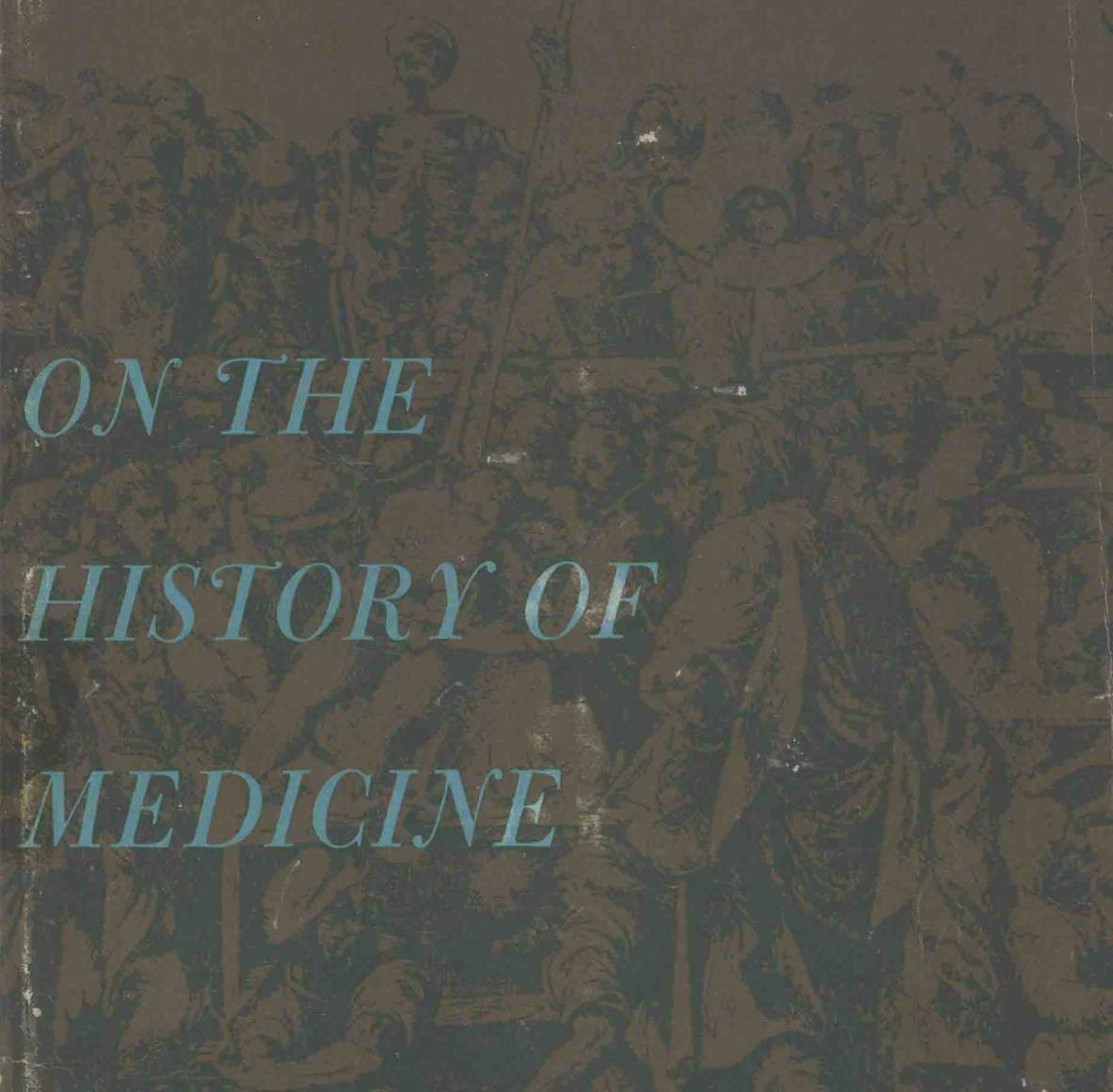


HENRY E.

SIGERIST

ON THE
HISTORY OF
MEDICINE



HENRY E.
S I G E R I S T
ON THE
HISTORY
OF MEDICINE

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A Literary Controversy over Tea in Eighteenth Century England.

FOREWORD

AT the end of the final essay of this volume, "Thoughts on the Physician's Writing and Reading," Henry E. Sigerist gives us a truly Homeric confession of faith: "what I wrote I have lived, and it has enriched my life so tremendously that I thought others might benefit from my experience," or, to paraphrase the old aphorism, "I am a part of all I have read." This undoubtedly exemplifies the spirit of Henry Sigerist more aptly than any other sentiment in the volume. Also, these essays indicate that Sigerist was as greatly interested in men as he was in books—men of all lands, persuasions, and occupations—and so conscientious was he in maintaining lines of communication with his ever-widening circle of friends that, toward the end of his life, his correspondence became so vast that it interfered with his more serious writing.

