



Eric Gaskell

Obituary

ERIC GASKELL
1928–2002

Eric Gaskell, who died in Perigueux at the age of seventy-four on 11 August 2002, was Sub-Librarian (deputy) of the Wellcome Library from 1961 to 1964 and then Librarian until 1973.

Eric's first love was modern languages. After Wigan Grammar School he read French and German at Liverpool University, including a year at the University of Nancy, and took a first in 1950. He returned to Liverpool University as an assistant librarian in 1952, after national service in the RAF, and became Medical Sub-Librarian in 1955. He qualified as Associate of the Library Association (ALA) in 1958.

By the 1960s Eric was ready for a change. He had become interested in medical history and considered applying for the Wellcome deputyship in November 1960, when Freddie Sutherland moved to the BMA, but was hesitant about leaving the university sector. When the post was advertised the following May, after Alec Dickson's brief tenure, he decided to take the plunge.

The Library, under Noël Poynter's dynamic leadership, was poised for expansion after a long period in straitened circumstances. The Wellcome Trust had assumed financial responsibility, and plans were afoot for an attractive remodelling of the Reading Room and general enhancement of the Library's facilities. Eric participated enthusiastically and became Librarian in 1964, when Poynter succeeded Dr Underwood as Director of the Wellcome Museum and Library.

The death of Eric's wife Kathleen (*née* Fray) at this time was a heavy blow. With a young son to look after, he was reluctant to attend the LA Medical Section's annual conference, but Leslie Morton persuaded him to change his mind. He thus met Janet Bull, then working for Smith & Nephew, and they were married in 1965.

Eric had a great feeling for people and enjoyed this period of revitalization for the Library and Museum. He made the most of opportunities for research, exhibition work, outreach, and interaction with readers. Enthusiasms included early North American medicine, medical illustration, Thomsonianism, nineteenth-century madhouses, and hospital history. He tracked down and acquired for the Library the papers of the adventurous female physician Lillias Hamilton (1858–1925). An exhibition on *Dickens and Medicine* in 1970 led to further research on that theme. Although Poynter exercised a close oversight over the Library, Eric became skilled at managing "the Boss". Like his predecessors he was active in the LA Medical Section and ensured that the Wellcome maintained its position in the general medical library community.

He was still fascinated by French history and culture and in 1970 started a London University MPhil thesis on *Medical literature and medical libraries in France, 1790–1815*. This, however, was overtaken by events when the UK's accession to the European Community offered an unexpected opportunity to work abroad and use his language skills.

Obituary

In November 1973 he moved to Brussels as Head of the Central Library of the European Commission, newly formed from the libraries of Euratom and the European Economic Community and providing a wide range of material on all aspects of European integration.

Eric enjoyed the challenge of the new environment and successfully forged a working library with a dedicated multi-lingual and multi-national staff team. Major preoccupations were the advent of automation and the introduction of the ECLAS database. He relished the Continental life-style, and his gregarious nature flourished in the expatriate community in Brussels and Tervuren. He continued to keep in touch with developments at the Wellcome, and was an early member of the Friends. On retirement in 1993 he and Janet moved to Pressignac in the Dordogne where they enjoyed happy and hospitable years until Eric's final illness. He will be much missed by family, friends and former colleagues.

John Symons