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Email: cdjsinclair@johnmacintyre.org

Norris Wolfenden: 100 years on

Christopher D. J. Sinclair

Abstract

Richard Norris Wolfenden (1854–1926) had a remarkable and varied career in both medical practice and marine biology. As a laryngologist, he was involved in the controversial treatment of the Crown Prince of Germany with Morell Mackenzie in 1887 and later undertook oceanographic research in the North Atlantic as a founding member of the Challenger Society for Marine Science. In 1896, he created a striking series of X-ray images of marine echinoderms taken from the seabed of Scapa Flow in Orkney. These beautiful images, created with the assistance of fellow physician John Macintyre, were published in the inaugural issue of the *Archives of Skiagraphy*. In this work, we give a brief appreciation of Wolfenden's contributions 100 years after his death and take the opportunity to offer a correction to two minor inaccuracies in a previously published account of Wolfenden's life.

Norris Wolfenden: 100 years on

Richard Norris Wolfenden founded this journal in 1887 with Morell Mackenzie and edited it for a decade.[1,2] One hundred years after his death, it is timely to remember the intriguing contributions Wolfenden made to his varied fields of study. His life and work were described in three papers published in *JLO* in 1989.[3–5] They discuss his education at Cambridge University, practice in laryngology (including his involvement in the treatment of the Crown Prince of Germany with Mackenzie in 1887) and his subsequent retreat from medical practice, devoting his time instead to scientific voyages in his yacht in the North Atlantic.[3] However, perhaps his most memorable and unique contribution to radiological history was his documentation of the marine creatures of Orkney with fellow laryngologist John Macintyre, using the recently discovered X-rays.

In the summer of 1896, Wolfenden dredged the seabed of Scapa Flow, collecting specimens of echinoderms including starfish and urchins. He made images of the specimens using Macintyre's early X-ray equipment in Glasgow and published them in the first issue of the *Archives of Skiagraphy*[6] and then in a special supplement the following year.[7] He hoped nothing further than "to show that the new method of radiography may be made of considerable service in zoology, as an accessory to dissection and description".[7]

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the field of "X-ray conchology" did not gain traction,[4] being limited compared to dissection. However, the images of starfish, crabs and lobsters are unique and beautiful. In an unsigned review in *Nature*, the merits of Wolfenden's work were said, likely disingenuously, to serve a positive purpose "in the awakening of the mind of the physicist to the fact that animals exist and have a form and symmetry capable of scientific treatment".[8]

John Macintyre pioneered the creation of moving X-ray images, publishing his work on the motion of a frog's leg in the same inaugural issue of the *Archives of Skiagraphy*.[9] In his thorough and engaging review, Damkaer inaccurately credits the development of cineradiology to Wolfenden,[3] likely due to the adjacent publication of Macintyre's and Wolfenden's work in the same issue. Macintyre himself went on to become a co-proprietor and editor of *JLO*.[10] In Figure 8 of the same paper, the author suggests that Macintyre appears as the President of the British Laryngological Association in an 1894 photograph alongside Wolfenden and Macintyre's wife Agnes.[3] However, given the apparent advanced years of the sitters and dissimilarity to other contemporary images, it is highly unlikely that the photograph features John and Agnes Macintyre, who were, respectively, 37 and 38 years old at the time.

Wolfenden died in August 1926, leaving a varied and intriguing legacy, including his founding of this journal. In the century that has passed since, it is worth pausing to remember his many notable contributions, not least his brief and unique episode as the first X-ray conchologist.

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- R. Norris Wolfenden, founder of *JLO*, died 100 years ago
- His varied career spanned both laryngology and marine zoology
- He made innovative and striking images of the sea creatures of Orkney, just months after the discovery of X-rays

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