

Obituaries

DR. E. ASHWORTH UNDERWOOD (1899-1980)

Edgar Ashworth Underwood was born in Dumfries on 9 March 1899. He was educated at the Dumfries Academy, a school of high standing, and finished his schooldays as Dux (head boy) of the modern side. War service (1917-1919) with the Cameron Highlanders in France followed (his regimental kilt long remained a treasured possession). On demobilization he entered the University of Glasgow and there in 1924 he disconcerted the authorities by not only obtaining the M.A. and the medical qualifications of the M.B. and Ch.B (Commended), but also the B.Sc. in pure science; this achievement involved the complication of two examinations at the same time, which was solved by spending half the time in one and half the time in the other examination. His student career was marked by the vice-presidency of the Glasgow Medico-Chirurgical Society and the award of the Cullen medal for materia medica and the Hunter medals for midwifery and clinical surgery. He was fortunate that for this last subject he had as teacher that great surgeon, Sir William Macewen, the Regius Professor of Surgery, for whom he had great admiration. After a period as resident physician at the Western Infirmary, Glasgow, he entered the Public Health Service obtaining the D.P.H. in 1926 and serving as Assistant MOH in Glasgow and the County of Lanark. From 1929 he occupied posts of increasing importance – Deputy MOH County Borough of Rotherham and Medical Superintendent of Oakwood Sanatorium, 1929-1931; Deputy MOH City of Leeds and Lecturer in Public Health, University of Leeds, 1932-1934; MOH Metropolitan Borough of Shoreditch, 1934-1937; MOH and Chief School Medical Officer County Borough of West Ham, 1937-1945, a dock area that suffered the full force of the blitz.

Underwood's earliest publications with which I am acquainted are concerned with tuberculosis and date from 1931, when he was at Rotherham. The most important was a textbook, *A manual of tuberculosis*, written for nurses, but largely rewritten for the third edition (1945) for the medical student and for all those concerned with the care of tuberculosis patients. A number of papers written between 1931 and 1945 relating to public health show his particular interest in epidemiology and statistics, an interest borne out by his being a Fellow of the Royal Statistical Society and, as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine, a member of the Epidemiology Section from the 1930s and for a time Honorary Secretary of that Section. In 1936 he obtained his M.D. (highly commended) and in 1938 published an *Annual report on the health services for the year 1937, in the County Borough of West Ham*, a work of 460 pages that must be a model of its kind.

From the early thirties Underwood's increasing devotion to the history of medicine became apparent. In 1932 he gave an interesting account of a pamphlet, *Cholera Morbus, precautions, preventives, and remedies*, printed in Doncaster in 1832. With his move to London he gave a number of scholarly papers to the History Section of the Royal Society of Medicine: 'History of the 1832 cholera epidemic in Yorkshire' (1935), 'Lavoisier and the history of respiration' (1944), 'Medicine and science in the writings

Obituaries

of Smollett' (1937), 'Wilhelm Conrad Roentgen' (1945). From 1942-1948 he was Honorary Secretary and from 1948-1950 President of that Section. In the meantime, with his appointment as Director of the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum and Library from January 1946, the history of medicine became his full-time occupation.

At the time of his appointment the Wellcome Library was being prepared for opening to readers for the first time. The years before had been spent in classifying the thousands of books bought by Sir Henry Wellcome. The Museum galleries likewise were being set up for the first time since their removal from Wigmore Street in 1930. The plans for the Library went steadily ahead, but for the Museum it was otherwise. Part of the space originally allocated by Sir Henry for the use of the Museum had already been taken over temporarily by the Wellcome Foundation after the headquarters at Snowhill had been destroyed by bombs. Then in 1947-8 the whole of the space occupied by the Museum was required. Strenuous efforts by Underwood prevented the Museum material being put into store indefinitely and led to the taking of a house in Portman Square, to which he moved with the Museum. Space there was too limited for a permanent exhibition illustrating the history of medicine, and so temporary exhibitions were mounted under Underwood's guidance – Prehistoric Medicine, Medicine of the Aboriginal Peoples of the Commonwealth, Edward Jenner, Medicine in 1850 – to mention some of the subjects chosen. Exhibitions were also staged in the entrance hall of the Wellcome Building, which included commemoration of the Centenary of the birth of Sir Henry Wellcome, and the Centenary of the birth of Paul Ehrlich. For all these material was drawn from the resources of the Library and Museum, and allowed detailed work to be done on important parts of the Museum collections. Underwood wrote descriptive catalogues for a number of these exhibitions. In the mid-fifties the Museum returned to very limited space in the Wellcome Building. The policy of temporary exhibitions was continued, while plans were drawn up for the time when further space would become available – which in the event only materialized after Underwood's retirement in 1964.

The years from 1946 onward established Underwood as a medical historian of international repute. Every hour from 10 a.m. to 2 or 3 a.m. the next morning that could be spared from administration etc. was devoted to editing the work of others or to his own writing and lectures. Works edited by him included the new series of publications of the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum beginning in 1946. He was a meticulous editor and spent many hours ensuring that any work for which he was in any way responsible met his own high standard of accuracy and layout, sometimes to the aggravation of the author at the delay in publication.

