

ROBERT WILLAN AND HIS KINSMEN

by

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A. THE ANCESTRY AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF ROBERT WILLAN, THE DERMATOLOGIST

IN THE spring of 1812, the year of Napoleon's ill-fated venture into Russia, Richard Willan, a gentleman farmer in Yorkshire, received a letter from Madeira. The letter, dated 14 April, came by Penzance and Kendal, and it took four weeks to reach its destination at the Hill, in Marthwaite near Sedbergh, where Richard lived. It related the sad news of the death of his younger brother, Robert Willan, whose pioneer work on dermatology was widely acclaimed.¹ Three months later, Richard Willan received another letter. This time it was from the dermatologist Dr. Thomas Bateman, to whom Robert Willan was "my much valued preceptor, colleague and friend", and he wrote to enlist Richard's help in the "memoir of his talents and character" which he was preparing for publication. He asked particularly for details of Robert Willan's early life and studies.² It seems likely that Richard Willan responded to this request, and that the information on the early life of his brother which Bateman included in his memoir came from him. Bateman recorded that Robert Willan's father resided at the Hill, now home of his eldest son, Richard, and that he had enjoyed "an extensive medical reputation and practice".³ Significantly, Bateman in his text did not state that Robert Willan's father held the degree of M.D., but the information was added in an editorial footnote that Robert Willan Senior graduated M.D. at Edinburgh in 1745, and had published an inaugural thesis entitled 'De qualitibus aeris'. This identification of Robert Willan's father as an Edinburgh graduate has been erroneously followed since 1812 by all writers who have referred to Robert Willan the dermatologist and his supposed father,⁴ whom Munk's *Roll* describes as "Robert Willan, M.D., the Elder".⁵ Recent analysis of the genealogy of the Willan family, however, reveals that Robert Willan the Elder, M.D. of Edinburgh, could not have been the father of the dermatologist, for after his graduation in Edinburgh in 1745, he went to work in Scarborough and from there, still a bachelor, moved to Philadelphia in 1748.

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¹ MS. autograph letter; Ashby Smith to Richard Willan Esq., Madeira, 14 April 1812. Medical Society of London.

² MS. autograph letter; T. Bateman, M.D., to Richard Willan, 44 Bedford Place, 19 August 1812. Medical Society of London.

³ T. Bateman, 'Biographical memoir of the late Dr. Willan', *Edinb. med. surg. J.*, 1812, 8: 502–510.

⁴ C. C. Booth, *Br. J. Dermat.*, 1968, 80: 459.

⁵ W. Munk, *Roll of the Royal College of Physicians of London*, London, Royal College of Physicians, 1878, vol. 2, p. 350.

He never married. Meanwhile, evidence proves that the father of the dermatologist married in 1745 and his first child, Richard, was born a year later. The years between 1745 and 1748 were spent setting up house with Ann, his new wife, at the Hill, where he inscribed a datestone with their initials, R. and A.W., on a building in 1748. Previous errors in the identification of Robert Willan's father are corrected by the detailed genealogical data provided in this paper.

Robert Willan, the dermatologist, was the youngest child of the sixth generation of Willans known to have lived in Marthwaite since the middle of the seventeenth century. The first Willan of Marthwaite identifiable in the Quaker records seems to have been Anthony who died in 1670 (Fig. 1). His son, Richard (I), married Alice Croft of nearby Killington in 1659, and he died at the Hill in 1706. His will indicates that he was not a wealthy man, his major legacy, to his wife, being only £5.⁶ It was his son, Robert Willan (I) (1663–1737), who created the fortunes of the Willan family. Like so many of his fellow-dalesmen, he was a member of the Society of Friends and played an active part in their affairs at Sedbergh throughout his life. He attended Meetings at the old Meeting House at Briggflatts near Sedbergh. The building dates from 1675 and retains to this day the quiet simplicity of eighteenth-century Quakerism (Fig. 2). Robert Willan (I) once recorded how “I had the advantage beyond many of Education under the care of Believing Parents and Masters for my furtherance in ye Knowledge and Life thereof and for my preservation therein in my young years. . . .⁷ Despite these advantages, Robert Willan (I) during those early years was not immune from the world's temptations, as the following account of the results of a late seventeenth-century debauch will show. In a Testimony to his Monthly Meeting on 27 September 1691, when he was twenty-eight years old, he confessed to having been “prevailed upon to take more strong drink than was good or convenient for me” and he went on to describe how,

coming from Lancaster having there taken too much strong Liquor and in my coming homewards wth another man being full of strong drink and riding fast I fell from my mare and being parted she run away homewards. And the man Rode after her and I followed after in my boots expecting to have met him coming back with the Mare, but she having taken another way I missed them and so came home on foote in y^e night. Then the man finding the Mare, and wanting me, Occasioned a great Noise and Blunder in the Country and put People in strange thoughts what was become of me. And all this work and Stirr I do sincerely acknowledge was occasion'd only thow taking over much strong drink before we came out. . . .⁸

It was a problem that was to occasion difficulties for a later generation of the family.

Robert Willan (I) was married in 1692 to Mary Birkett, daughter of Miles Birkett of Hartmell, and their first child, Richard, was born the following year. Soon afterwards they appear to have moved to Hewthwaite in the valley of Dent, some five miles from the family home at the Hill. Two more sons were to be born to Robert Willan whilst he lived in Dent. According to Norman Penney's *The first publishers of truth* (London, Headley Bros., 1907), the Quakers of Dent had no Meeting House until 1700 and they therefore gathered for worship in each other's houses, including “Robert Willan's house at East Banke in Dent” (p. 330). The house still has old oak

⁶ MS. will and inventory of Richard Willan I, 1706. Lancashire Record Office.

