

Obituaries

RENATE R. A. BURGESS (1910–1988)

Dr Renate Burgess, Keeper of Art Collections at the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine from 1964 to 1980, died in London on 15 August 1988.

Renate Ruth Adelheid Burgess was born in Hanover on 2 August 1910. Her parents came from Silesia. Her father was Dr. phil. Friedrich Bergius (1884–1949), a chemist who won the Nobel Prize (with Carl Bosch) in 1931 for his inventions in the field of coal hydrogenation.¹ Her mother, Margarethe Bergius, was a member of a Jewish family named Sachs. They were divorced when Renate was twelve years old. After her school education at the Westendschule in Berlin, she studied art history, archaeology, and French philology in Berlin and Munich. At Munich she was impressed by Wilhelm Pinder's method of style analysis, and her exercises in this genre of art history are recognizable, years later, in her catalogue-card descriptions of Wellcome Institute paintings. In 1933–1934 she travelled in France and Belgium doing research on fourteenth- and fifteenth-century sculpture for her doctorate, which she received from the University of Munich in June 1935. Her thesis was published in the following year.² Being unable to take up work in a museum owing to the Nazi restrictions on Jews, she worked for eighteen months for the art dealers Julius Böhler in Munich. Then she showed her political commitment by doing social work and teaching in Berlin for the *Bekennende Kirche* (Confessing Church): this organization defied the Nazi ban on the entry of Jews into Christian churches, and opposed those who wished to unite all the churches under the Führer.

In 1938 she chose to leave Germany—of her own resolve and under no compulsion, as she would later stress³—and came to London, where she was assisted by Hilda Matheson of the BBC and the art historian Elizabeth Senior among others. After a brief return to Germany, she, alone of her family, settled in Britain. Life was difficult. She had been allowed to take only ten marks out of Germany. Unlike some of her art-historian friends who had emigrated earlier (Ernst Kitzinger, Helmut Gernsheim, Edith Hoffman), she was unable to find professional employment and took up a series of domestic, factory and clerical jobs in Beaconsfield, London and Cambridge (where she worked for the Master of Downing College). Her undeserved misfortunes at this time strengthened but never soured her doughty character.

¹ There is a growing literature on this remarkable man, including, from different viewpoints, the following: *Nobel lectures: chemistry 1922–1941*, Amsterdam, Elsevier for the Nobel Foundation, 1966, pp. 224–79; Edgar von Schmidt-Pauli, *Friedrich Bergius: ein deutscher Erfinder kämpft gegen die englische Blockade*, Berlin, E. S. Mittler, 1943; Günther Kerstein, 'Bergius', *Dictionary of scientific biography*, New York, Scribner, 1970, vol. 2, pp. 3–4; Harald Beck, 'Friedrich Bergius, ein Erfinderschicksal', *Deutsches Museum Abhandlungen und Berichte*, 1982, 50: 1–37; Anthony N. Stranges, 'Friedrich Bergius and the rise of the German synthetic fuel industry', *Isis*, 1984, 75: 642–67.

² Renate Bergius, *Französische und belgische Konsol- und Zwickelplastik im 14. und 15. Jahrhundert*, Würzburg, Konrad Triltsch, 1936.

³ Kudlien (see next note), p. 338, n. 19.

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Dr Renate Burgess (1910–1988), at the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine in 1986.
(Photo: Wellcome Institute Library, London)

Early in the war, at the invitation of an aid committee for refugees, she took a two-year course in theology at Gilmore House, Clapham, a college for the training of deaconesses in the Church of England. Then she again changed direction, trained as a nurse and midwife, and practised as such from 1944 to 1951, first at the Paddington Hospital in Harrow Road (one of London's poorest areas) and then at St James Hospital, Balham, both being general hospitals run by the Public Health department of the London County Council. From 1952 to 1962 she worked as a clerical officer and translator at the General Nursing Council.

She was naturalized as a British citizen in 1949 and took the name Burgess on her marriage to Hans Burgess (born Juliusburger) in the 1950s: they later separated and he predeceased her.

In retrospect her unusual *curriculum vitae* formed a very suitable background to her later work in medical history. She had qualifications in art history and theology; a knowledge of languages; familiarity with German university towns and London hospitals; and experience of practical medicine. She also had personal links with medical historians. In 1932 her mother had married Dr Werner Leibbrand (1896–1974), a psychiatrist who became Professor of the History of Medicine at Munich in 1945.⁴ In fact Renate went to the Wellcome Library several times in the 1950s to look up references for him. By an astounding coincidence, she was also related to Dr Eugen Holländer of Berlin (1867–1932), the author of *Die Medizin in der klassischen Malerei* and other pioneer books on medical iconography; he was the brother-in-law of Renate's great-aunt, and Renate met him several times in her childhood. But, at the age of fifty-two, she still had no inkling of the fact that the start of a distinguished career in medical history—or any career at all—lay just around the corner.

In 1963 she applied for a typing post at the Wellcome Historical Medical Library. Dr Noel Poynter interviewed her and realized that she was just the right person to be curator of the collection of paintings, prints and photographs which, in a few months, were due to become his responsibility. According to her later account, "He said, 'Well, this typing is not your cup of tea. But I see from your form that you have the doctor[ate] in art history. I would like that you get on to us again, we want to employ you.' Well, that sounded like a miracle, and three months [actually one year] later I got a letter from them, they were expecting me to come." So, on 1 September 1964, her happy and productive career at the Wellcome Institute began.

