

Obituary

FREDERICK NOËL LAWRENCE POYNTER, B.A., Ph.D., F.L.A., F.R.S.L.,
Hon. D. Litt. (California), Hon. M.D. (Kiel).

24 December 1908 – 11 March 1979

Dr. Noël Poynter died at Brive in France after an illness of only a few weeks. For many years he was the veritable pivot about whom the study of medical history in Britain rotated. His creative powers were largely devoted to the exploration and display of the vast collections left by Sir Henry Wellcome, and it was during the years 1964–73 as Director of the Wellcome Institute of the History of Medicine that he exerted his greatest influence. His life was distinguished by his exceptional capacity for creative organization and generous stimulation of the work of other historical societies, as well as individuals, in whatever country they might be. Thus his influence was felt from Vancouver and Los Angeles in the West to Melbourne and Sydney in the East, as well as in the countries in Europe. He was the author and editor of a number of books and published many papers.

Noël Poynter was educated at King's and University College, University of London. In 1930 he became Assistant Librarian at the Wellcome Museum and Historical Medical Library. At this time he came to work closely with Sir Henry Wellcome and espoused the predominant motive of his life, that of augmenting, classifying, arranging, and displaying the Wellcome Collection. The Wellcome Historical Medical Museum was the first in England to be devoted to illustrating the history of medicine. It was opened on 24 June 1913 at 54A Wigmore Street, London. From the first it contained a fine series of manuscripts and early printed medical books, but its vast extent was not appreciated. Even at this time it included an apothecary's shop of 1625, familiar to those who enter the Wellcome Institute now in Euston Road. A barber-surgeon's operating room combined with a unique portrait of William Clowes was to provide the stimulus for the production of Poynter's first book, *The selected writings of William Clowes (1544-1608)*.

In 1926 on the reopening of a rearranged Museum Sir D'Arcy Power, remarked, "There is still more than a life-time's work to be done in arranging and describing the present collection." This indeed, has been the task undertaken by all subsequent Directors of the Wellcome Institute. The project still remains unfinished.

During the second World War, Poynter was in the R.A.F. from 1941–46. In 1954 he became Chief Librarian, and in 1964 Director of the Wellcome Museum and Library. Evidence of his influence on the Society of Apothecaries of London appeared in 1958 in the founding of the Faculty of the History of Medicine of which he was Secretary until 1971, when he became Chairman. It was always his belief that interest in the history of medicine should be spread as widely as possible both in medical and non-medical circles, and this policy the Faculty still actively pursues.

Whilst Director, Noël Poynter was active as a member of the Bibliographical Society and the literary side of his activities was recognized by the award of a Doctorate of Literature. He played a prominent part in reorganizing the Société Internationale d'Histoire de la Médecine, and then was Secretary-General of the Inter-



Doctor F. N. L. Poynter

Obituary

national Academy of the History of Medicine in 1965; later President from 1970–73. Over the same period he organized the British Society of the History of Medicine, and he presided over a very successful International Congress in London in 1972.

During the years in which he was Director of the Wellcome Institute, Poynter's advice was increasingly sought on a wide diversity of subjects. Whether dealing with the organization of societies or the publication of research in medical history, he modestly displayed a mastery of all aspects of the subject which placed him in world-wide high regard. He was naturally requested to give a large number of lectures, amongst which were the Gideon Delaune Lecture to the Society of Apothecaries (1964) and the Vicary Lecture at the Royal College of Surgeons (1973). Always happiest when talking about Tudor medicine in England, the Vicary Lecture gave him exceptional scope in developing the social context of the medicine of the Tudor period. This interest in the practice of medicine in England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is a thread woven into all his writings, such as his early study of William Clowes. In 1950 this was followed by *A seventeenth-century doctor and his patients: John Symcotts*. Symcotts, for years a medical attendant of Oliver Cromwell, left papers some of which were in the Wellcome Historical Medical Library. They provided Poynter with the opportunity of reconstructing the life of a seventeenth-century physician. This, with his friend W. J. Bishop, was carried out with scholarly skill. *William Harvey. Lectures on the whole of anatomy* (1961) provided the opportunity of collaboration with C. D. O'Malley and K. F. Russell, notable for its meticulous translation and full annotation.