⁷ Minute Books of Sedbergh Monthly Meeting, 19th 7th mo. 1691. County Record Office, Kendal, Cumbria. ⁸ *Ibid.*

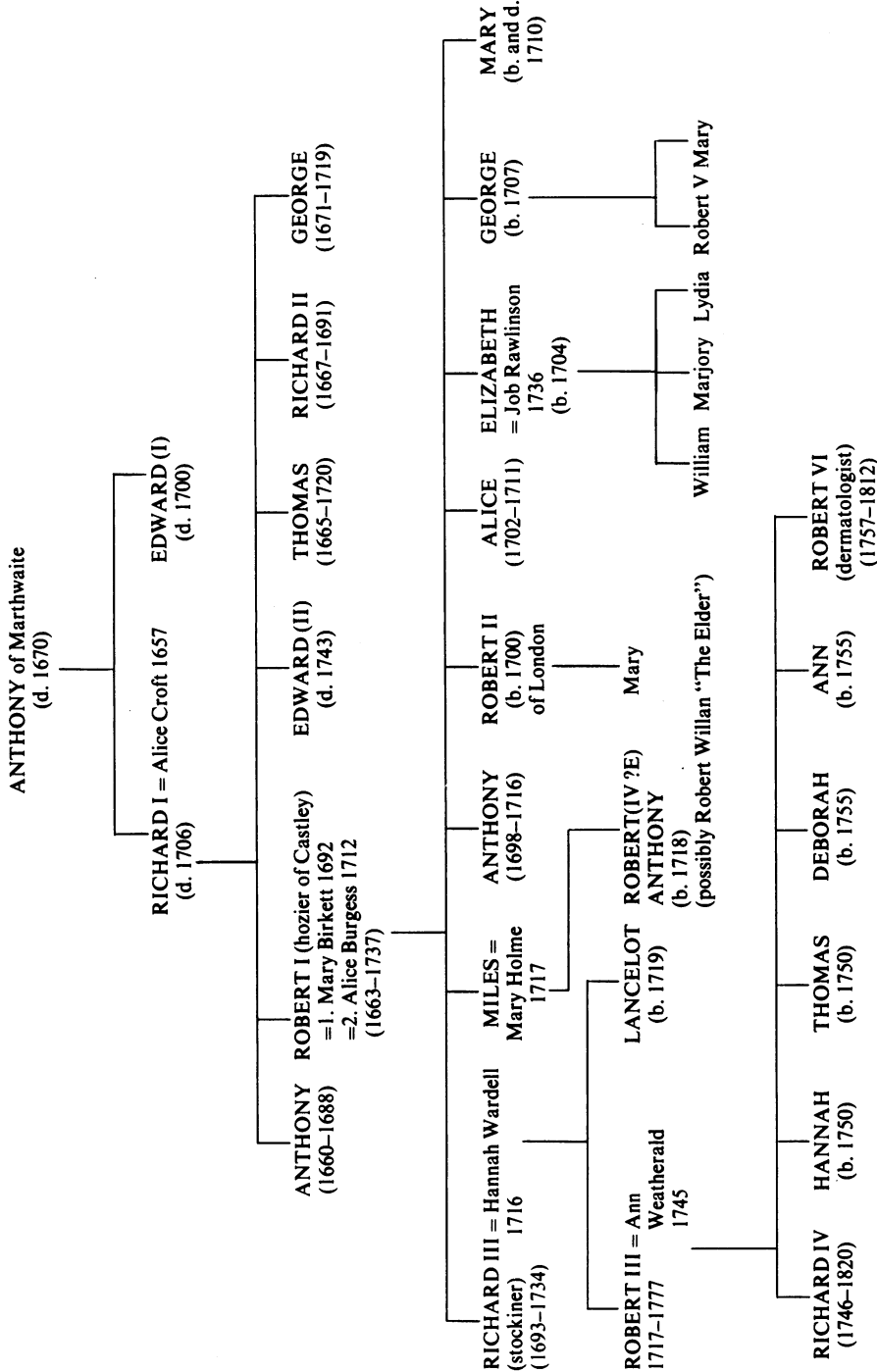


Figure 1. Genealogy of the Willan family, based on evidence from the Records of the Society of Friends, the Wills of Richard (I), Edward (I), Robert (I), Edward (III) and Richard (III), and from the Parish records of Sedburgh.

panelling but it has been extensively altered since the seventeenth century and only the remnants of what must have been stone mullioned windows can now be seen.

Dentdale starts as a narrow valley running south from the town of Sedbergh, widening out after several miles to form a broad valley around the town of Dent. Hewthwaite, on the east side of the valley, is halfway between Sedbergh and Dent town. In the seventeenth century it was a pastoral community of "statesmen", men who owned their small ancestral homes and who kept flocks of sheep on their hill pastures. For centuries wool was the staple product of the Yorkshire Dales and it is therefore not surprising that knitting should have become a major industry in those valleys in the years before the industrial revolution. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Dent became famous for the manufacture and export of knitted stockings, a position held until knee-breeches were superseded by long trousers. The fame of the Dent knitters spread far and wide. Robert Southey immortalized them as the "Terrible knitters e'Dent", using the word terrible in its dialect sense of great. Adam Sedgwick, born in Dent and later Woodwardian Professor of Geology in the University of Cambridge, recorded during the nineteenth century memories of the great days of knitting in his native valley. He wrote that some of the more enterprising of the statesmen of Dent became middle-men, acting between the village manufacturers and consumers, sometimes riding up to London "to deal personally with the merchants of Cheapside, and to keep alive the current of rural industry".⁹ Robert Willan (I) appears to have been one of these successful eighteenth-century hosiers. We can imagine the trains of packhorses filing down the narrow lane from Hewthwaite to the valley below, see the milkmaids knitting as they drove the cattle to their fields, and remember the "sittings" at which the country people met together in the winter evenings to knit "with a speed that cheated the eye", whilst they listened to readings from Defoe or Bunyan.¹⁰

The stocking trade clearly brought prosperity to Robert Willan (I) for by 1700 he was able to move to Castley, a larger and more impressive house just to the north of Sedbergh. The house, now called Castlehow, is little changed today from its appearance in the early eighteenth century (Fig. 3). A steep and narrow lane climbs from the main street of Sedbergh on to the lower slopes of Winder. The house faces directly south and lies beside Settle Beck, the stream that flows down between Winder and Crook from the moorland pastures above. It has the original stone mullioned windows, and a carved datestone above the door carries the initials R. and M.W., for Robert and Mary, his wife, with the date 1701 beneath. Inside, the house is panelled in oak and there is a fine staircase in the Jacobean style. Beside the fireplace in the main downstairs room there is an oak cupboard with a decorated door and the same initials and date carved upon it.

Their next son, Robert (II) was born at the end of 1700 (Old style), followed by Alice and Elizabeth at two-year intervals, both births being recorded as at Castley. Two years later in 1706, Richard Willan (I), father of Robert the hosier, died at his home at the Hill. The inventory of his goods and effects serves to illustrate his

⁹ Adam Sedgwick, *Supplement to the Memorial to the Trustees of the Cowgill Chapel*, Cambridge University Press, 1870, pp. 62–64.

