



W. J. BISHOP, F.L.A.
(1903-1961)

WILLIAM JOHN BISHOP

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It is with great regret that we report the death, on 27 July 1961, of Mr. W. J. Bishop, F.L.A., at the age of 57. As the first editor of the first successful journal of the history of medicine published in Britain, he has left a permanent impression of his scholarship and knowledge throughout the pages of *Medical History* and has given it a character which is truly representative of medico-historical studies today. Unerring in his judgement, he was immediately aware when scholarship sank into pedantry or when, on the other hand, it was sacrificed to the ephemeral attractions of mere journalism. Many of our contributors will recall with gratitude their indebtedness to him, and all our readers will be saddened by his passing.

An obituary article by Dr. F. N. L. Poynter appears on the pages following.

Obituary

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THE news of W. J. Bishop's sudden death has shocked and grieved his many friends and associates. At the peak of his powers, he had entered upon a period of his life which promised great fulfilment and which would have been of great benefit to the study to which he was ever devoted, the history of medicine. That he should have left great projects unfinished is a loss to scholarship, but for his friends the loss which is more grievous is of the man himself, a loyal and unselfish friend, a cheerful and inspiring companion, and a man of infinite patience and understanding. Those who knew Bishop only in his later years, when the fruits of decades of hard work were freely available to all who wished to share them, were always astonished at his extraordinary and detailed knowledge of medicine, a subject which is usually a closed book to all but those trained in its disciplines. His knowledge of historical and literary sources was equally impressive and he often led the way into the most abstruse researches with the authority and familiarity of some well experienced university professor. His was not the superficial acquaintance with subjects which can often be possessed by a mere 'bookman', for it was by no means unknown for him to correct a specialist on some detail in his own specialist work, a situation which often arose when he spent much of his time indexing long and difficult monographs in all branches of the medical sciences.

It may be said that he really belonged to a past age, for he was one of 'Nature's scholars', with a passion for learning which expressed itself the more vigorously because it had never been forced into the sometimes sterile channels which lead to academic honours. He was born in London in 1903 and was a member of a large family. At the age of 17, when he left Sir Walter St. John's Grammar School, he began work in The London Library as a junior assistant. There, in the benevolent shade of the late Sir Charles Hagberg Wright, brother of Sir Almroth Wright, he worked hard on the library catalogue, read voraciously, and let himself be guided on his way by the writers, historians, bishops and professors who formed the membership of that distinguished library and who took an interest in the young assistant's aspirations to scholarship.

An equally sympathetic atmosphere surrounded him when, four years later, he accepted the post of Assistant Librarian in The Royal College of Physicians of London, where the late Dr. Arnold Chaplin was then Harveian Librarian. They worked together on many useful projects, making additions to the catalogue which had been published in 1911 and listing portraits, letters and plate in possession of the College. There too he met Sir Humphry Rolleston and others of the older generation of physicians and medical historians who had a great influence on his own approach to medical history. In his daily life he was

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always more interested in people than in things, and in his work it was personalities rather than problems which attracted him strongly. At the age of 26 he read his first paper to the Section of the History of Medicine of the Royal Society of Medicine and it was published in the *Proceedings* in 1929 with the title, 'English Physicians in Russia in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries'. Three years later, in December 1932, he addressed the Society again on 'The Autobiographies of British Medical Men'. Both papers have for long been regarded and cited as standard references on their subjects. This early success made no difference to his customary modest and unassuming manner and certainly at that time he would have regarded with something like awe the prospect that one day (twenty-seven years later) he would be elected to the Honorary Membership of the Society which had heard his first paper.

The Royal Society of Medicine was indeed to have a profound influence upon his career, for from the peaceful and somewhat antiquarian environment of the College, Bishop moved in 1934 to the bustling activity of the Society's library as Sub-Librarian. There he became familiar with current medical problems and acquired that masterly knowledge of scientific periodicals and their contents which made him so valued a guide to the current literature. During the war years, when he moved, with a great part of the library stock, to St. Albans, his responsibilities were exceptionally heavy, but he always bore them with cheerful equanimity and maintained an uninterrupted and extended service to the profession.

