

Looking Back in History

## Sir Erasmus Wilson – A pioneer in dermatology

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### INTRODUCTION

William James Erasmus Wilson [Figure 1] was a leading figure who pioneered Dermatology in England. He popularized the term “Dermatology” when he founded the first chair of dermatology at the Royal College of Surgeons in 1869. His contributions to dermatology were numerous including his most popular work, “*Diseases of the Skin – A Practical and Theoretical Treatise.*” One of the greatest achievements of Wilson was to establish dermatology as a medical specialty in England during which time it was hostile to specialization.<sup>[1]</sup>

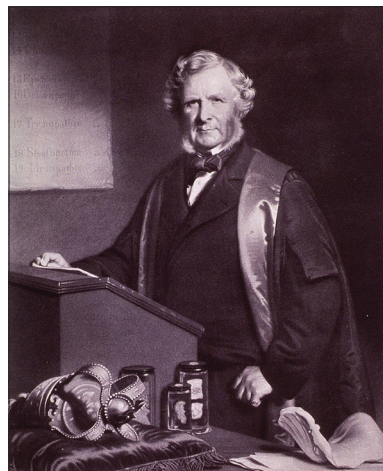


Figure 1: William James Erasmus Wilson FRCS FRS (1809–1884).

### EARLY LIFE

Wilson was born in London on November 25, 1809. His father, William Wilson, was a surgeon in the Royal Navy and his mother was an artist. He studied at Dartford Grammar School. In 1826, Wilson was a pupil of Mr. Abernathy at St. Bartholomew’s Hospital. He won prizes in surgery and midwifery at the Aldersgate School of Medicine and became a skillful surgeon and dissector. In 1830, he passed the licentiate examination of the Society of Apothecaries, and 1 year later, he became a member of the Royal College of Surgeons.<sup>[1]</sup>

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**Table 1:** Milestones in Sir Erasmus Wilson's career.

Year	Milestones
1831–1836	He started his career as a demonstrator in anatomy at University College and remained in this post for 5 years
1836–1840	He started a private general practice
1840	Appointed as a lecturer on anatomy and physiology at Middlesex Hospital and developed an interest in the subject of skin diseases
1840	He was appointed as a sub-editor of the Lancet by Thomas Wakley
1840	He was also appointed as a consultant surgeon to the Marylebone Infirmary
1844–1845	His practice grew rapidly due to his interest in dermatology and his philanthropic disposition
1845	He quit his job as a sub-editor of the Lancet
1869	Professor of dermatology at the college of surgeons
1870–1878	He remained as the first professor at the Council of the Royal Society of Surgery
1879	he resigned from his post as a professor of dermatology in the college of surgeons

## MEDICAL CAREER AND CONTRIBUTIONS

Wilson started his medical career as a demonstrator tutoring students in anatomy. He was a skilled surgeon who showed his expertise in dissection. Later, he developed an interest in skin diseases and published a couple of articles in Lancet. He became acquainted with Thomas Wakley, the editor, and founder of the Lancet. His dermatology career flourished in his private practice and he was busy holding multiple posts at the same time [Table 1]. He was named as the first professor in dermatology due to his contributions to the specialty [Table 2].<sup>[1,2]</sup>

## INTERESTS, CONTROVERSY, AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Wilson was the first dermatologist to own a bungalow. He believed that a bungalow provides the best sanitary home for a family and bought the first bungalow at the Westgate-on-sea. This emphasizes the fact that Wilson was a great advocate of cleanliness, hygiene, and regular bathing. His work on the history of Turkish baths helped revitalize bathing spas in England.<sup>[3]</sup>

Wilson was the first physician to endorse a personal care product, Pears soap. It all started with his book on "Healthy skin" (1845). To promote cleanliness, he encouraged all social class people to use soaps for bathing. His most notorious statement about Pears soap was mixed with his other soap comments and appeared in Pears soap advertisement. This created controversies about Wilson's involvement with

**Table 2:** Contributions and honors of Sir Erasmus Wilson in dermatology.

Year	Achievements
1842	"Diseases of the Skin – A Practical and Theoretical Treatise" a landmark of the English school of dermatology was published
1843	He was elected as one of the original 149 fellows of the Royal College of Surgeons principally for his contribution on a cutaneous parasite, Demodex
1845	"A Practical Treatise on Healthy Skin; with Rules for the Medical and Domestic Treatment of Cutaneous Diseases" was the most popular book on skincare for the lay audience
1847	"Portraits of the skin"
1855	"Folio Atlas of Portraits of Diseases of the Skin"
Other achievements	Pioneering descriptions on lichen planus, exfoliative dermatitis, roseola, and neurotic excoriations Separated acne vulgaris from acne rosacea Investigated <i>Demodex folliculorum</i> Estimated the number of hairs on the human head (147 black per square inch, 162 chestnut, and 182 blonds) He described trichorrhoeis nodosa Proposed the name xanthoma or xanthelasma for the condition called vitiligoidea Described pityriasis rosea as <i>Lichen annulatus</i> He also described erythema nodosa Suggested the name morphea
1867	He established the second dermatology journal "the Quarterly Journal of Cutaneous Medicine and Diseases of the Skin"
1881	He was knighted for many charitable works
1884	A gold medal was awarded by the college of surgeons recognizing his achievements

such commercial products. Even though Wilson denied any connection with these advertisements, some confusion existed whether he received any financial compensation from the Pears Soap Company that added to his wealth.<sup>[2]</sup>

Due to his interest in Egyptology, in 1878, he funded and organized the transportation from Egypt and erection of Cleopatra's Needle obelisk in London at the Victoria Embankment of the River Thames.<sup>[1]</sup>

During the mid-century, the attitude toward specialization was still unfavorable in England. When Wilson pioneered dermatology in England, it was widely criticized that "the exclusive practice of some small specialty tends to perpetuate and increase ignorance, if it does not deprave professional morals." Wilson's greatest achievement was to establish dermatology as a medical specialty worthy of the

respect of the physician in such a hostile environment to specialization.<sup>[1]</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Apart from being a dermatologist, Wilson was an author, sub-editor of the journal “Lancet,” hygienist, philanthropist, and Egyptologist. As a man of many talents, his love for dermatology made him one of the leaders of dermatology.

## Declaration of patient consent

Patient consent is not required as there are no patients in this study.

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Nil.

## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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