¹⁰ M. Hartley and J. Ingilby, *The old hand-knitters of the Dales*, Clapham, Dalesman Publishing Co., 1951.



Figure 2. The Quaker Meeting House at Brigflatts.



Figure 3. Castlehow, the home of Robert Willan (I). By courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Hood.



Figure 4. The Hill at Marthwaite, near Sedbergh, home of the Willan family. By courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Peter Madge.

interests, the modest extent of his property and the changes that were to occur in the fortunes of the family within one generation. Richard was clearly a farmer, for beasts and horses amounted to £44 10s. 0d. out of the total inventory which was valued at just over £93. His “money in his purse”, apparel and riding saddle accounted for £6 and there were silver spoons worth £2 10s. 0d. and a clock at £1. He felt no need to leave any of his property to his son Robert (I) living in some style at Castley, but there were five shillings for his thirteen-year-old grandson Richard (III) and the residue went to his son Edward (II), who was named as his executor.¹¹

Robert and Mary Willan were to have two more children at Castley, but, as so often happened in that century, disaster struck. In 1710, shortly after the birth of their last child, Mary Willan died, soon to be followed by the infant named after her.

By now, Richard Willan (III), the eldest son, was seventeen years old and he no doubt joined his father in his business. Two years later the house at the Hill was either renovated or rebuilt and a datestone with the initials R.W. 1712 was set into the lintel above the door, the single initials being those of Richard (III), still a bachelor (Fig. 4). It seems likely that Richard moved to the Hill at this time; perhaps significantly it was the year of his father’s remarriage, to Alice Burgess of Chester. Richard himself was to be married in 1716 to Hannah Wardell, but within five years she too was dead, leaving him in 1721 with his two young sons, Robert (III), the father of the dermatologist, and Lancelot. It was a friend from Kendal, Alice Cragg, who was to bring them up; Richard Willan in his will made her a legacy “in regard to her consideration for my children in their infancie”.¹²

By this time, Robert Willan (I) had lost three other children. Alice died in 1711 at the age of nine, Anthony at the age of eighteen in the year of his elder brother Richard’s marriage, Miles in 1720 at the age of twenty-five. Miles, who was named after his maternal grandfather, Miles Birkett, had married a non-Quaker, Mary Holme, in 1717. No doubt it was a grief to his father, so long a pillar of the Sedbergh Friends Meeting, when the Monthly Meeting recorded its testimony against Miles for being “married by a Priest with a Woman of another persuasion”.¹³ Their only son was born the following year and was baptised Robert Anthony (Robert IV) in Sedbergh church in July 1718.¹⁴ It was only two years later that Miles Willan himself died, possibly suddenly since he left no will. Mary Willan made over her interest in her husband’s estate to her father-in-law, Robert Willan (I). Perhaps it was as well; the assets were valued at £49 13s. 0d. but there were debts of £132 “upon speciality”.¹⁵

By now Robert Willan (I) was ageing. Increasingly during the ensuing years he seems to have made his business over to his son Richard (III) living at the Hill. Richard seems not to have enjoyed robust health. He made his first will in 1727, adding a codicil in 1734 just five days before his premature death, at the age of forty-one, on 14 April.¹⁶ Richard (III) was, by Dales standards, a relatively wealthy man.

¹¹ Loc. cit., note 6 above.

¹² MS. will of Richard Willan (III). Lancashire Record Office.

¹³ Minute Books of Sedbergh Monthly Meeting, 4 November 1717. County Record Office, Kendal, Cumbria.

¹⁴ Parish records, Sedbergh Parish Church, kindly provided by the Reverend A. Rogers.

¹⁵ MS. inventory of goods and chattels of Myles Willan, 1720. Lancashire Record Office.

¹⁶ Loc. cit., note 12 above.

His inventory,¹⁷ which describes him as a “Stockiner”, amounted to a total of £1,225 10s. 0d. Of this, £300 was accounted for by “stock in trade, stockins and other Debts”, and there was £663 owing to the deceased on securities. “Plaite” alone was worth £50, and his “purse and apparel” were valued at £55. Richard appointed his father Robert (I), Uncle Edward (II), and two friends as executors and trustees. He left the major part of his property to his elder son, Robert (III), to be held in trust until he would attain the age of twenty-one years. The sum of £500 was to go to his second son, Lancelot. His Wardell brothers-in-law were asked to supervise the boys’ education. If, however, both the sons were to die before reaching the age of twenty-one, then the property was to go to his younger brother, Robert Willan (II), whom he described as “of London”, and there were also to be appropriate legacies to his nephew, Robert Anthony, to his niece, Mary, and to younger brother, George. The fourth day of September, 1734, must have been a sad day for the grieving father when he put his signature, along with his fellow-executors, to the obligation to “truly execute and perform the last Will and Testament” of his eldest son.

Now over seventy, Robert Willan (I) lived on at Castley for another three years. In 1736 he had the pleasure of seeing his only surviving daughter Elizabeth married at the age of thirty-two to Job Rawlinson of Graythwaite Hall in Lancashire. It was an excellent marriage, for the Rawlinsons were established ironmasters with a wide meshwork of furnaces and forges in Lancashire, Westmorland, and as far afield as Invergarry in Scotland. They were closely involved with other Quaker families such as the Fords, Crosfields, and Backhouses in those early years of the Industrial Revolution in England.¹⁸ Ironically it was this revolution that was to end the stocking trade that had sustained so many in the dales of north-west Yorkshire for so long.

Robert Willan (I) died in November 1737 at the age of seventy-four. Many of his immediate family had already predeceased him. His eldest brother, Anthony, had died young; his younger brother, Richard (II), died in Barbados at the age of twenty-four; and his youngest brother, George, who had emigrated to London and possibly acted as his factor, died in Aldgate in 1719, leaving three daughters. His brother Thomas, who also left three daughters, died in Kendal a year later. Robert Willan was not the last of his own generation to die, for his brother, Edward, survived him for seven years. Nevertheless, for many Sedbergh Quakers the death of Robert Willan (I) must have seemed like the end of an era.

Robert Willan’s bequests to his children indicate the extent to which he had already helped them in their affairs.¹⁹ Robert (II) “of London” received only £10, his father “having given to him largely heretofore”, and George owed his father more than £400 at the time of his death, much of which sum was bequeathed to him. Elizabeth Rawlinson, however, was to have Castley and its land, and to her husband, Job, Robert Willan (I) left his silver tobacco box. Castley is said later to have become an academy. The Hewthwaite property in Dent was sold by the executors to pay other legacies and expenses. His grandchildren all received sums of money, the largest share

¹⁷ MS. inventory of goods and chattels of Richard Willan (III), stockiner, 1734. Lancashire Record Office.

