**Hanson Presentation: Elana Rakoff, Indiana University, Bloomington**

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**Title:**

Competition and Consensus: The Strange Evolution of Dermatological Nosologies, from Willan and Bateman to von Hebra

**Abstract:**

In 1933, the physician William Pusey, author of the first English-language history of dermatology, devoted a deliberately brief section to the ‘serious activity’ of dozens of nineteenth-century physicians in creating nosologies (or disease classifications) of skin diseases. In Pucey’s widely repeated precis of these controversies, the only two nosologies of significance were two landmark treatises published in 1813 and 1860, respectively, by the English physicians Robert Willan and Thomas Bateman, and the Austrian physician Ferdinand von Hebra. According to Pusey, the symptom-based classification of Willan and Bateman allowed the ‘rapid upbuilding of dermatology’ by providing the groundwork to ‘immediately’ incorporate contemporary scientific research, ‘until the knowledge of skin diseases arrived at a point where Hebra could make a reasonably satisfactory classification on a pathological basis.’ And so, Pusey declared, there was no reason to detail the other, failed alternative nosologies.

Although Pusey’s remarks should be appreciated in the context of his intended audience of medical students, his short narrative makes a number of questionable assumptions about why and how these two particular nosologies became so influential. In my paper, I seek to explain their influence by analyzing the long-running and contentious debates over a number of successful –  and unsuccessful – nosologies advocated by various physicians in England, France and Germany during the nineteenth century. I argue that the transition from classifying skin diseases by prominent symptoms to purported underlying causes was hardly as inevitable as Pusey claimed, nor was it simply a matter of incorporating contemporary scientific knowledge. I first situate Willan’s and Bateman’s work as a generational rejection of eighteenth-century nosologists, and demonstrate how bitter infighting within the French medical establishment played an unexpected role in circulating ‘le systeme des Anglais’ in the 1820s and 1830s. I then examine how various nosologies promoted during the 1830s and 1840s became increasingly ambitious and comprehensive, often utilizing conspicuously ‘scientific’ and formal terminology. This shift in rhetoric, I argue, was due to the growing general prestige of pathological research championed by Rokitansky well before such approaches were specifically applied to dermatological diseases, and played a crucial role in the seemingly swift acceptance of von Hebra’s work. I conclude that the seeming widespread acceptance of Willan’s and Von Hebra’s nosologies over a number of decades was not as much due, as Pusey claimed, to their positive perception, but rather that the possible alternatives failed to garner consensus. Indeed, many physicians were intensely frustrated that using Willan’s and Von Hebra’s nosologies for diagnostic purposes did not lead to corresponding improvements in treatment, and complained that such nosologies were of little use in day-to-day medical practice.