

Obituary

JOHN SYMONS
1943–2009

John Symons, who was for nearly forty years a librarian at the Wellcome Library, died on 21 September 2009. His work has made possible much of the scholarly and popular use of the Wellcome Library's book collections during his lifetime and long into the future.

John's father was a surgeon from Ballarat in the Australian state of Victoria, who had come to London as a postgraduate student of ophthalmic surgery at the Royal Eye Hospital in Lambeth. During the war Dr Symons had been posted to Devon, where he met his wife, who was working in the same hospital as a dispensing pharmacist. John—Henry John McNeil Symons—was born on 13 December 1943 in Moretonhampstead, Devon. After the war the family settled in Tunbridge Wells. John was educated at Tonbridge School (1957–1962), and went on to read *Literae Humaniores* at St John's College Oxford (1962–1966). After working in the Library at University College London for the academic year 1966–67 (mainly in the Biology and Zoology libraries), John went on to qualify as a librarian at UCL, and in 1968 was offered a post at the Wellcome Library, where his parents' professional backgrounds in medicine and pharmacy, combined with his own knowledge of Greek and Latin, provided a motivation to help catalogue the early books in the Wellcome Library, where he started work on 1 July 1968. In his job application he described his interests as “Medieval architecture, history, heraldry, and antiquarian subjects generally”: all were to prove invaluable in his later career.

John's interview with the Librarian and Director of the Wellcome Library on 12 June 1968 was notable for the fact that both interviewers had forgotten about it, and this was perhaps John's first intimation that the library he was applying to join was a far from predictable institution. The library had no shortage of stock: the collection built up by Henry S Wellcome (1853–1936) and his assistants had been diminished by sales, but still filled warehouses. Much work had been done to sort the books into various categories. This work, though essential, was only preliminary to cataloguing, and a procession of printed catalogues began to appear, initially under the editorship of the Chief Librarian Dr F N L Poynter. The most ambitious of these was the catalogue of *Printed books published before 1851*, to which John contributed as much as anybody, and on which he spent more of his professional time than on any other project.

The volumes of the catalogue bound in Oxford blue are still to be seen in university and medical history libraries round the world. When John started, the sequence was on a roll: the first volume (books up to *ca.* 1640, authors A-Z) had appeared in 1962 and the second volume (1641–1850, authors A-E) in 1966. In 1968 John joined Harold Denham in the work on the third volume (F-L): it was published in 1976 with an acknowledgment of John's “persistence in investigating many of the bibliographical problems which confronted us”. After Harold Denham retired in 1982, John took up the post of Chief Cataloguer with responsibility for the advancement of the 1641–1850 catalogue. In 1988 his post became Curator of Early Printed Books, and volume IV of the catalogue (M-P) was published in 1995 as “Compiled by H. J. M. Symons and H. R. Denham”.

Obituary



John Symons in the Wellcome Library in 2001.
(Wellcome Library, London.)

Each volume required painstaking checking of millions of details, and led to unimagined paroxysms in the production of the finished volumes. In the F-L volume Oxford University Press was thanked for maintaining the high standards of the previous volumes, but in the M-R volume John mentioned that “the sudden closure of the Oxford University Press Printing House in 1989 left the arrangements for eventual typesetting undecided. The end of an happy association of some forty years and the loss of the experience of the Press’s skilled staff were viewed with great regret”. The final volume (S-Z, published in 2006) was even more traumatic. It had become impractical to key in the typed slips with their many hand-written amendments, so the laboriously compiled slips on which John had worked for many years were laid aside and the published volume consisted of reprinted downloads from a database compiled largely by other libraries: many of John’s amendments and clarifications were thus lost. The value of the earlier volumes was endorsed by their reprinting in 1996 by Maurizio Martino of Staten Island, New York. These reprints included John’s manuscript emendations, which allowed readers a glimpse of the finesse of which technical progress had deprived them in that final volume.

It was at the Wellcome that in October 1970 John met his future wife Eleanor (Lenore) Putnam, who had come from the United States to work in the library. Two years later they married. It was a very happy partnership. They shared a love of books, good food, travel, cats, and gardening. John had an allotment which produced particularly fine raspberries as well as excellent vegetables.

Obituary

For many years, each autumn would be marked by John's reappearance tanned and full of energy after a refreshing holiday with Lenore in the Aegean or in France. His many activities enabled the Library to maintain its utility, impact and momentum: staffing the reading rooms, filing the newly arrived batches of typed catalogue cards, dealing with enquiries from book dealers, collectors and the public, writing articles and reviews (often very entertaining), assisting doctors with Latin texts, acquiring and cataloguing books published before 1851, and organizing exhibitions. He had a very wide range of bibliographic knowledge ready at hand, and was tenacious in mining it. In committee he could be fierce in the defence of justifiable policies threatened by casual proposals from unqualified reformers. He was heavily involved in the work which led to the purchase by the Wellcome Library of the library of the Medical Society of London, and put on an exhibition about that (*Books from the Library of the Medical Society of London*, 1985) as well as other exhibitions. For a time there was an informal rule that all Wellcome Institute publications had to be proof-read by John before being allowed an official *imprimatur*, a sign of the degree to which he had become indispensable.

A worsening heart problem, leading to a major operation in 2002, brought this period to an end. It had coincided with radical changes in work patterns as the Wellcome Library went over to electronic cataloguing, e-mail, and a more rigorous bureaucracy. In 2004 John gave up his other duties to work full-time on the completion of the S-Z volume of the catalogue before taking early retirement on 15 July 2005. The catalogue was launched with a reception at Apothecaries' Hall on 18 October 2006, which John was able to attend.

John was very kind and, despite his reserve, very sociable. His willingness to go to great lengths to help readers with their enquiries was particularly appreciated. He also much enjoyed a good party and a good gossip. His interest in people was especially useful when he began to collect material on the history of the Wellcome organization itself. He realized that many of the people who had worked for the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum and Library in its early days from 1913 were still alive, indeed some had become well-known in their own right, such as the anthropologist Ashley Montagu, the author Mary Cathcart Borer and the Hebrew scholar Theodore Gaster. Others had died but their descendants were still alive and had documents or information about their life at Wellcome, as in the case of Paul Rotha, the film director who was the son of Henry S Wellcome's first curator, C J S Thompson. John sought out the living witnesses, persuaded them to write down their reminiscences, enriched the memoirs with the evidence of documents, and produced a hilarious and fascinating volume called *Wigmore Street and Willesden*, named after two of the places in which the Wellcome collection had been respectively displayed and stored from 1913 to 1930. Unfortunately this work was never published, though typescript copies exist. A more official version, without verbatim quotations from the participants, was published in 1993 under the title *The Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine: a short history*. Each 11 November John kept alive the memory of those Wellcome librarians who had lost their lives in the World Wars.

John's work deserves to be remembered among those whose exacting standards raised the reputation of the Wellcome Library to a level envisaged by Henry Wellcome. All the Library's users are in his debt.

William Schupbach