¹⁸ A. Raistrick, *Quakers in science and industry*, London, Bannisdale Press, 1950, p. 102.

¹⁹ MS. will and inventory of Robert Willan (I), hosier of Castley, 1737. Lancashire Record Office.

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going to Robert Anthony who was to inherit £150 when he reached the age of twenty-one in 1739; he also got the “screw-tore that stands in the parlour”. Robert (I) left property at Briggflatts to his grandson Robert (III) who the following year, at twenty-one years of age, was to inherit the property at the Hill under the terms of his father Richard’s will.

No details are available of the future lives of any of the grandchildren of Robert Willan (I), with the exception of Robert (III), inheritor of the family home and shortly to be established at the Hill. Robert Anthony, in particular, does not appear in the records of the Sedbergh Meetings of the Friends, and when his mother died in 1744 there is no mention of him in her will.²⁰

Robert Willan (III) married Ann Wetherald in 1745 and took her to live with him at the Hill. Here, in that beautiful eighteenth century house, with oak panelling and staircase so similar to that at Castley, their six children were born between 1746 and 1757, the last being Robert Willan (VI), the dermatologist. As already noted, Robert Willan (III) put a datestone on a building at the Hill in 1748 with the initials of himself and his wife. He did not remain a lifelong Quaker, for he seems to have shared his grandfather’s early difficulty with strong drink. In 1758 his Monthly Meeting drew up a paper of their disunity with him on account of his “drinking to excess and breaking word”.²¹

There is little doubt that Robert Willan (III), the father of the dermatologist, became a medical practitioner in the Sedbergh district. As Bateman wrote, he enjoyed “an extensive medical reputation and practice”. At the time of his marriage the Friends record him as Robert Willan M.D., but there is considerable doubt as to whether he ever had a university degree. When he died in 1777 he was described as a “man-midwife”, and it seems more likely that he was one of those country practitioners who received an early training apprenticed to an apothecary but did not proceed to a university degree. As a Quaker it would have been open to him to attend the medical school in Edinburgh, but there is no evidence that he ever did so. A Robert Willan appears in Alexander Monro’s list of students in Edinburgh for the years 1739, 1740, and 1743,²² and this Robert Willan graduated M.D. in 1745.²³ Whilst it is possible that there were two Robert Willans at Edinburgh between 1739 and 1745, there was only one who graduated M.D. and he can be positively identified as a bachelor who, having gone from Edinburgh to practise in Scarborough, emigrated to Pennsylvania in 1748. He therefore could not have been the father of the dermatologist. The origins of this Robert Willan M.D., described by Munk as Robert Willan “the Elder” and hereinafter referred to as Robert Willan (E), are not established with certainty, but from the facts of his life it is possible to put forward a hypothesis to explain where he came from and what relationship he may have had to the Willan family of the Hill.

²⁰MS. will and inventory of Mary Willan, 1744. Lancashire Record Office.

²¹ Minute Books of Sedbergh Monthly Meeting, 6th and 7th mo. 1758. County Record Office, Kendal, Cumbria.

²² Alexander Monro *primus*, list of students. Edinburgh University Library.

²³ Records of University of Edinburgh.

B. WHO WAS ROBERT WILLAN, THE ELDER?

Robert Willan (E) first emerges from obscurity as a medical student in Edinburgh in 1739. Throughout his life he was befriended and supported by a fellow-alesman, John Fothergill, who became one of London's leading physicians, and it is from his correspondence that we learn something of his character. The Fothergill family lived at Carr End in the small valley of Raydale, a tributary dale of Wensleydale. It was only twenty miles to the east of Sedbergh, and since the Fothergills were well-known Quakers in that area, particularly through Fothergill's father, a ministering Friend who travelled widely, they would certainly have known the Willan family. John Fothergill was born in 1712, so that he was some six or eight years older than his protégé. He was educated at Sedbergh School between 1724 and 1728, and it is significant that during this period he lodged at Briggflatts, the small hamlet near Sedbergh where the Willan family regularly attended the Meetings.²⁴ John Fothergill as a boy must therefore have met Robert Willan (I), then a weighty and important member of that Meeting, as well as his family, and it seems likely that during those four impressionable years he visited both Castley and the Hill, which is close to Briggflatts.

John Fothergill himself was an Edinburgh graduate, obtaining his M.D. in 1736. He then went to London where he settled in Gracechurch Street, later moving to Harpur Street. He attended the Gracechurch Street Meeting where he subsequently became an influential Friend. For the first two years he walked the wards of St. Thomas's Hospital, but by 1740 he had started to build up what was to become one of the most successful medical practices in London in the eighteenth century. It seems likely that John Fothergill was one of those who encouraged Robert Willan (E) to undertake the study of medicine. Willan had been judged, according to Fothergill, "a tolerable proficient when at school; he was afterwards placed as an apprentice to a wholesale dealer", he wrote "but not liking the business, his master gave way to it and he went down to Edinburgh".²⁵ By 1739 he was enrolled as a medical student. In the following year Fothergill was writing to his brother Joseph in Warrington, enlisting his support in obtaining employment for Robert Willan (E), possibly in an apothecary's shop, a step which Fothergill had himself taken during the course of his studies in Edinburgh. "I am obliged to thee for thy care about Robert Willan", he wrote to his brother, "we shall both be obliged to thee for thy further care about it and if a vacancy occurs, to acquaint me as soon as thou can. He understands the practical part of chemistry very well and I doubt not would recommend himself in time by the goodness of his medicine, his fidelity and diligence".²⁶

A month later, Robert Willan (E) became a member of the Royal Medical Society, a distinction for the young medical student, who signed the Obligation Book on 9 December 1740. He remained in Edinburgh until 1741, but there is then a gap until the 1743–44 session when he was again enrolled and attended Alexander Monro's

²⁴ B. C. Corner and C. C. Booth, *Chain of friendship. Selected letters of Dr. John Fothergill of London, 1735–1780*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1971, p. 5.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

²⁶ MS. autograph letter; John Fothergill to his brother Joseph in Warrington, 6 October 1740. Portfolio 22/82, Library of Society of Friends, London.

