Sir Charles Scott Sherrington’s Letters: Considerations on the Intersections of Poetry and Physiology
Bruce M. Gao, Dr. Frank W. Stahnisch (University of Calgary, Canada)

Introduction

Oxford-based neurophysiologist Sir Charles Scott Sherrington (1857-1952) was a poet and a scientist. Canadian neurosurgeon Wilder Graves Penfield (1891-1976), who was under Sherrington’s tutelage for a period of time, noted how Sherrington was able to skillfully separate his two passions from one another, keeping one from tainting the other.

Sherrington the Physiologist

Sherrington was highly renowned for his meticulous research on neuronal function and integrated activation of spinal cord reflexes, publishing prolifically such as with his textbook The Integrative Action of the Nervous System (1906) and receiving the Nobel Prize in 1932.

In lab, Sherrington had been a staunch observer of factual information, refusing to jump to unsupported conclusions (Penfield, 1957).

Sherrington’s Lab Notebook where he recorded procedures, ideas, lectures and observations from his laboratory in detail. The book is replete with sketches of different species of animals such as chimpanzees, rats, dogs and cats (Sherrington Collection, Oxford)

Sherrington’s Letters

Sherrington had the habit to write letters to his scientific colleagues, especially during the period before the first world war where he was academically prolific.

Although Sherrington separated poetry and physiology in his daily life, enclosed with these scientific communications were often lines and even books of poetry.

Sherrington’s Lab Notebook where he recorded procedures, ideas, lectures and observations from his laboratory in detail. The book is replete with sketches of different species of animals such as chimpanzees, rats, dogs and cats (Sherrington Collection, Oxford)

And was I grief’d, my dear Ruffini. Accept a little volume of English poetry which my wife of much read. All success & a happy New Year to you yours! Your sincere friend Charles Sherrington

“Accept a little volume of English poetry which my wife and I much read.” Sherrington encloses a book of poetry when writing to Angelo Ruffini (1864-1929), an Italian histologist and embryologist, in 28 December 1902. Sherrington had never met Ruffini in person, but both worked with the higher goal of the advancement of science (Sherrington Collection, Oxford)

Outside the laboratory, Sherrington was a poet - weaving words together to create intricate compositions. He wrote The Assaying of Brabantius and other Verse (1925) where he explains how words had messages of “heavenly things to tell”

The Assaying of Brabantius, and other verse (Sherrington Collection, Oxford)

Many scientists thanked Sherrington for his verse including Henry Head, William McDougall, Lancelot Hogben and Charles Robert Richet. Though autographs and letters analyzed, it seems that Sherrington used poetry to build personal friendships and remain humble during his scientific correspondence. This helped Sherrington find success and pleasure in both of his passions. In other words, Penfield missed this aspect of Sherrington’s life - Sherrington indeed included poetry in his world of science through letter writing.

Future investigation includes acquiring Sherrington’s letters that he sent out to the aforementioned scientists that are not stored in the Sherrington Collection at Oxford.

References

- History of Medical Sciences Project (2015) The Sherrington Collection (Digital). Available at: https://cslide.medsci.ox.ac.uk/items/view/1005