

Obituary

Walter Pagel, M.D.—12 November 1898–25 March 1983

WITH the passing of Walter Pagel we have lost one of the major figures who shaped the growth of the history of science and medicine in the present century. He was the son of Julius Pagel, a physician who held the Chair in medical history at Berlin and whose research on pre-Salernitan medicine is still authoritative. The elder Pagel's two volume *Geschichte der Medizin* appeared the year of his son's birth. Walter was educated in the classical tradition of the German *humanistische gymnasium* and he went on to study medicine at the Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin where he received his M.D. in 1922. From there he pursued his research for a time at the Robert Koch Institute and then the Berlin Municipal Tuberculosis Hospital in Sommerfeld. His work on this disease was to lead eventually to the standard work, *Pulmonary Tuberculosis: Pathology, Diagnosis, Management and Prevention* (first edition jointly with George Gregory Kayne and L. O'Shaughnessy), which went through four editions from 1939 to 1964.

Along with his medical research Walter Pagel developed a deep interest in the history of medicine, an interest that was stimulated when he heard Henry Sigerist's famous lecture on William Harvey in 1928. After a brief stay at Leipzig with Sigerist he moved to Heidelberg where he lectured on pathology and the history of medicine. Those who attended his lectures on the history of medicine still speak of him as a dynamic teacher.

All of this was to end in 1933 when Hitler came to power. As a Jew Pagel was expelled from his position. Leaving Germany he moved first to the Laboratory of Albert Calmette in Paris and then to the Papworth Village Settlement near Cambridge where he established and administered a pathological laboratory. While there he organized the History of Science Lecture Committee at Cambridge University with Joseph Needham. A selection of lectures from the resultant series was to appear as *The Background to Modern Science* (1938) and the Committee itself led to the present programme in the history and philosophy of science at Cambridge University.

In 1939 Walter Pagel accepted a position as Assistant Pathologist (later Consultant Pathologist) at Central Middlesex Hospital and in 1956, due to ill health, he took a part time position as Consultant Pathologist at Clare Hall Sanatorium in Barnet, retiring finally in 1967.

Serious illness had plagued him from the early 1920s and for the last twenty-five years of his life he was a semi-invalid rarely leaving his house. The loss of his beloved wife, Magda, in 1980 was a great blow to him, one from which he never fully recovered. Considering all of these factors, the quantity of his work is astonishing. The list of his publications prepared by Marianne Winder for his Festschrift [*Science, Medicine and Society in the Renaissance*, ed. Allen G. Debus, 2 vols., 1972] lists over 450 items and his research continued unabated during the final ten years of his life. Most of his early publications were on his medical research, a field in which he was as distinguished as in the history of science and medicine. His work was widely appreciated and in addition to honorary degrees from Basle, Heidelberg and Leeds, he was made an Honorary Fellow of the British Academy. The American Association of the History of Medicine awarded him the William

H. Welch Medal in 1976 and the History of Science Society awarded him the Sarton Medal in 1970. He also received the Dexter Award from the Division of the History of Chemistry of the American Chemical Society.

Pagel's historical research falls into three major categories: Paracelsus and van Helmont, Harvey, and nineteenth century German *Naturphilosophie*. His interest in the period of the Baroque led to an early book on van Helmont [*J.B. van Helmont: Einführung in die philosophische Medizin des Barock* (1930)], but his inaugural lecture at Heidelberg was on 'Virchow und die Grundlagen der Medizin des XIX. Jahrhunderts' [printed as Heft 14 of the *Jena med. hist. Beitr.* 1931]. Deeply aware of the complex nature of the context of seventeenth century scientific discoveries Pagel prepared a six part article on the 'Religious Motives in the Medical Biology of the XVIIth Century' which was published in three issues of the *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* in 1935. By this time it was becoming increasingly aware to him that he could not pursue his studies without a deeper understanding of Paracelsus. This interest was to lead to his magisterial *Paracelsus: An Introduction to Philosophical Medicine in the Era of the Renaissance* (1958; reprinted with a new appendix, 1982). A decade later there appeared his *William Harvey's Biological Ideas* (1967), a work which was received with great acclaim. However, he continued his work on van Helmont over half a century and the resultant book was published only a few months prior to his death (*John Baptista Van Helmont: Reformer of Science and Medicine*, 1982). One final book now in page proof still awaits us (*The Smiling Spleen* to be published by S. Karger).

Pagel's research is essential for our understanding of key figures of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and he was also well aware of the importance of the mystical thought of that period for an understanding of the Romantic period. However, his work will remain important also for its methodology—even for those who may have relatively little interest in Paracelsus, van Helmont or Harvey. Pagel was strongly opposed to the positivistic approach that dominated our field until recently. He thought of himself as an internalist, but at the same time he sought a contextual approach to the figures he studied. Because religious motives and mysticism formed a strong part of their world, he believed that the historian must study these non-scientific factors as well as positive achievements. Together they formed an integrated whole. As he explained in his most recent book, he wished

... to submit a synthesis of Van Helmont's scientific and medical discoveries with his cosmology and religious philosophy. An attempt has been made to re-situate the former in their original context and background, which was neither modern, nor scientific, nor medical. The savant is presented as an integrated whole in his personal view of God, the world, and man 'idiocentrically':—by contrast with a selection of what strikes us as relevant and meaningful today 'nostricentrically.' It demands an effort at converting oneself into a contemporary of the savant. However, short this must fall of the target, it may at least help to illuminate the ways in which a discovery was made, or a concept meaningful in science and medicine today was arrived at in spite of its original religious or cosmological overtones [*Van Helmont* (1982), p. ix].

Although Walter Pagel had no regular university position after 1933, he welcomed scholars with similar interests to his home. These visits were very much a part of his life and those who saw him frequently may in a sense think of themselves as participants of an international seminar presided over by a great and kind scholar who will be sorely missed.

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