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lectures. Fothergill wrote later that Robert Willan “for want of sufficient support . . . was obliged to begin practice sooner than was convenient . . .”.²⁷ In 1745, however, he succeeded in obtaining his M.D. with a thesis entitled ‘De qualitatibus aeris’. Significantly the thesis was dedicated to his London friend, Dr. John Fothergill. Fothergill throughout his life unobtrusively helped those less fortunate than himself, and the dedication may indicate that his help for Robert Willan (E) had gone beyond mere sympathetic support. He may later have come to regret taking on this commitment.

In the autumn of 1745, the year of his namesake’s marriage to Ann Wetherald, Robert Willan (E) settled in Scarborough, a seaside town in Yorkshire with a spa whose popularity was increasing during the middle of the eighteenth century. His certificate of removal from Edinburgh was received by the Scarborough and Whitby Monthly Meeting on 5 September. He seems at that period of his life to have played an active role in Friends’ affairs. On 4 December he was a Scarborough representative at the Monthly Meeting at Staintondale, and on 4 January 1746 he represented Scarborough at the Quarterly Meeting.²⁸ During the summer of 1746 his friend, Dr. John Fothergill, was in Scarborough accompanying an important family of City Friends to the Spa; on their return to London they were to pass the Highland rebel, Lord Lovat, on his final journey to the scaffold at Tower Hill.²⁹ That same year Robert Willan (E) published his book *An essay on the king’s evil*,³⁰ dedicating his work to the celebrated Dr. Richard Mead, to whom John Fothergill had addressed his communication ‘De diaphragmate fisso . . .’ in a paper read to the Royal Society the previous year.³¹ Willan wrote in his introduction that “The Art of Healing would seem to be of all Arts the most honourable, even tho’ no better reason could be given for it, than that it is the most difficult”. He went on to give a detailed account of scrofula, as glandular tuberculosis was then known, describing the glandular swellings, abdominal pain, skin ulceration, and discharge that characterize this malady. For treatment Willan enthusiastically recommended the waters of the Scarborough Spa which, he wrote, “are wonderfully safe and have produced as few ill-effects as any efficacious medicines can be supposed to do. . . .” The Scarborough Spa waters, he went on, “are adapted to the cure not only of the Disease which has been the subject of this Essay, but of the greater part of the formidable Chronic Tribe. . .”.

Robert Willan (E), however, did not stay in Scarborough treating the “formidable Chronic Tribe” with the waters of the Spa, as did others to their financial advantage. Always restless and meeting with little success as a physician, he had notified the Monthly Meeting by the end of 1747 of his intention to move to Philadelphia.³² The Board of Overseers of the William Penn Charter School were seeking a schoolmaster. Dr. John Fothergill had by then been long established as the London correspondent of

²⁷ Corner and Booth, *op. cit.*, note 24 above, p. 116.

²⁸ Minute Books of Scarborough and Whitby Monthly Meeting, 5 September, 4 December 1745, and 4 January 1745/6. Brynmor Jones Library, University of Hull.

²⁹ Corner and Booth, *op. cit.*, note 24 above, p. 116.

³⁰ R. Willan, *An essay on the king’s evil*, London, Knapton & Longman, 1746.

³¹ J. Fothergill, ‘De diaphragmate fisso, et mutatis quorundam viscerum sedibus, in cadavere puellae decem mensium observatis’, *Phil. Trans.*, 1745, no. 478, 11.

³² Minute Books of Scarborough and Whitby Monthly Meeting, 16th 6th mo. 1748; Brynmor Jones Library, University of Hull.

the Pennsylvania Quakers and it was natural that the Overseers should turn for advice to him as well as to John Hunt, another London Friend. It must have been some time during 1747 that the question of a schoolmaster for the most famous Quaker School in Philadelphia was discussed between Robert Willan (E) and John Fothergill. In early 1748 Fothergill wrote to Israel Pemberton, an influential Friend in Philadelphia, recommending Robert Willan. Referring to his practice, he wrote that “whatever genius he might have, his manner and address not being the most taking, he has not succeeded in his business to much advantage”. Fothergill had advised him to turn his thoughts to teaching, thinking that what he lacked in experience would be made up by “an education less confined than happens to the generality of schoolmasters”. As to his character, he believed him to be “untainted by any vicious habits; he is naturally a little overbearing and impatient of contradiction, easily offended and soon reconciled, but under all honest and well-meaning”. He concluded cautiously: “I hope he will not fail to pay just regard to thy judgement.”³³

On 16 August, Robert Willan (E) presented his Scarborough certificate in Philadelphia.³⁴ He was to be paid £150 a year and the expenses of his journey, and he undertook to teach Latin and Greek and “other parts of learning”. These other parts would have included some English grammar, writing, and mathematics. His first term of employment was to be for one year.³⁵

Philadelphia was at that time the largest city in the American Colonies and the Quakers were still the most important group in the Province of Pennsylvania, then under the Proprietorship of the Penn family. Robert Willan (E), with recommendations from leading London Quakers, was at once welcomed into the highest echelons of Philadelphia society. John Smith, soon to be influential in the Province, records meeting Robert Willan in the middle of August 1748.³⁶ John Smith was the future son-in-law of James Logan, one of early America’s greatest men and a leading figure in Philadelphia and the affairs of Pennsylvania. In November, John Smith attended a dinner at which there were present Anthony Benezet, teacher in the English School and future emancipist, Edward Shippen, whose lovely estate was a “veritable rus in urbe”,³⁷ Rachel and John Pemberton, who were important Philadelphia Quakers, John Logan’s daughter-in-law, as well as Robert Willan.³⁸ A month later there was a party at Stenton, the famous country estate of James Logan. Richard Peters, an important figure as Secretary to the Province, was there. It was here also that the young Robert Willan met Benjamin Franklin.³⁹

It was a heady beginning to his career as a schoolmaster. A year later Robert Willan (E) seems to have established himself well, and James Logan was able to write to John Fothergill in London: “Robert Willan, who brought me the last letter I have

³³ Corner and Booth, *op. cit.*, note 24 above, p. 127.

³⁴ Minute Book of Philadelphia Monthly Meeting, 16th 6th mo. 1748.

³⁵ Minutes of the Board of Overseers of the William Penn Charter School; kindly provided by Nancy P. Speers, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania 19081.

³⁶ A. C. Myers (editor), *Hannah Logan’s courtship*, Philadelphia, Ferris & Leach, 1904, pp. 227, 229.

