

# Wilder Penfield

Neurosurgeon (1891–1976)

During his lifetime he was called “the greatest living Canadian,” but Penfield was born in Spokane, Washington. He attended Princeton where, at 170 pounds, he played tackle on the football team. Upon graduation in 1913, he won a Rhodes Scholarship, but Merton College granted him permission to defer his entrance so that he might fulfill an agreement to coach the Princeton football team, captained by Hobey Baker.

At Oxford, he met Canadian-born Sir William Osler at whose home he convalesced in 1916 after a German torpedo blew up a ship on which he was crossing the English Channel to serve in a hospital in France. Osler was one of the founding doctors of Johns Hopkins University, and it was there that Penfield earned his medical degree in 1918. Today, med students at McGill University delight in saying that they’ll meet at the corner of Penfield and Osler.

In 1919, he was a surgical intern at Boston’s Peter Bent Brigham Hospital, serving an apprenticeship under HARVEY CUSHING. In 1921, Penfield accepted a post at Columbia and Presbyterian Hospital where he developed his surgical techniques under ALLEN O. WHIPPLE, later his co-sponsor at the Century. In 1928, Penfield was invited to Montreal, where he became the city’s first neurosurgeon. Six years later he founded McGill University’s world-famous Montreal Neurological Institute and the associated Montreal Neurological Hospital.

Penfield was a groundbreaking researcher and a highly original surgeon. With his colleague Herbert Jasper, he invented the Montreal Procedure, in which he treated patients with severe epilepsy by destroying nerve cells in the brain where the seizures originated. His development of a neurosurgical technique known as the “Penfield dissector” is still in use. Penfield is memorialized in Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* where characters use a device called a Penfield Mood Organ to dial up emotions on demand.

Twice decorated by Canada, he was awarded the United States Medal of Freedom, crosses of the French Legion of Honor and the Greek Legion of George I, and the British Order of Merit. In 1967, Penfield published *The Difficult Art of Giving*, a biography of ALAN GREGG, a director at the Rockefeller Foundation, who had engineered the grant that made his Institute possible. Three weeks before his death at age 85, Penfield completed the draft of his autobiography, *No Man Alone*, his sixth book.

