



Edwin Clarke, MD, FRCP
(1919–1996)
(Photograph: Wellcome Institute Library, London)

Obituary

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(1919–1996)

Dr Edwin S Clarke, neurologist and historian of medicine, died on 11 April 1996, aged 76. Readers of this journal will know him as one of the principal shapers of the modern study of the history of medicine in the United Kingdom.

Edwin Sisterson Clarke (he disliked his second name intensely and rarely used it) was born on 18 June 1919 at Felling-on-Tyne, County Durham. At the age of sixteen he began an apprenticeship in Pharmacy in the Dispensary of the Newcastle General Hospital. His evenings were occupied at Rutherford Technical College, Newcastle-upon-Tyne. He must have worked hard and been blessed with talent, since in 1939 he was admitted to the Medical School, King's College, Newcastle, at that time still part of the University of Durham. Hard work, talent, and perhaps the ability to get himself noticed by the right people, resulted in his selection as a Rockefeller Student at the University of Chicago's Medical School, as part of a wartime scheme to place British medical students in North American universities. Durham duly gave him his MB,BS in 1945 and Chicago a doctorate in the following year. Later years yielded the MRCP (London) in 1949, a Durham MD in 1954 and the FRCP (London) in 1970.

Edwin's first medical appointment was in 1946 as House Surgeon to Professor Sir Hugh Cairns at the Radcliffe Infirmary, Oxford. National Service (inevitably in the RAMC) and posts at the National Hospital, Queen Square, led in 1951 to his appointment as Lecturer in Neurology and Consultant Neurologist under Professor Sir John McMichael in the Department of Medicine of the Hammersmith Hospital. Sir John was later (1960–77) a Wellcome Trustee, and it may have been his connections which persuaded Edwin to take up a briefly-held post as Assistant Scientific Secretary at the Trust in 1958.

Later colleagues who dared to quiz Edwin on his reasons for “giving up” neurology would be informed, in a typically self-deprecating phrase, that it was because the subject had become too mathematical. A slowly forming, but nonetheless radical, change of interest, stimulated perhaps by the book-collecting virus, seems a much more likely explanation. Whatever his reasons, Edwin managed his career change by going to the then heartland of the subject, the Institute of the History of Medicine, Johns Hopkins Hospital Medical School, Baltimore, Maryland. During 1960–62 he sat at the feet of Owsei Temkin, apart from a brief period with C Donald O'Malley in the University of California at Los Angeles. After a year at Yale in the Department of the History of Science and Medicine, he returned to England to the post of medical historian to the (then) Wellcome Historical Medical Museum and Library.

Edwin Clarke brought back from America the (for the times) slightly eccentric notion that the history of medicine was, or could be made to be, a field of study as intellectually serious and respectable as neurology itself. He believed passionately that only the highest standards of research and evidential proof, derived from the very best historical practice, were worthy of the field. Inevitably, this “high” notion of his adopted profession occasionally brought him into conflict with proponents of the easy, relaxed amateur pursuit of medical history which was dominant in Britain at the time. His coming to the Wellcome Museum and Library was a breath of fresh air for some and an uncomfortable

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east wind for others. Junior colleagues remember best his carefully restrained enthusiasm which, once tapped, turned an apparently shy man into a eloquent purveyor of facts, ideas and opinions mostly inimical to the stuffy and confined world we read about in the history of medicine textbooks. His Journal Club for staff, although brief in duration because most of his colleagues could not match his twenty-four hour dedication to the subject, was for several their first introduction to medical history as a potentially exciting field of study.

By a generous quirk of fate, Edwin's stern inability to conform to received ideas prompted his removal in 1966 to a specially founded Sub-Department of the History of Medicine in University College London. There he was supposed to languish, out of sight and out of mind. In the event, his Sub-Department became the seed from which grew the still flourishing Academic Unit within the Wellcome Institute.

It was during his Directorship of the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine between 1973 and 1979 that the now familiar lineaments of that institution were first shaped. His was the basic concept of a group of scholars devoted to research and teaching supported by the incomparable resource of Henry Wellcome's library. Edwin always revelled in the books by which he was surrounded; he frequently enjoyed his colleagues and sometimes his students. He did not enjoy the administrative and ceremonial aspects of his work as Director; a trait which earned him the not altogether fair reputation of remoteness. His omnipresence in the Institute seven days a week and at all hours became legendary. He revived and edited the quarterly *Medical History* in a typically robust fashion, paying little heed to a largely dormant and partly fictional editorial board and reviewing most of the books received himself.

Thirty-two entries in his list of publications relate to his work as a neurologist. Those who knew him only as an historian may be surprised by the high regard in which his neurological work is held by those best able to judge. His historical research also revolved around a core interest in neurology, typified by his first monograph (in collaboration with Donald O'Malley) *The brain and spinal cord. A historical study illustrated by writings from antiquity to the twentieth century*, 1968 (a second, revised edition appeared in February 1996). A trail-blazer in its time was his edited volume, *Modern methods in the history of medicine* (1971), very much a personal manifesto to which he contributed (alone or in collaboration) four chapters. Two of them were especially characteristic of the man: his attempted classification system for library material in the history of medicine (Edwin was a librarian *manqué*), and his controversial theories about the diagnostic value of reconstructing medical experiments from the past.

An illustrated history of brain function, written with his friend Kenneth Dewhurst, appeared in 1972 and later achieved translations into German (1973) and French (1975), with a further English edition in 1996. This book demonstrates Edwin's interest in, and skilful use of, images from the history of neurology. "Sandford Publications", the imprint, was his co-author's creation and Edwin told with glee stories of his adventures as sole distributor. These included depositing most of the edition in an Oxfordshire field when his car overturned on ice after a somewhat heavy night. His translation of Max Neuberger's 1897 work *Die historische Entwicklung der experimentellen Gehirn-und Rückenmarksphysiologie vor Flourens* (1981) was a tribute to one of his heroes and a mark of his respect for the old German gymnasium system of humanist education. His last major work, written with L S Jacyna, appeared in 1987 as *Nineteenth century origins of*

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neuroscientific concepts. Fifty-four journal and occasional publications produced between 1953 and 1978 and ranging through historical time from Aristotle to Harvey Cushing and beyond, testify to a research career more appreciated by his peers and successors than by the man himself. His striving for high standards was impelled by a keenly felt uncertainty of his position; between medicine and history without wholly belonging to either. Colleagues, pupils and friends learned to discount his frequent protestation of not being “a proper historian” and to understand the depth of his feelings about doctors who merely dabbled in history.

Edwin Clarke’s enduring monument is the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine. His intellectual legacy is his once novel, now commonplace, conviction of the high seriousness of history of medicine as an intellectual and academic pursuit. In the more relaxed conditions of early retirement (he resigned his Directorship in 1979) he maintained close contacts with Institute staff, was always eager for news and immensely proud of its growing national and world reputation as a centre of lively excellence. He seemed indestructible and news of his last illness was a considerable shock. He is survived by his wife Gaynor and by three children from previous marriages.

Eric J Freeman