During the summer of 1959, while attending international congresses in South America (physiology) and in Spain (history of science), my thoughts turned to him frequently, for, having seen him in action at many such international gatherings, I knew full well what they meant to him. He kept detailed notes about them and generally on returning home promptly sat down to prepare a report for publication. For him this was contemporary history, something that needed to be recorded, and his compulsions were such that he could no more go to a congress and not record it than he could attend an opera and fail the next day to tell someone about it. He never wearied of sending cards to those

who, for one reason or another, could not be present. Such friendly and kindly gestures he made in full measure. This is well illustrated in the essay "A Boerhaave Pilgrimage to Holland," which records the two day celebration in September, 1938, at the University of Leiden in commemoration of the two hundredth anniversary of the death of Boerhaave. "The two days will remain unforgettable to all who had the privilege of attending the celebration. Europe was in a turmoil with every country mobilizing troops, but Holland seemed an island of peace." These phrases exemplify, incidentally, another of Sigerist's tenets, namely, that the history of medicine, or of any other science, should be portrayed in the framework of general history.

Similarly, no American medical historian can forget Dr. Sigerist's great valedictory address, "Medical History in the United States: Past, Present, Future" in which he reported with almost complete objectivity upon his fifteen year tour of duty in the United States, during which time he established the world's foremost center for historical studies in medicine in addition to inspiring dozens of other centers and individuals—junior students and senior colleagues in every branch of medicine—with the importance of the historical approach. In retrospect it seems almost inconceivable that one man could have accomplished so much in such a brief space of time.

Some have regarded it as a misfortune that he gave so freely of his time and energy that he failed to achieve the great object on which he had set his heart, namely, the completion of a formidable eight volume history of medicine written on new and original lines. There are others, however, who feel that he achieved much more through the inspiration of his essays and miscellaneous writings, many of which are reprinted here for the first time, than he might have through his projected history.

Sigerist approached true greatness as a writer because of his essential humanity. In his travels he gave as much attention to local cuisine and the *vin du pays* as he did to the customs of the people and their literary and cultural heritage. His prose, moreover, was lightened by a gay wit that has served as a source of endless delight to readers, young and old. In describing a dull book such as *An Essay on Tea* by Jonas Hanway (1757), instead of boring us with Hanway's lucubrations about tea, he draws a picture of the eighteenth century reformer as an entertaining eccentric who launched vast schemes, such as trying to reform penitent prostitutes and the Bank of England, but who incidentally was responsible for inventing that great British institution the umbrella. Hanway

was indeed the first to walk the oft-moistened streets of London armed with an umbrella; not being wholly sympathetic with the German-American Ph.D. tradition, Dr. Sigerist asks whether a good title for a doctoral dissertation might not be "From Hanway to Chamberlain, a History of the Umbrella in British Life." In Sigerist's hands the history of medicine thus became identified with humanism, albeit in somewhat unconventional form.

Even when his health began to fail, his outlook remained that of a young man; for him, everything was of interest and what he saw became history. For Sigerist, study of the past was the only sound way of anticipating what lay ahead in any field of human endeavor.

JOHN F. FULTON, M.D.

New Haven, Connecticut
September, 1959

INTRODUCTION

THE MIND OF A MAN

THIS book is, by the power of the enlightening words it contains, an immortal mirror of the luminous mind of a great medical historian. But perhaps the best homage I can pay Henry E. Sigerist is to say simply that this book is a monument to a Man.

To be a man and to deserve such title is very difficult nowadays. In times when society was based on individualism, as in the Renaissance, the man who ventured to assert himself held in his hand the winning cards in the game of life. This is why geniuses like Leonardo and rogues like Casanova triumphed in the early centuries of the modern age, some through the magic of genius and others through sheer rascality, but always through their fiery individualism. Today, to try to be a man, to be faithful to Pindar's dictum, "Become what thou art," to be loyal to one's own real personal and inalienable destiny, is highly dangerous and, though sometimes it leads to victory, is often a road to ostracism.

Henry Sigerist was, in his own words, "a nonconformist," a *homo universalis* who even in the heyday of the empire of "the masses," whom he loved dearly and to whom he contributed so much, never renounced his personality, his ideas, or his passionate individualism, although he knew how harmful to him this could be among the Pharisees. Possibly his individualism was one of the intimate factors that resulted in his being hemmed in by adverse circumstances and prodded into seeking the peaceful environment of palm and vineyard under the azure skies of Switzerland. Over there, his dynamic spirit, unrestrained by frontiers of

time and space, blossomed freely. His mind, like Aristotle's, was a vast empire of culture incessantly lashed by gales of insatiable curiosity about the life around him.

