

Obituary

PROFESSOR SYDNEY SELWYN (1934–1996)

As microbiologist, traveller, photographer, lover of music, and historian of medicine, there were few interests that Sydney Selwyn did not touch with distinction. For him, all his interests were one, and to hear his discourse in full flight was to recognize something of an inner connectivity perceived in all things. His areas of knowledge and enthusiasm were indeed legion, and even during his last long drawn-out illness, despite almost complete immobility, he continued to travel and to collect almost anything that took his eclectic and perceptive eye.

His career, beginning at the Grammar School of his native Leeds and continuing thence to read medicine and achieve his MD at the University of Edinburgh, gives little evidence of the highly active polymath he was to become. That was perhaps initiated by the exotic nature of his WHO visiting Professorship at Baroda University 1966–7, paralleled by his WHO medical consultancy in South East Asia during the same period. Transferring to Westminster Medical School in 1967, he became Reader in Medical Microbiology in 1974 and Professor of Medical Microbiology in 1979, becoming in due time, with the merging of hospitals and medical schools, successively Professor of Medical Microbiology at both the Westminster and Charing Cross Hospitals, and Honorary Consultant Microbiologist and Director of Microbiological Services of the Riverside Health District, whose main sites were at the Charing Cross, Westminster and St Stephen's Hospitals.

It was in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s that his interests and activities drew him increasingly into the history of medicine, a field then primarily dominated by clinician-historians, with all the clinical excellencies and contextual limitations that dual role often, but by no means always, implies. In spite of numerous research, advisory and administrative commitments, he found time to become Vice-President of the Osler Club of London (later President), Vice-President of the Pathology Section of the Royal Society of Medicine, and President of the Harveian Society of London. More germane to his historical interests were his Honorary Secretaryship of the British Society for the History of Medicine (1978–81), his Presidency of the Faculty of the History and Philosophy of Medicine and Pharmacy of the Society of Apothecaries (1982–87), accompanied by his Directorship of the DHMSA course of the Society of Apothecaries, which for some seventeen years brought him into touch with medical practitioners seeking their historical context, until in 1990 he was forced to retire from that post owing to ill-health. The DHMSA course, whose development and present structure is largely due to his enthusiasm for seeing medicine within its cultural matrix, together with the papers on the history of public health researched and written towards the end of his shortened life, remain possibly his most lasting achievements within the history of medicine.

None of this says anything of his rare ability to illumine medicine and its history by flashes of insight, best seen in casual talk rather than in formal lectures, nor of his ability to enthuse students by his rapid, enthusiastic and connective discussion. At his best, he was a quite extraordinary figure, sometimes quirkish, often entertaining, illuminating all he did with a rapidity of percept and wit often breathtaking in their originality. He achieved much for both microbiology and the history of medicine, particularly in the 1970s, before administrative burdens became excessive and before the new wave of social historians had fully entered the field.

But nothing says more of the essential qualities of the man than his last years when, deprived of motion and speech (and considerably aided by a skilled and devoted nurse), the old mocking, discursive, fun-loving, connective, lover of polysyllables and new-minted ideas spelled out his love of life on his speech-synthesizer. Of the physical indignities and deprivations, so cruel to one who had been so multitudinously active, he never complained. Truly a hero, and waywardly and enthusiastically himself to the last.

Robin Price