³⁷ F. G. Tolles, *Meeting house and counting house. The Quaker merchants of Colonial Philadelphia*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1948, p. 135.

³⁸ Myers, *op. cit.*, note 36 above, p. 252.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

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had from thee, recommends himself gradually more and more amongst Friends, and appears to be now in a way that he may depend upon for a Small Living. Friends have lately built a handsome and commodious School-house in several apartments, where he teaches Latin on the ground-floor. . . .”⁴⁰ Three years later a set of books was delivered to Robert Willan for the use of the Latin School. They included Varenius’s *Geography and Latin*, Dupens’s *Universal library*, Prideaux’s *Life of Mahomet*, *Christian perfection*, Watt’s *Logic*, a *History of the House of Nassau*, and, curiously for a Quaker library, the *Memoirs of Marlborough’s life*.⁴¹ Despite all the social advantages of his position, however, Robert Willan (E) seems to have settled down in Philadelphia no better than he did in Scarborough. In early 1753 he asked to resign his position at the William Penn Charter School,⁴² received his certificate of removal from the Philadelphia Monthly Meeting,⁴³ and was soon on his way to England. His patron, John Fothergill, could not fail to be put out. He wrote in some chagrin to John Smith in Philadelphia, who had so generously befriended Robert Willan in his early days there in 1748 and who was now himself an Overseer of the School: “I received thy kind letter from Dr. Willan whose precipitate return from the province made such an introduction necessary, for as I had some share in procuring him the place, I considered myself in some respects answerable for it, and to those under whose direction he had undertaken to act. . . .” He continued apologetically: “If my reputation is not quite forfeited, I shall readily do all in my power to assist you and am not without hopes I might prevail upon a young man . . . to come over”.⁴⁴ Robert Willan (E) probably stayed only a short time in London, for by the next year, in June 1754, Timothy Bevan requested a certificate from Gracechurch Street Meeting on his behalf as he had “lately removed to Scarborough”.⁴⁵ Here he seems to have stayed for a few years longer, since on 4 May 1756, the records of the Monthly Meeting of Scarborough and Whitby again refer to him. The reference is of particular interest since it provides the only evidence of a possible link between Robert Willan, M.D., the Elder, and the Willan family at Sedbergh. The entry reads: “Whereas Robert Willan sometime since Proposing to Remove to within the Compass of Kendal Mo mtg and having a certificate of our unity with him as a member; but having altered his Intentions before he delivered the same to the said meeting, is this day Delivered in again to this meeting”.⁴⁶ Sedbergh was immediately adjacent to Kendal, where several members of the Willan family had lived. The minute also serves to illustrate the persisting uncertainty of Robert Willan’s intentions, a trait that lasted until the end of his life.

Robert Willan (E), the Edinburgh graduate, fades into obscurity during the next few years, which were among the most stirring in Britain’s history, spanning the Seven Years’ War and the emergence of William Pitt as the nation’s leader. Pitt became

⁴⁰ James Logan, letter-book, p. 30, 14 December 1749. Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

⁴¹ J. Malhern, *A history of secondary education in Pennsylvania*, Philadelphia, [the author], 1933.

⁴² Loc. cit., note 35 above.

⁴³ Minute Book of Philadelphia Monthly Meeting, 25th 5th mo. 1753.

⁴⁴ Corner and Booth, op. cit., note 24 above, p. 147.

⁴⁵ Minute Book of two weeks’ meeting of Gracechurch Street Monthly Meeting, 17th 6th mo. 1754. Library of Society of Friends, London.

⁴⁶ Minute Book of Scarborough and Whitby Monthly Meeting, 4 May 1756. Brynmor Jones Library, University of Hull.

Prime Minister in 1757 after a series of calamitous reverses in Europe, America, and India. Yet by 1759, the *annus mirabilis* of the Seven Years' War, when the church bells scarcely stopped ringing for victories, India had been secured, Canada conquered, and the battle of Minden won. George III, however, who acceded to the throne in 1760 and who never came to understand the tone of grandiloquent obfuscation with which Pitt addressed him,⁴⁷ was opposed to the continuation of the war, a difference of view that led to Pitt's resignation in October of that year.

It was after the end of the war in 1763 that the king's ministers decided to raise money to pay for the defence of America by introducing a stamp duty. The notorious Stamp Act was passed by Parliament in early 1765, provoking from John Fothergill, whose sympathies lay entirely with the Americans, the comment to a correspondent in Philadelphia that "a resolution of the House of Commons has within the last few days given America a dreadful stab and hurt. . .".⁴⁸ The Americans reacted with riots and demonstrations, and their friends in London, who now included Benjamin Franklin acting as agent for the province of Pennsylvania, at once set about lobbying for repeal of the obnoxious Act. A Gracechurch Street Quaker, Thomas Crowley, writing under the pseudonym of Amor Patriae, sent communications to the public newspapers as well as private letters to William Pitt⁴⁹ and to the Prime Minister, the Marquess of Rockingham.⁵⁰ John Fothergill sent a paper urging repeal to his friend and patient,⁵¹ the Earl of Dartmouth, then President of the Board of Trade, and he subsequently published anonymously an influential pamphlet *Considerations relative to the North American Colonies*.⁵² Robert Willan (E), now apparently living in London, wrote from Warwick Street, Charing Cross, to William Pitt:

I have often thought it a great Happiness to this Country that in a Time of so great Danger a few worthy Persons of Distinction were yet left who prefer their Duty and a good Conscience to all other Considerations.

There is no part of the Unpleasant Task which is assign'd them more difficult to be reduced into Order than the most unhappy State of Affairs in N. America. . . . I have not without some Interruption to other Business drawn up a scheme for reducing those Affairs into a better Situation. . . . It is the Fruit of a long Acquaintance with the State and principle Transactions of that Country & a Considerable Time of Residence there. . . . I think it of the last Importance, & therefore should be glad to present it to Mr. Pitt myself, that I may be prepared to answer any Questions which may be necessary to evince the Truth of the Arguments which support this Scheme. . . .⁵³

The letter itself, written in the immaculate copperplate of an eighteenth-century schoolmaster, is not remarkable. William Pitt was firmly opposed to the Stamp Act

⁴⁷ J. Brooke, *King George III*, London, Constable, 1972, p. 140.

⁴⁸ Corner and Booth, *op. cit.*, note 24 above, p. 238.

⁴⁹ MS. autograph letter; Amor Patriae to ye Rt Hon William Pitt Esqr, 2 February 1766. Public Record Office, London, PRO 30/8/97.

