



Sir Zachary Cope (1881–1974) (*right*). Photographed with Sir Henry Hallet Dale (1875–1968) at the reopening of the Wellcome Historical Medical Library, 25 September 1962.

OBITUARY

VINCENT ZACHARY COPE, Kt., M.D., M.S., F.R.C.S.

SIR ZACHARY COPE, who died at Oxford on 28 December 1974 aged ninety-three, was a prominent London surgeon before he made his large and scholarly contribution to English medical history. Born at Hull on 14 February 1881, the son of a minister, he won a scholarship to St. Mary's Hospital Medical School from Westminster City School, of which he had been head boy. He took the highest degrees in medicine and surgery, and was elected to the honorary staff of his hospital when he was thirty. He made his career in surgical practice, achieving eminence as an authority on acute abdominal disorders, but he was deeply influenced by the devotion to research of his teachers, particularly Augustus D. Waller the electrophysiologist and Almroth Wright the famous serologist. Taking up historical writing late in life, Cope applied to his work among books and archives the rigour of research which he had learned in the laboratory. He had a wide knowledge of medical literature, though he said in public that instead of collecting a library he had, as a young man, invested in a set of the *Medico-Chirurgical Transactions*, which, with its continuation the *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine*, provided an encyclopaedic survey of medicine in its "golden age". Before turning to history he wrote several good medical books; his *Early diagnosis of the acute abdomen*, published in 1921, was in steady demand when he revised a fourteenth edition at the age of ninety. He also amused himself and his friends by composing light verse, and extended this skill to a rhyming version of his textbook, which served several generations of students as a *memoria technica*.

In late middle age Cope gave valuable service to the Ministry of Health as chairman of committees which surveyed hospital facilities, medical manpower, and the training of auxiliaries, and he edited their influential reports between 1949 and 1952. He also compiled for the official Medical History of the Second World War the substantial volumes on *Medicine and pathology* (565 pages, 1952) and *Surgery* (772 pages, 1953). This public work was acknowledged by the knighthood conferred in 1953.

Cope was specially interested in the nineteenth century, though he knew the preceding medical literature and the work of his contemporaries. His first historical book *Pioneers in acute abdominal surgery* (Oxford, 1939) described the background of his special field, and he returned to this much later with *A history of the acute abdomen* (Oxford University Press, 1965). He wrote two books about his hospital: *The history of St. Mary's Hospital Medical School* and *A hundred years of nursing at St. Mary's Hospital, Paddington* (London, Heinemann, 1954 and 1955). His largest chronicle was *The Royal College of Surgeons of England, a history* (London, Anthony Blond, 1959). From the formal Minutes of 150 years he produced a lively story which kept a nice balance between the domestic and public history of the College.

He edited two collections of medical historical essays: first, twenty-three papers by different authors from the *Proceedings of the Section of the History of Medicine, Royal Society of Medicine*, during the Section's first forty-five years; this appeared as *Sidelights on the history of medicine* (London, Butterworth, 1957); and secondly, fifteen of his own scattered papers under the title *Some famous general practitioners*

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and other medical historical essays (London, Pitman, 1961). The most original of these was the First Grey Turner Memorial Lecture, which Cope had given at Durham University Medical School in 1955 "On Surgical Museums", but all his essays exhibit thorough archival research and wisely chosen illustrations.

Cope's favourite approach was biographical; besides essays he wrote seven "Lives" between his seventieth and eighty-fifth years. He found and used forgotten papers, and often persuaded their owners to deposit them in accessible libraries. The first was *The versatile Victorian, being the life of Sir Henry Thompson, Bt. 1820-1904* (London, Harvey & Blythe, 1951), which dealt pleasantly with Thompson's novels and his famous "octave" dinners besides his important work in urology. Cope next went back 150 years and in *William Cheselden 1688-1752* (Edinburgh, Livingstone, 1953) displayed much new information about that famous man; while preparing this book he found stored away at the Royal Academy the beautiful drawings for Cheselden's *Osteographia*. Then followed two books on unfamiliar aspects of nursing history: *Florence Nightingale and the doctors* (London, Museum Press, 1958), a useful supplement to the standard biographies, and *Six disciples of Florence Nightingale* (London, Pitman, 1961), a worthwhile upgrading of early nurses. He chose next a dental theme in *Sir John Tomes, a pioneer of British dentistry* (London, Dawson, 1961), in which he reprinted Tomes's classic paper on the dental fibrils. Finally he honoured his old master in *Almroth Wright, founder of modern vaccine therapy* (London Nelson, 1966). Cope greatly admired Wright and his scientific work, but viewed his controversies with detachment. He saw in Wright that combination of opposites which amounts to genius: absolute integrity and conviction in science, generosity and kindness in private life, prejudice and pugnacity in politics.

Cope was active in many professional bodies, and was honoured by high office at the Royal College of Surgeons, the Medical Society of London, and the Royal Society of Medicine, among others. In private life he was the most equable, modest and friendly of men. He was devoted to his family and loved by his friends. His first wife died young and he outlived his second wife by thirty years. He often said that the good surgeon must feel for his patients, but never let this sympathy disturb his judgment or treatment; he had the strength to obey this counsel of perfection in his own case.

WILLIAM LEFANU