

Humanistic Historian

Charles Singer

CHARLES SINGER lived a full and active 83 years, was physician, scientist, medical historian, published 21 books, more than 400 articles, and was always a little dissatisfied with his career. In his old age he observed wistfully that he never found time to pursue his original interest in zoology.

No one career could have fulfilled Singer completely but his chosen work at least enlisted all his talents. To medical history he brought a scientist's precision, a humanist's perception; his restless curiosity, vast knowledge and lucid style all helped to establish him as one of England's most eminent contributors to the field.

EARLY YEARS. Singer was by birthplace a Londoner, by heritage a product of Jewish scholarly tradition. Born November 2, 1876, in London's Brunswick Square, on the south side of the Thames, he was the fifth child of Rabbi Simeon Singer. The father was a distinguished Greek and Hebrew scholar, also a keen student of the Bible, and was author of the standard edition and translation of Jewish liturgy. Singer was reading Hebrew at 4, Greek and Latin at 13; thus formed was a lifelong devotion to the classics.



Dr. Singer as a World War I army pathologist. After serving at Chatham he was sent overseas to Malta and Salonika.

Early education was at the City of London School; there he developed a strong bent toward science. At 17 he entered University College (University of London) as a medical student; a year later he transferred to the faculty of sciences to study for a biology degree.

Through chance incident he learned of a zoology scholarship at Oxford, decided to try for it, and won easily after only a week's preparation. He earned a zoology degree from Oxford's Magdalen College, went on to study medicine at St. Mary's Hospital in London; in 1903 he was licensed as both physician and surgeon.

After graduating he joined an African expedition led by American explorer W. N. McMillan and British Abyssinian minister Sir John Harrington. Starting at Khartoum the party ascended the White Nile, navigated the Nile's Sobat tributary and trekked overland to the Red Sea for a journey of 2000 miles. Singer collected biologic specimens still preserved at the British Museum; on his return he published the first of his voluminous works, a report on medical conditions in western Abyssinia.

He held brief resident posts at London and Brighton, spent three years with the Government General Hospital in Singapore, and returned to England in 1908. Over the next six years he maintained a busy practice, was staff member of several London hospitals, and published a dozen papers. The range of his interests was wide: he investigated cancer, gastric secretion and ulceration, wrote on tropical diseases, devised what was probably the first portable apparatus for obtaining a graphic record of blood pressure.

In 1910 a chance discovery stimulated his first venture into historical research. While browsing

through a secondhand book store he picked up a copy of Benjamin Marten's *New Theory of Consumptions*, published almost two centuries before; he was fascinated to learn that Marten had anticipated the germ theory. Singer developed the idea in a *Lancet* article entitled "A Forgotten Prophecy"; it was the first of many such reports that flowed from his prolific pen.

That same year he married Dorothea Cohen, a medical and scientific writer who was well on the way toward establishing a major reputation of her own. She encouraged his historical interests, became a devoted partner in his work.*

For a brief interlude Singer conducted cancer research at Vincenz Czerny's laboratory in Heidelberg; while there he collected material on the medical views and mystic visions of Hildegarde of Bingen. One observer called it a period of "productive doubt" in which Singer was torn between the attractions of scientific and literary careers. The conflict was resolved in 1914 when Singer went to Oxford at the invitation of Sir William Osler. Ostensibly the appointment was in pathology; privately Osler instructed Singer to act as a "Socratic gadfly" while establishing the foundation for a history department.

HISTORIAN. On the eve of World War I Singer and his wife were in Germany collecting additional data for his study of Hildegarde. One afternoon the two took a walk in the woods, wandered by accident across the German-Holland border, and found their return blocked by the mobilization of troops. The incident spared Singer from internment but cost him an almost completed manuscript left behind in Germany; he patiently reconstructed the work from his notes.

War service for Singer included a tour of duty as an army pathologist at Chatham. He was then assigned to overseas posts at Malta and Salonika and throughout the war he snatched every odd moment to pursue historic research. His first book *The Cures of the Diseased* was published while he was at Chatham. The initial volume of his *Studies in the History and Method of Science* went to press while he was overseas, the knowledgeable Dorothea oversaw the final details in his absence.

