effort to collect primary material about the etiology, prophylaxis, and control of communicable diseases in Europe and North America in the 18th and 19th centuries.23

The Osler Library has benefited from donations of books from individuals and other libraries. The Academy of Medicine in Toronto transferred approximately 400 19th- and early 20th-century monographs when it closed. The Osler Library also received a similar donation from the former Montreal Homeopathic Hospital, which gave the library its collection of 19th-century homeopathic literature, thus filling a gap in the library’s collection and which may be of interest for those working in the field of alternative medicine (at least in North American terms). All the above-mentioned material is listed separately in the McGill Library Catalogue.

Another collection acquired recently, albeit by purchase, is a large collection of medical almanacs from the 19th and 20th centuries. There are around 200 items, dating from 1841 to 1977, two-thirds of which come from Canadian companies. These are eclectic and entertaining objects as they include recipes, health guides, astrology guides, dream
interpretation guides, and jokes. Generally, the contents appear to be filler for the primary business of selling drugs, with vivid testimonials and dramatic illustrations to get the point across. Both established pharmaceutical firms, such as Northrop and Lyman, and patent medicine dealers used this form of advertisement. This collection of ephemera provides excellent examples of the popular culture of medicine for the period. There is a searchable database for these called *The Osler Library Collection of Medical Almanacs* on the Osler Library website.

**MEDICAL THESAUSES**

The Osler Library has three large sets of medical theses as well as individual titles from the 17th to the 19th centuries. The largest is a collection of over 20,000 theses produced at the Université de Paris between 1796 and 1896 and purchased in the mid-1980s. These were produced by students for their Doctor of Medicine degree and range in length from 20 to 100 pages. They can be approached in a number of ways, such as providing an indication of some of the issues and concerns being studied in the period, the state of knowledge, and gender of student. Of course, one can track the evolution of these variables over time given the scope of the collection. There are also some theses that are of particular interest because of their author’s later fame. For example, there is René Laënnec’s work on the Hippocratic Oath in medical practice and Georges Gilles de la Tourette’s 1885 thesis entitled “Etudes cliniques et physiologiques sur la marche. La marche dans les maladies du système nerveux étudiée par la méthode des empreintes.” Each thesis is listed in the McGill Library Catalogue under both author and title and with the series title “French Theses.” There is also a supplementary collection of about 7,000 additional Paris theses written between 1897 and 1920. This set can also be searched in the McGill Library Catalogue by using author or title along the series title “Paris Theses.”

The two sets of Paris medical theses are particularly appealing in that they are fairly complete for the years covered and provide a wealth of information from a particularly vital period in French medicine. The tradition of publishing medical theses also existed at the University of Edinburgh between 1726 and 1835. The Osler Library has a collection of over 1,100 of these, mostly from 1790 to 1821. These are listed in the library catalogue by author, title, and subject and under the series title “Edinburgh Theses.” For all three sets, the student’s place of origin is listed on the title page, making it possible to track down theses submitted by Canadians. The theses of two of the founders of the McGill medical school, Andrew Fernando Holmes and John Stephenson, are included in the Edinburgh collection.
Complementing its published material in medical history are the Osler Library’s archival, images and artifacts holdings. The library has close to 150 archival fonds or collections of material on individuals and organizations. Not surprisingly, material related to Sir William Osler and Osleriana has been collected. Part of the library’s original collection consisted of Sir William’s student notebooks, unpublished manuscripts, other assorted writings, lecture notes and case notes, including a special study he did of 486 patients’ experiences of death, called *A Study of Dying*. These are not part of the archives per se, but are listed in the Bibliotheca Osleriana. There are significant holdings of Osleriana in the Sir William Osler Collection (P 100) and the Harvey Cushing Fonds (P 416), which has over 7,000 originals or typed copies of Osler correspondence collected by Harvey Cushing in preparation of his biography of Sir William Osler. The Malloch Family Fonds (P 107) also has correspondence with the Osler family as well—Archibald Malloch was one of the editors of the Bibliotheca Osleriana. The library is also the official repository of the American Osler Society. Osler material also may be found sporadically in other fonds.

