

OBITUARIES

Barbara Duncum (1910-2001)

Barbara Mary Pycraft was born on 22 February 1910. Her sister, Margaret, who has supplied some of the following information, was born five years later. Their father, William Pycraft, was an ornithologist on the staff of the Natural History Museum, South Kensington, author of several books, and for many years editor of the science page in the *Illustrated London News*. The girls went to a boarding school in Cambridge, where Barbara 'refused to fit into the jelly mould', and then to Hamilton House School, Tunbridge Wells. This was an establishment which turned out young ladies, so before entering London University to read history, Barbara found that in order to matriculate she had to repair the deficiencies in her education. This involved much hard work in Latin, and, as an alternative to maths in which both sisters were hopeless, logic.

In February 1931 the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum, still in Wigmore Street, was looking for a research assistant, and Barbara, fresh from university, aged 21, secured the job. Although the Museum had been built as a shop (now occupied by John Bell and Croydon), the cramped and congested interior was organised in a way Barbara was familiar with from her father's work. There were trestle tables and packing cases arriving frequently, from which objects were removed for cataloguing. The staff was small in number, and very friendly. The men spent much time at auctions, bidding for anything connected with the history of medicine, including books. 'In a secluded bay old Mrs French Sheldon sat, day after day for many months, writing her memoirs. She was an American lady who had been a medical missionary in the Congo, and was a personal friend of both the King of the Belgians and Sir Henry. She looked, I must say, remarkably like Mrs Tiggy-Winkle.' It is thought that Barbara was the last survivor of those who worked at Wigmore Street; in 1932 the Museum moved to the building in Euston Road.

This she described in a memoir written at the request of John Symons of the Wellcome Institute in 1982: 'Yes, the move to Euston Road did make a difference to my working conditions - not overwhelming, just mildly obtrusive. I thought it sad that Wellcome, with all his resources, should have done little more than transfer his favourite brain-child from a shop to a kind of department store. All that blue lino. And I remember jeering at a building with two consequential public faces and a yellow-brick backside which would not have graced a factory. You can see how self-opinionated I was. I jeered also at the new regime. WHMM staff who were not 'they' were required to enter by the back door, be clocked in by Chadburn the commissioner, above or (too often in Miss Pycraft's case) below the crucial 9.30 line in the register, and then proceed through the nether regions to the front hall. There one was permitted to share a lift with unknown bowler-hatted characters who had been let in by the front door. Happily, the true Wigmore Street spirit survived these and other vicissitudes.' A memorandum dated February 1937 recording the suspension, because of persistent lateness, of Miss Pycraft's privilege of one free Saturday a month, is still preserved in the Wellcome archives.

Barbara's first work involved the classifying of items of folklore, amulets and various objects carried as mascots. Her job was to type the descriptions called out by Mr Lacaille, a model of patience and courtesy: 'There was a brief embarrassment when we came to mascots carried in the pockets of French soldiers during World War 1. "You must excuse it, Miss Pycraft",

Lacaille called "a piss-pot, gunmetal; and another". Indeed, there were many scores of them; and although many soldiers must surely have been carrying other kinds of talismans I no longer remember what they were.'

Next, 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. At times she was assisted by someone, returning from field expeditions, whose mother tongue was Spanish, 'an engaging character, small and leathery, with eyes so dark they could justifiably be called black,' who, it was said, had been recruited personally by Wellcome from the Peruvian army. In 1934 Barbara accompanied a senior member of staff, Alec Haggis, on a tour of churches in East Anglia and Devon, listing and photographing statues, carvings, and paintings of saints with medical connections. Then in 1936 she was asked to organise and run a journal-abstracting service covering the main fields of interest to the Museum. Within a short time she found that she was being swamped with data, little of which was of interest to her colleagues, and began to feel the need for a change of direction.