The Malta assignment yielded notes for a subsequent report, *Neolithic Representations of the Human Form from the Islands of Malta and Gozo*. At Salonika he unearthed the material for *Byzantine Medical Fragments*, dealing with 14th century Greek prognostic methods.

Other papers were written in army tents, on troopships, wherever duty took him; he seemed to find relief from the conflict by immersing himself in classical studies. Only once in this period did he touch on war itself, in a study of "The Early Treatment of Gunshot Wounds." Otherwise his wartime writing was devoted to such subjects as: "On a Greek Charm used in England in the Twelfth Century," "The Figures of the Bristol Guy de Chauliac

*The marriage produced two children.



At Kilmarth, his home on the coast of Cornwall, Dr. Singer plays chess with his wife. The former Dorothea Cohen, she was a medical and scientific writer; after their marriage in 1910 she encouraged him and was a partner in his historical interests.

MS," "Thirteenth Century Miniatures Illustrating Medical Practice," "A Legend of Salerno, How Constantine the African Brought the Art of Medicine to the Christians."

Singer returned to Oxford in 1919, was dissatisfied with the university's failure to develop a full-fledged medical history department, and with the death of William Osler he lost a powerful supporter. He transferred to University College in London as lecturer in history of medicine; at the London school he became an active participant in the first university department ever established for the history and philosophy of science.

Oxford later recognized Singer's contributions with two honorary degrees; he became the only man of his time to hold Oxford doctorates in the three faculties of medicine, science, letters. He was named president of the history section of the Royal Society of Medicine (1920-22) and served for more than two decades as editorial representative of the section. At various times he was president of the Third International Congress of the History of Medicine, the Second International Congress of the History of Science, and the Académie Internationale d'Histoire des Sciences.

In the 1920s he produced a stream of important works; his bibliography for the period totaled 160 publications. Notable books included *Greek Biology and Greek Medicine* (1922), *History of the Circulation of the Blood* (1922), *The Evolution of Anatomy* (1925), *A Short History of Medicine* (1928), and *Religion and Science Considered in their Historical Relations* (1928). In this period he also wrote a first draft of *A Short History of Science to the Nineteenth Century*; owing to other projects the volume was not finished until 1941.

He contributed also by stimulating the work of other scholars. Singer joined with Arthur Platt, the university's professor of Greek, in working through almost the entire Hippocratic literature. With J. H. G. Grattan he collaborated similarly in Anglo-Saxon studies which he completed after his co-worker's death.

In 1930 he toured the United States, giving a series of lectures at Johns Hopkins and the University of California at Berkeley. The trip was hugely successful; he returned the next year as visiting professor at Berkeley, and Johns Hopkins offered him a chair as William Henry Welch's successor at the Institute of the History of Medicine. Out of the lecture series came *A Short History of Biology*, considered by Singer to be his best book.

The Singers converted their second American trip into a world tour, returning to England by way of Hong Kong and Ceylon. Singer had suffered pneumonia in the United States and decided to avoid London's damp climate as much as possible; he took rooms in the city during university sessions but otherwise lived at Kilmarth, a country home on the coast of Cornwall.

After 1933 Singer curtailed his literary output, devoted his energy to helping Jewish victims of Nazi oppression. He was a founder of the Society for the Protection of Learning and Science, a group which gave active assistance to fleeing scholars; often when the society's funds ran low he provided aid out of his own pocket. Of one such case he wrote in a letter: "I must send the poor fellow a few pounds but my power to help will not last out much longer. It is all very dreadful." In another letter he observed: "I am engaged on the proofs (Continued on page 285)

of my *History of Science*. But I give very little time to them for almost all my time is taken up with work for these unfortunate émigrés for whom some sort of accommodation has to be provided."

During World War II he converted Kilmarth into classrooms for student evacuees of King's School at Canterbury. Singer set up a biology laboratory in one room, taught the class himself; his students scored unusually high in examinations.

In 1942, at 67, he retired from his chair at the London school. His prodigious career was still far from complete; when the war ended he summoned a new burst of creative energy, produced more than a hundred works while in his seventies.