The acquisition policy of the library has been to collect archival material related to doctors with a strong Canadian, particularly Montreal and McGill, connection. The library has been fortunate in being able to archive the works of several important individuals in Canadian medical history. The Wilder Penfield Fonds (P 142) consists of 80 meters of material from 1920 to 1976. These extensive holdings of correspondence, articles, unpublished writings, reports, addresses, glass and microscopic slides, and photographs provide a wealth of information about Dr. Penfield and his work in such activities as founding and running the Montreal Neurological Institute (1934), case work, research, and interest in broader humanitarian issues. The Maude Abbott Collection (P 111) has correspondence, notes, and illustrations related to her work in cardiology, Canadian medical history, and medical museums, as well as some personal correspondence. Those interested in the representation and dissemination of medical information may find the exhibition panels she created for the 1932 centenary meeting of the British Medical Association or her lantern slides of hearts of research interest. Other significant holdings include 88 metres of material in the Harold Nathan Segall Fonds (P 109), which gives one a very detailed look at the work of Montreal’s first fully trained cardiologist, McGill professor and co-founder of the Sir Mortimer B. Davis Jewish General Hospital, where he was also head of cardiology. The extensive fonds of cardiology innovator Arthur Vineberg (P 126) is another significant resource for those interested in this aspect of medical history. The library also has archival material by
and about Norman Bethune (P 156), including correspondence, case records, and transcripts of interviews of people who knew him gathered from several sources.

There are also archival holdings of less august figures, but which nonetheless illuminate the history of the health sciences. John Henry Wye (P 153) was a 19th-century ship’s doctor who travelled across the Atlantic and to the Far East with the Allan Line. His fonds consists of his ship board diaries, which describe his work and personal thoughts, especially his dreams, and which are illustrated by his watercolours. The Mrs. H. V. Bignell Fonds (P 040) has a series of consultative letters between her and noted Montreal pediatrician Alton Goldbloom about her son from 1924 to 1927. Both in content and in tone, one gets an unusually intimate look at an example of pediatrics from the period. There are also archival holdings for medical and related organizations, such as the Montreal Medico-Chirurgical Society and the Canadian Health Libraries Association. Almost all of the archival holdings have been described at the fonds or collection level and can be searched online using the Osler Library Archives Database.

Images and artifacts make up the other media that are collected by the Osler Library. The largest photographic collection is of Sir William Osler and his family. Collected from a variety of sources, most notably by Harvey Cushing, these depict the personal and professional life of Sir William from youth to old age. The library also has extensive photographs of individuals associated with McGill University’s Faculty of Medicine, as well as some of the university’s buildings and Montreal hospitals. Engraved portraits make up the collection of 17th to 19th physicians donated to McGill by Dr. Frederick Kalz. The Evans Collection has portraits, as well as original water colours and some photographs of cancer and tumour cases from London hospitals from the 1860s to the 1920s. These visual recordings of pathology are complemented by a collection of late 19th- and early 20th-century stereoscopic medical photographic sets. Originally in the Life Sciences Library, these sets of three-dimensional images were first used for pedagogical and diagnostic purposes. There are several of these, which may make this the largest medical collection in the country. The images are very vivid, with their intensity occasionally heightened by the use of colour. They were produced in the United Kingdom, the United States and Germany and include such sets as the Stereoscopic Skin Clinic, Howard Kelly’s Stereoscopic Clinic, The Edinburgh Stereoscopic Atlas of Anatomy, and The Edinburgh Stereoscopic Atlas of Obstetrics. This form of medical imaging was highly praised by Oliver Wendell Holmes in 1859, who also developed a handheld stereo viewer.

Though the library does not actively collect artifacts, it does have a collection consisting of approximately 600 medical instruments and
related objects, including Norman Bethune’s pneumothorax apparatus and Harold Segall’s collection of monaural stethoscopes. The library also has a good collection of artifacts that belonged to Sir William, such as his presentation silver and one of his desks from his home in Oxford. A chair, coat, and inkwell belonging to Osler and a microscope used by him were generously donated to the library by the Canadian Museum of Health and Medicine when it closed. Unfortunately, listings of the library’s images and artifacts are not yet publicly accessible and one needs to contact it for details of holdings. The only exception is the stereoscopic sets, which are listed in the McGill Library Catalogue.

Figure 4

Sir William Osler’s Desk and Inkwell, Osler Library, McGill University (Osler Library Collection)

OTHER MEDICAL HISTORY HOLDINGS AT MCGILL UNIVERSITY

As was noted above, the Osler Library’s collection of primary material in medical history is supplemented by other holdings at McGill. One is the very rich collection of books and serials held, in storage, by the Life Sciences Library. Although pre-1850 monographs were transferred to the Osler Library, the Life Sciences Library still has about 8,000 books from 1850 to 1913, as well as more recent ones. There are individual titles which are interesting, but the strength of the collection is also due to its size and depth. One can trace the evolution of medical thought by analyzing the succession of writings on a topic. In general the McGill Life Sciences Library, unlike most medical school libraries, has not withdrawn older editions of textbooks. The presence of various editions of text books, such
as the two editions of Howard Kelly’s *Operative Gynecology*,\(^\text{37}\) which have illustrations by Max Brödel, or the three editions of Timothy Holmes’s *A System of Surgery, Theoretical and Practical, in Treatises by Various Authors*,\(^\text{38}\) may provide good opportunities for comparative analysis. The serials holdings in storage are exceptional, with long runs of 19th- and 20th-century journals from Germany, France, the United States, England, and Canada. Many of the titles are unique in Canadian libraries. Generally, the material in storage provides a continuum with the primary material held in the Osler. Information on all material in storage is in the McGill Library Catalogue, but access to it restricted, and requests need to be submitted well in advance through the Osler Library.