⁵⁰ MS. autograph letter; Amor Patriae to Ye Rt Hon ye Marquess of Rockingham. Wentworth Woodham MSS., Sheffield City Libraries.

⁵¹ MS. letter in Dr. Fothergill's handwriting to Lord Dartmouth with enclosures in handwriting of an amanuensis. Wentworth Woodham MSS., Sheffield City Libraries.

⁵² J. Fothergill, *Considerations relative to the American Colonies*, London, [published anonymously], 1765.

⁵³ MS. autograph letter; Robert Willan to William Pitt, Warwick Street, Charing Cross, 2d Instant. Public Record Office, PRO 30/8/66. The handwriting is identical to that of Robert Willan's letter to James Pemberton, (note 60 below).

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and was to argue strongly for repeal in the House of Commons. It was therefore not surprising that those making representations should include Robert Willan (E), who had lived in the American Colonies and knew them well. What was unusual, however, was Willan's mode of address to the most famous Englishman of his age. Willan wrote "Honoured Frd . . .". Such an address was in striking contrast to Amor Patriae who began his letters "Rt Hon Sr",⁵⁴ and to Fothergill who addressed Lord Dartmouth entirely in the third person.⁵⁵ Willan's address suggests the familiarity of friendship and raises the intriguing possibility that he knew Pitt. Whether he ever had the chance of presenting his document to William Pitt is uncertain, since his proposals cannot now be found among the Chatham papers.

There is, however, another letter written by Robert Willan (E) preserved among those papers. It was sent in 1768 and illustrates his concern with the health of William Pitt, now Earl of Chatham, whose serious mental illness had necessitated a prolonged absence from public affairs. The mode of address and conclusion are similar to those used in the previous letter.

Honoured Frd

The same friendly Hand which addressed you last Year on the Subject of your Health when you was at Northend⁵⁶ & which pressed your Departure from that place because he thought your Health in which he believed the Country to be deeply interested could only be recover'd by that Means & by the choice of such a Situation as he then described . . . now addresses you again.

After congratulating you most sincerely on the Return of your Health may I be permitted with great Respect to ask, Whether at this Time, when Kingdoms weep & the Welfare of Millions is become a Prey, when the Pride and Cruelty of a few have been permitted to triumph & the Sufferings of Nations are beheld with Derision, Is it possible that the Earl of Chatham should forbear one Moment to exert himself for the Welfare of a People who are not by Constitution ungrateful and are by no Means insensible of what they owe him. The Caprice & Petulance of a few shou'd not determine the Character of a Great Nation who have often approved themselves very grateful to their Benefactors & in Respect of Government a most patient, loyal, & Worthy People.

The Expectations of this people were raised very high by the Talents they had seen vested in one whose Integrity had before appeared by the most Affecting Proofs. His Want of Health afforded the ready means of an Apology while the eyes of the Publick were directed with the utmost Impatience to the Person whom they supposed particularly chosen by Heaven for the Preservation of their Kingdoms.

Great was the Pleasure they received from hearing by the Publick Papers that his Health was restored, because great indeed were their Expectations . . . but what Apology must now be made to those who believe that their first Friend has forsaken them & that the Patriot Flame is extinguished in his Breast?

My own private Apprehension is that the true State of the People who compose this Country is but too little known to Persons of high Rank, who indeed have not the Means of knowing it except at second hand from those whose Situation obliges them often to see and sometimes to feel the true State of these Kingdoms. This last Remark might perhaps be extended to some other Countries; but it is more particularly applicable to this where the true Cause of the Sufferings of the People is likewise the true Cause of the Immoderate Aggrandisement of the Noblesse & the Principal Gentry, tho the final Consequence of this must be as direful as it has been in other Countries.

If the Earl of Chatham shou'd be kind enough to believe that my Address to him on this occasion is as well meant as was my letter to him last Year he will perhaps oblige me with the Favour of an Interview & some Conference on this Subject.

I am with the Greatest Respect

Lord Chatham's Very Sincere Friend

Kentish Town 12th 8 mo 1768.

R. Willan.

⁵⁴ See notes 49 and 50 above.

⁵⁵ See note 51 above.

⁵⁶ The Earl of Chatham retired to North End House, Hampstead Heath, in 1766 to recover from his mental illness. The house was lent by Charles Dingley (B. Tunstall, *William Pitt, Earl of Chatham*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1938, p. 370).

Christopher C. Booth

P.S. Lord C. will be pleased to direct to Dr. Willan in Gray's Inn, London or as I am almost always in the Country . . . to the Vine in Kentish Town.⁵⁷

There is no way of knowing whether the request for an interview was granted. The letter, however, is interesting not so much in the exhortation to the Earl of Chatham nor in Robert Willan's dropping of the conventional Quaker "thou", as in the later sentences which reveal Willan as a non-conformist radical who would have found a kindred spirit in Tom Paine.

By now the Scarborough Quakers were wondering what had become of their one-time member Robert Willan (E). On 6 September 1768 the Monthly Meeting appointed three Friends to make enquiries about him since he had "long since removed from Scarboro'" and was "now residing within the Compass of the two-weeks Meeting in London". They finally reported in February 1769 that "Robert Willan proposes shortly to remove to America . . ." and therefore "the affair is drop'd".⁵⁸

Robert Willan (E) was to make his final move. He had a land grant for 5,000 acres in Florida and he wanted to investigate its potential. It seems that it was all he had. He had no money of his own, and he now went again to his friend and patron, John Fothergill, to enlist his help in emigrating for a second time to America. On this occasion, the cautious Fothergill insisted on guarantees for the money that he advanced and the Florida land grant was assigned to him as security.⁵⁹ Robert Willan (E) travelled to America in the summer of 1770 and by July he was in Charlestown, South Carolina. He wrote from there to James Pemberton, an influential Quaker in Philadelphia and close friend by correspondence of Dr. Fothergill, telling him of his interest in "Lands in a new settled province of East Florida". He was intending, he wrote, to take "a Turn to Philadelphia" and explained that "I purpose to come by Land if I can have Company for several Reasons & am just now treating for the Purchase of a Horse and Chaise for that Purpose". His subsequent explanation of the necessity to draw money on James Pemberton was a model of the begging letter. In fact he did not need help. He borrowed from D. and J. Bordeaux instead.⁶⁰

As with many other things in his life, his last journey did not go as he intended. He made it, not in a chaise, but by sea, and by the time he reached Philadelphia, he was mortally sick. The nature of his illness is not known, but it was sufficiently serious that Thomas Bond, one of Philadelphia's leading physicians, was requested by the government to visit him. He was taken ashore and cared for by Elizabeth Robinson, but to no avail. Robert Willan died on 26 September 1770, "aged about 50".⁶¹

Thomas Bond, who no doubt knew Robert Willan (E) during his early period in Philadelphia, was appointed to administer the estate. His effects were sold – a globe for £5 10s 0d, "9 stockings, 2 hndkfs, Neckcloth, 2 caps, waistcoat, Rmt of muslin,

⁵⁷ MS. autograph letter; Robert Willan to the Earl of Chatham, Kentish Town, 12th 8th mo. 1768. Public Record Office, PRO 30/8/66.