In 1948 he wrote *The Earliest Chemical Industry*, a book on economic and technologic aspects of the alum trade. The new field of interest so intrigued him that he became the originator, planner and chief editor of a massive five-volume survey, *A History of Technology*; he described it as "a belated apprenticeship which remains among the most intellectually rewarding experiences of my not very short life." Other labors of his final years: he contributed two works on Vesalius, published a translation of Galen's *De anatomicis administrationibus* and completed the long delayed *Anglo-Saxon Magic and Medicine*.

THE WORK. Singer's forte was medieval and Renaissance scholarship. He scorned the pedantry often associated with the classics; his style embraced simplicity, clarity, a decisive point of view. Said an admiring associate: "He was a scholar who desired not so much to impress other scholars, as to inform the educated public, particularly those trained in science, to whom it was his ambition to bring the spirit of humanistic knowledge."

A colleague added that Singer "literally thought with a pen in his hand." When fired with enthusiasm for a new idea he would sit down and write a draft out of his head. Later he would consult reference books, rewriting as he acquired additional information; the evolutionary process often went through ten drafts before he was satisfied.

He seldom bothered with such scholarly apparatus as file cards and a complicated index system; instead he depended on an encyclopedic memory plus a thorough mastery of a huge collection of reference works. The method led to occasional minor errors but it allowed him to handle voluminous materials with ease; he was superb at marshalling hosts of diverse facts into a readily understandable synthesis.

In the preface to *A Short History of Medicine* Singer described the basic approach which characterized his major works: "Two particular aims have been kept steadily in view; first, to stress the principles of medicine rather than the details of practice; second, to treat of these principles in as small a space as may be. For 'principles' the author has substituted at times the word 'philosophy.' He would beseech the timid reader to take no alarm at a word."

Another stream in his writing was devoted to ethics and culture, particularly the Jewish traditions; though not orthodox in observance he professed "the principles of Judaism" as forming the basic philosophy for his life and work. Said Singer: "In considering those principles I would place first an unshakeable faith in the existence of certain absolute values, that is to say a belief that there are certain relations (and notably relations between God and man) which no circumstances can ever change. It is because of the absoluteness, the unchangeability of those relations that a Jew must be an optimist about this world. This is the innermost meaning of the Messianic idea in Judaism. To be hopeful of this world one must accept as fixed certain things which stand behind the flux and compromise of history, of human relations and current policies. Thus I believe most firmly that a lie cannot achieve the same result as truth; that brutality will never secure the same result as justice; that civilization is truly worthwhile; that, in short, there are certain basic ethical and spiritual values which are unchangeable, even if our apprehensions of them may change."

LAST YEARS. Singer remained to the end alert and vigorous, a man who combined intense scholarly labor with a lively appreciation of simple pleasures. In his seventies he still bathed regularly in the sea, took long walks in the country, maintained a keen interest in local affairs. One corner of his huge library was given over to books on Cornwall.

He found an endless delight in observing local flora and fauna, and pressed visiting friends to share in the hobby. When Sir Julian Huxley visited Kilmarth he signed his name in the visitor's book, listed the birds observed during his stay, and added jestingly, "by request."

Singer loved good food, drink and conversation. After the day's work was done he would often entertain friends in his library which looked out on the sea. He would sit at his desk, spicing the talk with witty, often salty observations; if his interest in the conversation flagged he would turn quietly to his desk and work on a manuscript while his guests entertained themselves.

In his final years he suffered from attacks of pneumonia and cardiac asthma, endured two operations for the removal of cataracts; each time he rallied with cheerful resilience. The end came quietly, on June 10, 1960. He went to his library at his usual early hour, did a good morning's work, and laid down for an accustomed nap from which he never awoke.

SUMMING UP. In writing of other historians Singer paid a tribute which could well be applied to himself: "Such singleness of purpose, such learning, such skill, such penetration, such a constant search for clarity, inevitably affect the character of those who exhibit them. The contemplation of their lives induces a reflection on the effect on these fortunate and happy men of the single-minded pursuit of truth."