Some of Underwood's notable achievements must be mentioned briefly. In *Science, medicine and history*, a collection of ninety essays written by scholars from all over the world in honour of Charles Singer, Underwood set a new standard for such a work both in conception and achievement (a facsimile edition appeared in 1975). In 1928 Charles Singer had published *A short history of medicine* and had made minor alterations in successive printings, but recognizing that extensive revision was required, asked his son-in-law, Dr. Underwood, to do this. The result, Singer and Underwood, *A short history of medicine* (1962) preserved the original design of the early part as written by Singer, but it became virtually a new book by Underwood's



Dr. E. Ashworth Underwood (1899-1980)

Obituaries

account of the great advances made in medicine in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which occupies two-thirds of the more than 800 pages. In 1963 the first volume of *A history of the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries of London, 1617-1815*, was published after much trial and tribulation. The text by H. Charles Cameron based on the manuscript notes extracted by Cecil Wall was revised, annotated, and edited by Underwood. Underwood's notes, which occupy some 200 pages, largely consist of transcripts from the original manuscript sources made by Underwood himself. A long essay by Underwood entitled 'Charles Creighton, the man and his work' appeared in the republication of Creighton's *History of epidemics in Britain* in 1965. 1968 saw the publication of G. A. Lindeboom, *Herman Boerhaave*, edited by Underwood; and *The healers, then and now* by Kurt Pollak translated from the German and adapted for English readers by Underwood. His last major work was *Boerhaave's men at Leyden and after* (1977) – an analysis of the background, length of stay, and later careers of the 746 English-speaking students of medicine, who studied under Boerhaave. Related to this was what was almost his last published writing, 'The first and final phases of the Irish medical students at the University of Leyden, with comments on Oliver Goldsmith' contributed to *Essays in honour of J. D. H. Widdess* (1978) edited by E. O'Brien.

Underwood wrote masterly short biographies of scientists and medical men for *Chambers encyclopedia*, the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and the *Biographical dictionary of scientists*. Numerous papers on various subjects, reviews of books, and obituary notices by him appeared in journals of the history of medicine and science in this country and abroad. The obituaries are a sad reminder of his many friends, eminent historians of science and medicine, who had predeceased him. His interest in the history of science is indicated by the fact that he was a founder-member of the British Society for the History of Science and President from 1957 to 1962. It was largely due to his energy that *The British Journal for the History of Science* was born in 1962. Also he was an honorary lecturer in the Department of the History and Philosophy of Science, University College London; a member of the University Board of Studies and an examiner for those subjects, 1947-1977; and finally an Honorary Research Fellow of the Department at University College.

Recognition of his services to the history of medicine and science came increasingly with the passing of time: Thomas Vicary Lecturer, Royal College of Surgeons, 1946; Guest Lecturer at the Centenary Meeting of the American Medical Association and Fielding H. Garrison Lecturer, 1947; John H. Ash Lecturer, University of Birmingham, 1969; FitzPatrick Lecturer, Royal College of Physicians, 1971-2; Hunterian Trustee, The Royal College of Surgeons from 1953; Honorary Fellow of the American Medical Association; Fellow of the Linnean Society; corresponding member of a number of foreign societies; Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur. Two honours that brought him particular pleasure were his election as a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians in 1965 and the award of the Hon.D.Litt. of the University of Glasgow on the occasion of the centenary of the removal of the University to the Gilmore Hill site.

One of the things that will be most remembered by all who knew him was Underwood's concern for the welfare and contentment of his staff. No day passed

Obituaries

without his enquiring from those who worked for and with him whether all was well, and this referred not merely to Museum business but also more especially to the personal circumstances of each one. This concern for people was coupled with a deep knowledge, love and reverence for books. He himself had a notable library. Perhaps less well known were his love of music and of mountains. His last mountain adventure was the ascent of the Gran Sasso d'Italia, the highest mountain in Italy south of the Alps on a day snatched between a congress at Aquila and meetings in Rome. The climb of nearly 6,000ft. was achieved and the art of "scree-skiing" learnt at the age of sixty-five. An interesting account appeared in the *Alpine Journal* (1964).

A tragedy of the final years was gradually failing eyesight, the frustration of no longer being able to work in libraries to complete projects on which he had already done much work: the second volume of the history of the Society of Apothecaries; the history of urology; a work relating to the manuscripts and letters of Edward Jenner. Illness – a severe attack of shingles, a pathological condition of the oesophagus, and later pneumonia – led to a progressive deterioration of his sight, so that reading and writing gradually became impossible. His very active mind was imprisoned. Music on radio and records, the company of his two much beloved dogs, an elderly dachshund and an amiable, amusing mongrel, were his solace during the day while his wife, Nancy, daughter of Charles Singer, was teaching. He much enjoyed the occasional visits of old friends and of his two daughters and two grandchildren. He died at his home at Walton-on-Thames on 6 March 1980, only three days before his 81st birthday.

MARGARET E. ROWBOTTOM