The main task allotted to her by Dr Poynter was the cataloguing of some 12,000 portrait-prints collected by Sir Henry Wellcome between 1900 and 1936. This task had become feasible as a result of the fundamental curatorial work of her predecessor, C. A. Earnshaw, who had identified the sitters, arranged the prints in alphabetical order of subjects, and done some preliminary research. Renate brought his data up to a publishable level of consistency, added a great deal of information, and prepared the whole for the press. Other demands on her time during the working day—particularly the unstinting help which she gave to visiting researchers—forced her to do much of the work on the portraits catalogue in the evenings, usually in the British Museum Library

⁴ On Leibbrand see Fridolf Kudlien, 'Werner Leibbrand als Zeitzeuge: ein ärztlicher Gegner des Nationalsozialismus im Dritten Reich', *Medizinhist. J.*, 1986, 21: 332–52.

(“my nightclub”), where she became a familiar figure, working with a stamina one would not have thought possible in one who had already done a hard day’s work. In later years she would miss no opportunity to express her gratitude for the help which she received also from two other great institutions, the National Portrait Gallery and the Department of Prints and Drawings of the British Museum. Among those who encouraged her to press on with the catalogue few were more effective than Professor C. D. O’Malley of Los Angeles, who was always asking if she had reached the letter V (for Vesalius).

The monumental catalogue, *Portraits of doctors and scientists in the Wellcome Institute*, was published in January 1973 simultaneously with S. A. J. Moorat’s catalogue of the western manuscripts. Both catalogues were compiled with remarkable speed but succeeded nevertheless in giving easy access, for the first time, to collections of baffling range and complexity. As Professor Otto Kurz of the Warburg Institute wrote to her on 2 February 1973, “Going through the pages one realises what a fantastic amount of work and research went into it. I am sure there are numerous cases in the book where it took days to verify a seemingly simple fact, find the correct date or the correct name.”⁵ Reviewers applauded the book with great satisfaction.⁶

While thrusting forward with the portraits catalogue, she was also carrying out a broad range of duties: helping visitors, doing groundwork on the caricatures, oil-paintings and sculptures, and contributing to exhibitions. In 1965 alone, for example, there were exhibitions on *Medicine in 1815*, *Asthma*, and *The history of pharmacy*, followed in 1966 by *Chinese medicine* and *The child in history*. She looked back with special satisfaction to the *Dickens and medicine* exhibition of 1970, organized with Eric Gaskell and Brenda Sutton: the reviewer in *The Dickensian* (1970, 66: 231–6) acclaimed particularly the choice of little-known prints. She also found time to write articles for learned journals on works in the collection.⁷ She was indefatigable in tracking down forgotten sources which documented individual pictures. The Wellcome Trust’s jubilee exhibition, *A vision of history* (1986), devoted a whole case to her work on one painting which she had helped to identify through a pertinacious international correspondence lasting five years (1973–1977).

⁵ Kurz added characteristically, “The only mistake I have found is the mention of my name in the preface which will give the entirely wrong impression that I have in some [way] contributed to the catalogue.” In fact he was Renate’s mentor on art-historical matters from 1964 until his death in 1974.

⁶ See the reviews by John Kerslake in *Apollo*, July 1974, pp. 84–5; Pierre Julien in *Rev. d’Hist. Pharm.*, 1974, 22: 142; G. S. Rousseau in *Isis*, 1975, 66: 105–8; R. J. B. Walker in *The Antiquaries Journal*, 1975, 54: 364; Kenneth Garlick in *Notes and Queries*, March 1976, pp. 141–2; Heinz Balmer in *Gesnerus*, 1976, 33: 150–3.

⁷ In addition to her major work, *Portraits of doctors and scientists in the Wellcome Institute of the History of Medicine*, London, Wellcome Institute, 1973, she also published the following papers on medical history: ‘A nativity by Leandro Bassano at the Wellcome Institute’, *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, March 1971, pp. 177–8; ‘Humphry Davy or Friedrich Accum: a question of identification’, *Med. Hist.*, 1972, 16: 290–3; ‘Thomas Garvine—Ayrshire surgeon active in Russia and China’, *Med. Hist.*, 1975, 19: 91–4; ‘Notes on some plague paintings’, *Med. Hist.*, 1976, 20: 422–8; ‘Illustrative material in the Wellcome Institute’, *Social Hist.*, 1977, no. 6, pp. 801–2; ‘A satire on the influenza of 1803’, *Med. Hist.*, 1979, 23: 469–73; ‘The dance of death. An iconographic interpretation of the popular theme of death through five centuries’, *Soc. soc. Hist. Med. Bull.*, 1980, no. 26, pp. 25–37; ‘A portrait by Wright of Derby’, *The Burlington Magazine*, 1982, 124: 155–7; (with Marianne Winder) ‘Ancient cures depicted in a drawing by Pieter Bruegel, the elder’, *Zusammenhang: Festschrift für Marielene Putscher*, ed. O. Baur and O. Glandien, Cologne, Wienand, 1984, vol. 1, pp. 245–70.

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Her formal retirement came in 1980, but the Wellcome Institute continued to provide her with working facilities, in return for which the Chairman of the Institute laid on her only one duty: "Continue to be your inimitable self!". She gave freely of her scholarship, adding to her draft catalogue of group-portraits, indexing the titles of caricatures, researching the history of leprosy, and working on George Cruikshank, to whom she devoted a lecture at the Royal Society of Arts in 1987. She furthered her self-imposed work of creating friendships between British medical historians and their counterparts in Germany. And she continued to delight her colleagues with her enthusiasm, her interest in their work and welfare, her girlish love of mischief, and her excellent dinner-parties. All who knew her will remember her with admiration, affection, and regret at her passing.

W. SCHUPBACH