Penfield, Wilder Graves (1891 – 1976)

Canadian neurosurgeon

He was born in Spokane, Washington, USA, and after undergraduate studies at Princeton, went to Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar in 1914, where he studied physiology under Charles Sherrington; the outbreak of World War I interrupted his studies. Wounded in the war, he returned to the USA, where he finished his medical education at Johns Hopkins University. Further scientific study in Oxford and Spain prepared him for his experimental neurosurgical work, which he developed in conjunction with surgical practice in New York at the Presbyterian Hospital and the College of Physicians and Surgeons at Columbia University. He moved to a neurological appointment at McGill University in 1928, and was instrumental in founding the world-famous Montreal Neurological Institute of which he became the first director (1934-60). An outstanding practical neurosurgeon, his experimental work on animals and on the exposed brains of conscious human beings assisted in understanding the higher functions of the brain, and the causes of symptoms of brain disease such as epilepsy, and the mechanisms involved in speech. He became a Canadian citizen in 1934. Following his retirement in 1960, he began a successful second career as a novelist and biographer.