But Sigerist's individualism was what made possible the legacy he left us, which will breathe with life as long as man remains man. His dynamic philosophy of medical history will help us, now and in the future, to face and resolve problems of health and disease by making the history of the past a key to that of the future, and the shining example he gave of courage, idealism, genius, and greatness, which, like a mountain shadow lengthening in the sunset, has grown only greater in stature since his death, will be an ever stronger inspiration to physicians the world over.

The greatness of Sigerist is manifest in the supreme humanism with which throughout his life he undertook almost superhuman enterprises. Prominent among these was the writing of his great history of medicine, which remained an unfinished symphony at his death.

Sigerist's greatness rests upon his having been a man, nothing more and nothing less, pledged to epic projects and great achievements, who never for an instant relinquished his human quality, possibly because he felt that there is no greatness higher than that of the human being who makes his life a supreme endeavor to renounce nothing, not even his simplicity. For greatness is simplicity. It is doing great things that change the life of mankind, keeping the spirit aloft in the heaven of ideals but retaining one's supreme personal simplicity, even in one's most glittering hours on the road to glory.

Physicians and students will continue far into the future to read Sigerist's works and to assimilate his ideas, as we all have done, making of his concepts a compass for navigating the broad seas of medicine. But only those who knew him personally can fully benefit from the memory of his presence and words, from that ineffable learning and feeling, thinking and working, dreaming and creating, that were his life and his example.

Elsewhere* I have recounted my memories of Sigerist during his visit to Spain and our last meeting in Rome. On these occasions, acquaintances and friends alike were amazed and charmed by this man who for years had been spiritual mentor to so many physicians and yet retained the enthusiasm and curiosity of a child, the sense of wonder, the enjoyment of life, the high spirits and strong emotions, and consequently the

* "Sigerist and Spain," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 13:244, 1958.

ability to convert the dry faded herbarium of medical history into a sunlit garden filled with the fragrance of roses and the hum of bees.

Sigerist was a *great* man, which is far superior to being a "big" man. This greatness of soul and mind of Sigerist moves me to say here something that to some may sound like heresy, but that I, sincerely believing it to be the truth, dare lay reverently upon his, in our memory, eternally warm ashes: the best of Sigerist perhaps would be not a long, formal history of medicine but the articles and papers, now scattered like flocks of restless birds, that he published in his lifetime, some of which are collected in this anthology.

Many people deplore the fact that Sigerist never completed his monumental history of medicine. I do not think he would have ever finished it. Had he done so, I do not think, great though it would have been and undoubtedly the best work of its kind, that it would have been *the best* of Sigerist. Besides, I think that Sigerist *did* write such a history. One need only peruse his works to prove that. It is not a history written in the chronological order and organized form beloved by some, but in the way he himself preferred, that is, in articles varying in theme and occasion but unified by the thought that inspired them.

Sigerist's work, his articles and lectures, lead by paths full of beauty and precision to all the problems of the history of medicine. When Ortega y Gasset died, some people regretted that he did not leave a complete treatise on philosophy. Dr. Gregorio Marañón remarked at the time: "What could a circumstantial and dogmatic treatise add to that infinite curiosity and clarity that he [Ortega] put into everything?" Very true. Similarly, Sigerist did not leave a complete history of medicine possibly because there was no need to do so, just as Einstein did not need to leave a complete treatise on physics to ensure his immortality.

As a matter of fact, geniuses rarely have the patience, time, and desire to leave "complete" works on the favorite subject of their vocation. It seems as though the genius were fated to be a sublime catalytic agent that creates, inspires, and stimulates but rarely has the opportunity—denied by his life or restlessness—of devoting sufficient years to creating a definitive work on his specialty. But even if he produced such a work, it could never capture the brilliant light that the genius flashes forth in his moments of creation.

Geniuses are rarely good scholars in childhood—as witness Santiago Ramon y Cajal, a very poor student, who failed in anatomy, yet later became the genius of neurohistology—perhaps because their creative

nature instinctively rejects the routine and discipline that others less gifted have no difficulty in accepting.

Sigerist's work is a scattered mosaic whose pieces his disciples will some day assemble. It would be sufficient to arrange chronologically selected fragments of his articles—some day I myself may try to do this—in order to have a history of medicine far more effective and inspiring than anything Sigerist might have written after taming the winged Pegasus of his spirit into the plodding plow horse that the historian perforce becomes under the burden of compulsory regimented writing. Sigerist left a great history of medicine. All one need do to find it is look for it in his writings, his words, his life.

For a medical historian not only makes history with what he says and writes but also with his person and his thought. Like a catalyst of greatness, he inspires his surroundings. Sigerist made history because life for him was all light and clarity. No one will ever again be able to make medical history uninfluenced by Sigerist's ideas, which have become integrated into the thinking of physicians all over the world, thus stamping upon the beloved absent a supreme epitaph of universality.