All this time his growing knowledge of medical history had been employed and enlarged in helping others with their own books and papers and he accepted gladly an opportunity to specialize in history when, in 1946, he was offered the post of Librarian of The Wellcome Historical Medical Library. As one who was thoroughly familiar with the medical world and who was widely known in all ranks of the profession he was ideally suited to the task of preparing this new centre of historical research for its public opening. When this took place in 1949 it was chiefly a result of his own determination that, despite post-war restrictions which made it impossible at that time to plan the library as he would have wished, its resources should be made available to scholars in all countries. The demands on his time and energies grew rapidly as the library became known and meanwhile his own literary aspirations, all the keener from the stimulus which they had received from working in this great new collection, were, if not frustrated, indefinitely deferred. He faced this situation with his characteristic directness and at the end of 1953, when he had already committed himself to a number of literary undertakings, he decided that nothing less than full-time literary work would satisfy him. He had already published three books in collaboration with others, and the most successful of these, *Notable Names in Medicine and Surgery* (1944, 2nd ed. 1946, 3rd ed. 1959) again reflected his own special interests. For many years he had been contributing authoritative articles on the most important figures in modern British medicine to the *Dictionary of National Biography*, and he was himself planning a comprehensive *Dictionary of British Medical Biography*, a work which would certainly

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be of lasting value as a standard work of reference. Before long he became involved in a great project initiated by The Florence Nightingale International Foundation for the preparation of a complete calendar of all the extant letters of Florence Nightingale. When he began this work nobody had any idea of its magnitude. It was estimated that something like 5,000 letters would need to be examined, but eventually the total approached 20,000, and the wide range of subjects discussed in them have made the calendar a veritable source-book for nineteenth-century British history. In connexion with this calendar, Bishop had also compiled a definitive bio-bibliography of Florence Nightingale which he left almost ready for press. It was concurrently with these major preoccupations that he wrote numerous articles for periodicals and, in little more than three months, wrote to order the latest and most popular of his books, *The Early History of Surgery* (1960). In the same period he was Editor, from its foundation in 1957, of *Medical History*, which has been of inestimable value in promoting interest in the history of medicine in Britain and abroad.

Although Bishop retired from full-time work as librarian at the early age of 51 he retained his links with the profession by continuing to serve as Consultant Librarian of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, and despite his many absorbing interests, was always ready to help and advise in professional matters. Highly regarded as one of the outstanding librarians of his generation, he was elected to the Fellowship of The Library Association in 1935 and was one of a small group which was responsible for the establishment of the Medical Section of the Association in 1947, which he served as first Honorary Secretary and later as Chairman. He was also one of those responsible for initiating and organizing the First International Congress on Medical Librarianship in London in 1953, which was attended by delegates from thirty-five countries, his work as Joint Honorary Secretary doing much to ensure its success.

This brief account of Bishop's career can give little idea of the man himself, except that he was tireless in his industry. To many of his friends his life seemed one of unremitting toil, an impression which scarcely survived renewed contact with his friendly effervescence. He loved learning for its own sake, and in return it provided him with many satisfactions which were denied to him in other directions. His long and devoted service to the medical profession, whose high ideals were the guide to his own life, was singularly selfless. In many ways quite unworldly, he was nevertheless a shrewd judge of character and ability and, in matters on which he felt qualified to do so, he held strong opinions which he could express forthrightly. To live usefully, to add something, no matter how slight, to the sum of knowledge, to help others to reduce the sum of distress and illness in the world, these were his aims, and, on his passing, let us salute one who pursued them so resolutely.

F. N. L. POYNTER

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A BIBLIOGRAPHY OF W. J. BISHOP

Compiled by S. H. Watkins

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