⁵⁸ Minute Books of Scarborough and Whitby Monthly Meeting, 6 September, 6 December 1768, and 7 February 1769. Brynmor Jones Library, University of Hull.

⁵⁹ Corner and Booth, *op. cit.*, note 24 above, p. 339.

⁶⁰ MS. autograph letter; Robert Willan to James Pemberton of Philadelphia. [Charles]town, 17th 7th mo. 1770. Pemberton Papers, vol. 22, p. 35, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

⁶¹ Monthly Meeting Record of Friends Deceased in Philadelphia. Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

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Sundry Pictures &c &c” for £1 4s 6d, several watches, and two trunks. As befitted the one-time schoolmaster, there were also 114 books, sold in lots of two to seven but tantalizingly without titles. The total proceeds, including “several pieces of Silver found in his Chest”, were £47 10s 0d, which paid for his coffin, the letters of administration, Captain Blewers for his freight from South Carolina, Dr. Bond for his visits and for medicines, and part only of the Bill of Exchange in favour of D. and J. Bordeaux of Charlestown.⁶² The news must have reached Fothergill in London some time during the winter. The next year, he tried to dispose of the Florida land grant. Writing on 22 April 1771, he told William Logan in Philadelphia “if any adventurer with you would offer me anything considerable for it I would put him in possession of the grant It must be worth £150 sterling to someone now”.⁶³ There is no evidence as to whether Dr. Fothergill ever got his money back.

The final question remains. Who was Robert Willan “the Elder”? It is quite clear that he was not the father of the dermatologist. He must have been well known to John Fothergill in his early years in London between 1736 and 1740, the period when Fothergill describes Robert Willan (E) as an apprentice to a “wholesale dealer”.⁶⁴ The support that Fothergill gave him, not only at this time but also throughout his life, suggests that there was some more compelling reason than mere acquaintance that encouraged Fothergill to help him. There were at that time no Quaker Willans in London, and it therefore seems possible that Robert Willan (E) belonged to the family at Sedbergh who were the most important members of the Meeting at Briggflatts which John Fothergill had attended as a schoolboy. He could well have been Robert Anthony (Robert IV), son of Miles Willan who died prematurely. It seems possible that after the death of his father in 1720, when his mother relinquished her claims to his estate to Robert (I), he may have been taken into the Quaker fold. It is also perhaps significant that he inherited £150 from his grandfather Robert (I) in 1739, when he reached the age of twenty-one years; that same year Robert Willan (E) gave up his apprenticeship and went to Edinburgh as a medical student. Robert Anthony Willan, a fatherless apprentice, member of a Sedbergh family well known to John Fothergill and for whom he had a high regard, seems most likely to have been the recipient of Fothergill’s generosity.

CONCLUSION

Today only datestones remain on the houses near Sedbergh where the Willan family lived for so long. Richard (IV), who was to receive the news of his famous brother’s death in Madeira in 1812, inherited the property at the Hill in 1777. He parted company with the Friends in 1788, and they recorded how “Richard Willan acknowledged the kindness of Friends but there did not appear any desire in him of returning to our Society again and having joined himself to the established religion of this Nation, we do not look upon him as a member of our Society”.⁶⁵

⁶² Letters of Administration. Robert Willan Deceased, 6 October 1770. Philadelphia City Hall.

⁶³ Corner and Booth, *op. cit.*, note 24 above, p. 339.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁶⁵ Minute Books of Sedbergh Monthly Meeting, 29th 7th mo. 1788. County Record Office, Kendal, Cumbria.

Long after his death in 1820 at the age of seventy-four, Richard Willan was remembered by Adam Sedgwick (1870), native of Dent and Professor of Geology at Cambridge when he taught the young Charles Darwin. Sedgwick described Richard Willan as “a thorough Dalesman”, who was “a lively cheerful man with a love for classical learning” Unlike his father, he was a man of temperate habits, “no small praise”, wrote Sedgwick, “during those days of deep potations among the County Squires of the North of England”. He taught Alan Sedgwick how to fish, and shot grouse enthusiastically on the moors around Dent. Sedgwick’s recollections of Richard Willan were written when he was over eighty, and it is perhaps not surprising that the old man’s memories of the admired friend of his youth may not have been entirely accurate. He recorded that Richard Willan had fought as a volunteer at the battle on the Heights of Abraham, an unlikely story since Richard would in 1759 have been scarcely thirteen years old.

According to Sedgwick, Richard Willan (IV) retained “his pleasant bright address even to old age”. Until weighed down by infirmity, he was “always a wellcome guest at the whist table of an evening party at Sedbergh, or at a graver meeting of the intellectual men from the neighbouring Dales”. When he died, he was buried in Sedbergh churchyard by a priest who was a lifelong friend, and his tombstone stands against the north wall of the church. He was the last of the Willans of Marthwaite.

SUMMARY

The father of Robert Willan the dermatologist has been erroneously identified by most writers since Bateman’s memoir written in 1812. It was assumed that the father of Robert Willan graduated M.D. in Edinburgh in 1745. Recent evidence from a study of the Friends’ records shows that this Robert Willan could not have been the father of the dermatologist since the Edinburgh M.D. was working in Scarborough from 1745 to 1748, at which time he emigrated to Pennsylvania until 1753. The father of the dermatologist meantime married in 1745 and his children were born at his home, The Hill, near Sedbergh between 1746 and 1757. It is unlikely that the father of the dermatologist was an M.D., and when he died he was described as a “man midwife”. Robert Willan M.D. of Edinburgh appears to have been born around 1720 and there is evidence that he died in Philadelphia in 1770. It seems likely that he was a kinsman of the dermatologist’s family. His precise identity, however, remains uncertain.

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