In this book we present a selection of Sigerist's works as made by the author himself at my request some years ago, when I suggested to him the idea of publishing an anthology, together with some other pieces selected by myself as the best examples of his work. The selection he himself made at my personal request in March of 1956 faithfully reflects his personality. He left out some important works on medieval medical bibliography, in which he so greatly excelled, yet he included several delightful articles on such subjects as how to spell his name and how to prepare a truffled turkey on Thanksgiving Day. That he chose those articles for his anthology reflects better than anything else his great simplicity, his deeply warm nature, and his enchanting sense of humor. He never affected pompous postures. He was fond of life, kind, simple, and merry even in the hours of his greatest professional renown.

Our editorial efforts on these pieces have been focused on arranging them in some "chronological" order (by periods) and by subjects, with the object of helping the reader get his bearings. Otherwise, I have preferred to let the master speak in the way he was fond of, passing from one theme to another, alternating serious statements with humorous remarks, always in that friendly conversational tone characteristic of the true master who, unimpressed by his own learning, acts more like a companion than a tutor. I have preferred to let his thought—on whose

mighty wings the sun of ideas shone as fiercely as the sun on the far-reaching wings of the condor—range over time and space, continents and ages, facts, figures, things, and places of history—the history not only of medicine but also of civilization.

Sigerist's great innovation is to have made the history of medicine a facet of the history of mankind by linking it with the history of the culture, art, creeds and philosophies, economy, technology, and sociology of each period, thus binding the physician's endeavor to man's yearnings, struggles, and conquests in each historical epoch. This great contribution of Sigerist's as a historian can be compared only with the impact that his presence, speech, and example as a man made on all of us who knew him.

Sigerist considered medicine to be a science natural in its methods and social in its objectives. He placed medicine among the social sciences by making it responsible not only for preventing and healing disease but also for protecting the health and well-being of mankind.

The history of medicine was to Sigerist a powerful tool with which his mighty hands carved a statue to human well-being. His history is no mere story about a coin, a parchment, an instrument, a statue, or a building. He was a true artificer of history, in whose hands everything instantly acquired a dynamic character and was illuminated by the vivid light of our own time.

Let us emphasize that dynamic character, of *living* history, in Sigerist's work, for it illuminates all the writings contained in this volume. From the sunny sands of the island of Cos, just as from Boerhaave's Amsterdam, Harvey's London, or Paracelsus' Zurich, Sigerist knew at once how to extract an inference applicable to our own age, a lesson of enormous practical value to the present-day physician.

History with Sigerist was never a static investigation of the past, but a dynamic exploration of the present and an anticipation of the future. He made history because history to him was learning from the past how to interpret the present and anticipate the future. History never repeats itself; hence we must know it in order to re-create it at each instant with our effort. A sociologist of medicine, Sigerist always bore in his heart the longing to help every man by offering him the best that medicine could do for his health and well-being. For him medicine was not so much the healing of disease as its prevention and the promotion of health.

But what I admire most in Sigerist is his concept of the history of medicine as a facet carved on the immense quarry of the history of civilization. From his earliest works, Sigerist knew how to get away

from the narrow ambit of history considered as a mere chronology of dates on a single subject, so as to link medicine with the civilization of each epoch. Without talking of philosophy, he had one of his own, properly organized, that allowed him to integrate medical knowledge with all the other endeavors of man in time and space.

Prior to Sigerist, medical historiography, the study of the activities of medicine, suffered from being neither historical nor medical enough. Sigerist established from the start that the history of medicine must be first of all *history*, but always *medicine* as well. Its objective must be to serve the physician's vocation by stimulating him, enlightening him, and serving him as a tool and a system.

At the same time, Sigerist knew how to combine in a clear and entertaining prose the three ways of making history, namely, to describe the lesser facts, to narrate the important facts, and to interpret the basic facts. In his polished and lucid style, he made pleasing and friendly history, not grave and stern like the face of a professor of the last century, but cheerful and dynamic like the face of a young sportsman of our time.

This book contains all that and more. It affords a *complete* perspective of the history of medicine, requiring the reader only to fill in mentally the gaps between one section and the next in order to complete the span of the unfinished bridge that Sigerist started, and whose curve can be projected mentally to reach over to the other side of the river of history. This book also contains a philosophy and a dynamics of history, a historical methodology that can be applied to any historicomedical study. Above all, just as the breast encloses the heart, this book contains the soul of a man who, like a crusader for humanism, lived serving an ideal and died hoping for it.

FELIX MARTI-IBAÑEZ, M.D.

New York City
September, 1959

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ON MEDICAL HISTORY