A short history of medicine (1961) was designed to reach the young. The clinical aspects, sketched by K. D. Keele, were followed by Noël Poynter's section on 'Medicine and the community', a masterly general survey of the social aspects of medicine which received wide approbation. *The journal of James Yonge, 1647-1721* (1963) finds Poynter once more giving insights into the practice and social context within which a surgeon of the seventeenth century worked. *Medicine and man* (1971) was a thoughtful contribution to the history of contemporary problems, particularly those surrounding the origins of our National Health Service. It remains very relevant to our present-day problems.

Besides these books Dr. Poynter engaged in wide editorial and publishing activities. In 1958 he edited the proceedings of a valuable symposium on *The brain and its functions*, held at the Wellcome Institute, which included a stimulating address by Sir Henry Dale *Medicine and culture*. (1969) was a symposium not only edited by Poynter but published by the Wellcome Institute as one of a series of publications.

In addition, Poynter edited this quarterly journal, *Medical History*, from 1961 until his retirement in 1973. He also introduced a quarterly bibliography, *Current work in the history of medicine*, invaluable to medical historians.

Poynter's attempts to create at the Wellcome Institute what he knew from personal acquaintance to be the wishes of Sir Henry Wellcome were brilliantly successful especially with regard to the design of the library.

In spite of all the responsible activities which continually occupied him Noël Poynter remained a quiet-voiced, modest man. Those who knew him well felt that his unostentatious generosity was sometimes overlooked.

Obituary

In 1966 he was deeply afflicted by the loss of his first wife, Ruth. His second wife, Dodie, whom he married in 1968 restored to him a new vitality. In 1973 he retired to a long-loved favourite haunt in the Dordogne at Montvalent. There he once more showed his creative gifts in converting some old cottages into a home entirely in harmony with a neighbouring medieval castle. There he was writing an unfinished analysis of medicine in Tudor England when he was overtaken by his last illness.

KENNETH D. KEELE

News, Notes and Queries

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF THE HISTORY OF CANADIAN MEDICINE

Dr. Charles Roland is preparing a bibliography of secondary sources in the history of Canadian medicine and health care. The scope is intended to be as broad as possible: included will be theses and published material of any kind—journal articles, monographs, book chapters, pamphlets, etc. The bibliography is intended to encompass the entire time span of Canadian history, including references to aboriginal medicine.

All of the common sources for references have been or will be consulted, including the complete runs of periodicals such as the *Canadian Historical Review*, *L'Union Médicale du Canada*, the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, the journals devoted to medical history, and the various provincial historical journals. However, it is evident that much material has been published in less obvious sites; these would include articles in journals published outside Canada, contributions to the publications of local or regional historical societies, etc.

Readers are requested to submit full bibliographic details (and reprints or xerox copies if possible) of any items thought to be suitable. The aim of the project will be not only to provide a printed checklist, but also to store and cross-index all references so that pertinent information will be available to scholars on request. It is also intended that the project will be maintained and expanded continuously once the bulk of the data is on file.

Any items considered appropriate should be sent to: Charles G. Roland, M.D., Hannah Professor of the History of Medicine, 3H56-HSC McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario L8S 4J9, Canada.

HANNAH INSTITUTE FOR THE HISTORY OF MEDICINE

Applications are invited for the post of Visiting Professor for one term during the academic year 1980–81. Candidates must hold a doctorate and have teaching experience at university level. For further information please contact: T. Gelfand, Ph.D., Program History of Medicine, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Ottawa, 275 Nicholas Street, Ottawa, Canada K1N 9A9.