

Obituary

BARBARA DUNCUM
(1910–2001)

Barbara Mary Pycraft was born on 22 February 1910. Her father, William Pycraft, was an ornithologist on the staff of the Natural History Museum, South Kensington, and the author of several books. After reading history at London University she was appointed research assistant at the Wellcome Medical History Museum, still in Wigmore Street, in the spring of 1931. Her first work involved the classifying of items of folklore, after which she worked on the history of cinchona, for which she had to learn a modicum of Spanish, and from this she passed to descriptions of native medical procedures. In the course of this work she became experienced in researching aspects of the history of medicine, and in 1936 she was charged with organizing and running a journal-abstracting service covering the main fields of interest to the Museum.

In 1937 she felt the need for a change of direction, and took up a post in Oxford with an Agricultural Research Institute. Shortly afterwards she was asked to produce a brief history of anaesthesia for inclusion in a textbook being written by Professor Robert Macintosh, director of the newly established Nuffield Department of Anaesthetics in Oxford. The result was so satisfactory that she was offered the post of historical researcher to the Department, with the suggestion that her researches should form the basis of a DPhil thesis. The outbreak of war in September 1939 put an unexpected administrative load on her, so her research in the Bodleian and the Radcliffe Science Library had to be done in the evenings. On 9 September 1940 she married Philip Duncum, a journalist on the *Oxford Mail and Times*.

Barbara obtained her DPhil in 1945, and immediately set about rewriting and augmenting her thesis to make it suitable for publication. In 1946 she was offered employment with the Nuffield Foundation, so the Duncums moved to London, where Philip continued his work in journalism, and Barbara researched in the major scientific libraries. The book, *The development of inhalation anaesthesia*, sponsored by the Wellcome Museum, was published by Oxford University Press in 1947. It attained its status as the authoritative history of inhalation anaesthesia, and as a classic in the history of medicine also, without advertising, and purely on its merits, since apparently no review copies were ever sent out. Its published price was £1-15-0, and by the early 1990s much-sought-after second-hand copies were costing more than fifty times as much. It was reprinted by the History of Anaesthesia Society in 1994, to her great pleasure, and the dismay of the antiquarian booksellers.

At the Nuffield Foundation, Dr Duncum researched the history of hospital architecture for a book on hospital planning, wrote reports, speeches for the Director, and undertook general administrative duties. She retired in the late 1970s, but found herself in the limelight when, with the founding of the History of Anaesthesia Society in 1986, she was elected with acclaim as one of the first group of honorary members, a distinction that united her again with her erstwhile chief, now Sir Robert Macintosh.

Travelling became a problem, but she attended London meetings, and contributed papers, her last being at the Nitrous Oxide Sesquicentennial Meeting in December 1994, when she spoke, with much new information, about the reintroduction of the gas in the 1860s.

She died on 16 October 2001, after a short illness, at the age of ninety-one. She is survived by her husband of 61 years of married happiness, and her sister, Mrs Margaret Frost.

David Zuck