She left the Wellcome Museum in November 1937, for an appointment at the Institute for Research in Agricultural Engineering in Oxford. This was a government sponsored organisation, and she found herself having to become familiar with such topics as techniques for the determination of the moisture content of soil, and struggling to translate an article on tractor trials from the German. At this point, in 1938, she was asked to produce a brief history of anaesthesia for a textbook, *Essentials of General Anaesthesia*, that was being written by Professor Robert Macintosh, director of the newly established Nuffield Department of Anaesthetics, Oxford, and his first assistant, Freda Pratt (later Bannister). Barbara researched the subject and prepared the material, to such good effect that she was offered a job, much more congenial than the one she was in, that she thought she had better take. This was the appointment of historical researcher to the Department, with the suggestion that her researches should form the basis of a D Phil thesis. The outbreak of war in September 1939 put an unexpected load of departmental administrative work on her, so that not until the end of her working day could she cycle to the Bodleian or the Radcliffe Science Library, where she would do her research until they closed at ten o'clock in the evening. But this could not have taken up all her time, because on 9 September 1940 she married Philip Duncum, an Oxford graduate, who was working as a journalist on the *Oxford Mail and Times*. Reading the history chapter in Macintosh and Pratt today, it remains a most impressive introduction, and a harbinger of the magnificent work that was to follow.

Barbara obtained her D Phil in 1945, and immediately set about rethinking, rewriting, and augmenting her thesis to make it suitable for publication. At the end of 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:

'During the first three months of 1946 all was set fair for my book. It was written and accepted by the Trustees of the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum, for publication as a major element in an exhibition being organised to celebrate the centenary of Morton's triumph on October 16. The WHMM had been allocated the third floor of the Wellcome Institute. Since the beginning of 1946 the WHMM had had a new director - E Ashworth Underwood, a protégé of Charles Singer. From the word 'go' Underwood was determined to gratify Singer by making one of his books the WHMM's first post-war major publication.

My book was not published in time for the anaesthesia centenary and I was left in complete ignorance of what was happening. I first knew that my book had been published when, in the late summer of 1947, somebody said to me: "by the way, I saw a copy of your book in a shop window in Oxford High today". By that time I had a new research job on the staff of the Nuffield Foundation, and my book was getting to be known without the publicity Underwood denied me. ... Even now, I can hardly bear to remember the non-event of 1946-7! But as you discovered, the official silence was absolute.'

[This account, and the last comment, was contained in a letter to one of us (NA), who was preparing a review exactly fifty years later, when the book was reprinted by the History of Anaesthesia Society, and could find no evidence that it had ever been reviewed in the medical press. In fact the book was published, by the Oxford University Press, in March or early April. The other of us (DZ) still has the receipt from H K Lewis, dated 14 April 1947.] It had attained its status as the classic and authoritative history of inhalation anaesthesia, and as a classic in the history of medicine also, purely on its merits, by word of mouth and frequency of citation. Its published price was £1.15.0. (£1.75), and by the early 1990s much-sought-after second-hand copies were costing more than fifty times as much.

At the Nuffield Foundation Barbara researched the history of hospital architecture for a book on hospital planning, wrote reports and 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, 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.

Latterly travel became difficult, but Barbara attended meetings in London and contributed papers, her last being at the Joint Sesquicentennial Meeting with the Section of Anaesthetics of the RSM in December 1994, when she spoke, with much new information, about the reintroduction of nitrous oxide in the 1860s.

She died on 16 October 2001, after a short illness, at the age of 91. She is survived by her husband of 61 years of married happiness, and her sister, Mrs Margaret Frost. The History of Anaesthesia Society, the Nuffield Foundation, and the Wellcome Trust were represented at her funeral at Putney Vale Crematorium, on 2 November 2001.

Today it seems incredible that her book, *The Development of Inhalation Anaesthesia*, should, apart from a brief notice in the Oxford University newspaper *Isis*, not have received its first reviews until fifty years after it was published. Written not by a medical amateur but a professional historian, it is most readable and contains not a single solecism. It is so scholarly, authoritative, and comprehensive, that many have learned by bitter experience that it is unwise to expend much energy on a historical research project in anaesthesia without first checking that the topic is not already adequately covered in Duncum – and usually it is!

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