The other key repository for primary medical material at McGill is the university archives. As the official repository of university records, the McGill University Archives has a great deal of material generated by the Faculty of Medicine going back to its foundation as the Montreal Medical Institution in 1823 (RG 38). Much about medical teaching, learning, and research at McGill can be found in the student, departmental and faculty files, as well as the annual departmental and faculty reports. Other holdings in the university archives are also useful for health science historians. There are records from the Faculty of Dentistry (RG 33), Nursing (RG 64) and two of the hospitals affiliated with the university: The Royal Victoria Hospital (RG 95) and the Montreal General Hospital (RG 96).\(^\text{39}\) The university archives also has a considerable collection of papers from individuals and organisations that are related to health. For example, there are over three meters of material from the Lyman Pharmaceutical Company of Montreal (MG 1006) from 1805 to 1951 that documents its financial activities, its products, and its packaging. Those interested in public health advocacy may find the Montreal Anti-Tuberculosis and General Health League (MG 2028) useful. From 1924 to 1930 this group supported a public health nurse and advocated for greater government involvement in the area. There is an archival guide on the archives’ home page that lists some, but not all of its holdings. The website also has a searchable database of file lists of university papers and a photographic database, which includes some digital images. It is best to contact the McGill University Archives for more details about its holdings.\(^\text{40}\)

**OTHER ACTIVITIES OF THE OSLER LIBRARY**

The Osler Library sponsors several activities to support the study of the history of the health sciences. One is the publication of the *Osler Library Newsletter*, which appears twice a year. Each issue includes a major article on a topic related to the library or its holdings and shorter news pieces. It began publication in 1969, and is available electronically on the library’s website.\(^\text{41}\) The Osler also publishes a book series called *The
Osler Library Studies in the History of Medicine. Generally, the series has focused on publishing monographs, anthologies and reference works related to Sir William Osler or medicine at McGill. A complete list of these books, along with ordering information, is available on the library’s website. The library also supports scholarship undertaken using the Osler Library by awarding a Research Travel Grant each year. Previous recipients have written on a great variety of subjects using the collection, which have resulted in scholarly publications. Information about the grant can be found on the website.

CONCLUSION

Much of the work of the Osler Library to preserve and promote the history of medicine is due to the labour of a great many people, only a very small number of whom are on the staff. The Osler has benefited from the efforts of many, only a few of whom can be acknowledged here. The Friends of the Osler Library has been generously supporting the library since 1972. Their efforts are augmented by those of the American Osler Society and others who have donated time and money to help the Osler Library achieve its mission. Generous financial support has been received by various bodies such as AMS-Hannah, SSHRCC, the Faculty of Medicine of McGill University, as well as several of its classes, the McGill Library system, and individuals from Lady Osler to Dr. John P. McGovern. The library also has been fortunate in the wise guidance and support it receives from its governing body, the Board of Curators. Modelled after the Board of Curators of the Bodleian Library at Oxford, curators of the Osler Library, past and present, have helped to make the Osler Library such a dynamic resource in the history of medicine.

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NOTES

3 Andreas Vesalius, De Humani Corpus Fabrica Libra Septem (Basileae: Ex offina I. Oporini, 1543).
5 Peter McNally, Nicolas Savard and Glenn Brown “Sir William Osler as a Collector and Bibliographer,” p. 7 [Unpublished work].
7 Thomas Browne, *A True and Full Copy of That Which Was Most Imperfectly and Surreptitiously Printed Before under the Name of Religio Medici* (London: printed for A. Crooke, 1643).
11 Osler Library of the History of Medicine, Minutes of the Board of Curators, 1967 “Summary of Impressions Arising from a Close Examination of the Curators’ Minute Book,” p. 2.
13 The original library was dismantled and reassembled in the new building, with a new reading room added.
14 Contact information for the Osler Library of the History of Medicine, plus a listing of some of the services offered, can be found on the website, http://www.mcgill.ca/osler-library. Accessed 20 February 2006. In addition to the specific features listed below, the Osler Library website lists and annotates a great number of websites and research tools. Those that are restricted to McGill University users are noted. Readers are welcome to browse the website and, of course, to contact the library.
15 A generous grant from the Mackle Foundation helped to pay for the move.
Privacy restrictions are enforced for all Osler Library and McGill University archival material.

This is item 7644 in Osler, Bibliotheca.


Howard A. Kelly, Stereo-Clinic (Troy, N.Y.: Southworth, 1908).


The archives’ holdings from these two hospitals are not complete, nor are records for all the hospitals affiliated with McGill University held.


