

Frederick Noël Lawrence Poynter

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Frederick Noël Lawrence Poynter

Ph. D., Hon. D. Litt. (California), Hon. M. D. (Kiel)

24 December 1908—11 March 1979

The death of F.N.L. Poynter, following a short illness, has robbed the international history of medicine community of one of its most distinguished elder statesmen. He possessed a remarkable mixture of scholarly, editorial, and administrative skills which are rarely combined in a single individual.

Except for service in the R. A. F. during World War II, Poynter's professional career was inextricably linked to the magnificent collection of books, manuscripts, and artefacts acquired by Sir Henry Wellcome (1853–1936) which form the nucleus of the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine. Poynter joined Wellcome's staff as a young graduate in 1930, becoming Chief Librarian in 1954 and Director of the Wellcome Museum and Library in 1964. During those years he wrote and edited a steady stream of books and articles, including *The Selected Writings of William Clowes 1544–1604* (1948); *The Journal of James Yonge 1647–1721* (1963); *The Brain and its Functions* (1958); and *Medicine and Man* (1971). He also was involved in a number of collaborative efforts, including (with C. D. O'Malley and K. F. Russell) *William Harvey: Lectures on the whole of Anatomy* (1961); and (with Kenneth Keele) *A short History of Medicine* (1961). Poynter edited the first of the invaluable series of printed catalogues of the Wellcome Collection, *A Catalogue of Incunabula in the Wellcome Historical Medical Library* (1954). Later volumes appeared under his general editorship, though the series is still not complete. The useful bibliographical publication *Current Work in the History of Medicine* was begun under his careful eye, and from 1961 to 1973 he edited with distinction the scholarly quarterly, *Medical History*.

During Poynter's years at the Wellcome, the Institute became the centre of medical history in Great Britain, and a place where scholars from all over the world came to work. Poynter encouraged members of the medical professions to take an interest in their own history, and the meetings, during the 1950s and 1960s, of the British Society of the History of Medicine produced a number of useful volumes, edited by Poynter, primarily concerned with aspects of medical history in Britain. He was also instrumental in establishing a Faculty of the History of Medicine in the Society of Apothecaries.

Poynter's interests and influence extended far beyond the shores of his native country. He helped reorganize the Société Internationale d'Histoire de la Médecine and presided over the successful International Congress in London in 1972. From 1970 to 1973 he was President of the International Academy of the History of Medicine.

Noël Poynter had a deep and abiding love of France, and it was natural that he moved there following his retirement in 1973. With help of his second wife Dodie (his first wife having died in 1966), he converted some old cottages into a home in the Dordogne at Montvalent. It was there that he was working on his study of medicine in Tudor England when illness overcame him. Those of us who work at the Wellcome Institute still see daily evidences of his creative abilities and know that many friends and colleagues all over the world share our sense of loss.

William F. Bynum