ON BEING A LITERARY EXECUTOR*

JOHN F. FULTON, M.D.

The Historical Library, Yale University School of Medicine, New Haven, Connecticut

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I t was just seven years and four days ago that H.C. died and for better or worse entrusted me with the responsibility of acting as his literary executor. Without wishing to be boastful, I can assure you that this has proved no ordinary assignment. In the first place, I was named literary executor without ever having been consulted about it. And there were other somewhat embarrassing clauses in his will—one relating to his biography and the other to his books. Being aware that a biography might be called for and no doubt recalling what the Osler Biography had entailed, he asked that if his wife and literary executor felt “that the publication of my biography might be of interest or help to medical students, I request my executors hereinafter named pay out of the corpus of my estate the expenses of such publication not to exceed the sum of Five Thousand Dollars ($5,000).” He further stipulated that “Any royalties from such biography and all royalties from any of my own writings and publications, I give to and the same shall be paid to Yale University for use by it in connection with the project hereinafter set forth for the Medical Historical Library.”

And then with regard to his books, after bequeathing them to the University, he further embarrassed his literary executor by adding:

I expressly authorize said Yale University, however, to dispose of such items of my said books and papers as my literary executor, if living, may approve. If my literary executor shall decide that it would be better to have said books and papers, or a substantial portion thereof, sold at public auction in order that others may share in the pleasure which I have had in the temporary possession thereof, he may authorize and direct said University thus to sell the whole or any part of my said books and papers at public auction, or may, himself, arrange for such sale, the proceeds of any such sale or sales to revert to said University for the benefit of the Library of the Yale School of Medicine.

I can only interpret this as a deliberate attempt to give me an axe to hold over the head of the University fathers if they didn’t toe the line as far as the Library is concerned. Actually, the University has treated us most handsomely in providing a new building, but the funds came almost too late for, while they were appropriated in July 1939, the architect’s plans were not finally approved until October 3, 1939, the day Dr. Cushing had his first coronary attack. Hostilities had broken out (as Olof Sjöqvist will recall), and only ten days before the plans were accepted, H.C. at a conference with Yale officials was told that the war precluded going ahead with construction. This being the culmination of four years of agitation for a suitable

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building he replied with extraordinary and somewhat Machiavellian restraint, "Very well, gentlemen, my books are going to the Welch Library." This had an electrifying effect and ten days later, when H.C. was in an oxygen tent, we were able to tell him that the plans for the Library had been approved.

Even so we were almost too late, for within a few weeks an embargo was put on steel. However, Mr. Atterbury, the architect, had worked with incredible speed and had placed his order for the steel in time. The result of this nip-and-tuck struggle, which I suspect shortened Dr. Cushing's life, is that we have the newest and one of the most unusual medical school libraries in the United States.

The circumstances surrounding the building of the Library, and the fact that other divisions of the University no doubt questioned the wisdom of investing so much in the library of a single school so soon after they had invested $7,000,000 in a University Library building, have made those of us associated with the new undertaking doubly eager to justify the Library's existence, especially the old book division, which we have called the Historical Library and which in wartime was clearly looked upon as a luxury. With these things in mind our small staff devoted a large part of its energy to wartime bibliographies—two on aviation medicine, one on vision, and a third on Scientific, Medical, and Technical Books published since 1930; this latter, the largest volume ever printed at the Yale Press, was undertaken for the State Department through the National Research Council.

But the literary executorship also entailed other duties, for the Oxford Press was asking for a Preface for a one-volume 'Osler,' Dr. Cushing had a book of essays, The Medical Career, halfway through the press at the time of his death, he had provided a fund for the completion of a catalogue of his library and that undertaking had to be supervised, and then his great bio-bibliography of Vesalius was left unfinished with the unwritten understanding that it should be brought out in 1943 in time for the commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the Fabrica. Not content with this, he blithely suggested in his will that annotated catalogues ought to be issued of his special collections, such as his Jenners, Culpepers, his black-letter English books, and of course his 168 incunabula. We were also asked, in 1944, to edit one of his illustrated travel diaries for the Rowfant Club of Cleveland. And not only had he given his own collection but he had proceeded to "talk" Arnold Klebs into giving his collection of 22,000 items to Yale, and Dr. Klebs died in 1943 with his huge projected catalogue of medical and scientific incunabula only half ready for press; also a short-title catalogue of the Klebs library will have to be issued.

I used to think the Chief was a little hard on Gil Horrax, and on his assistant residents and secretaries, but what he did to them isn't a patch on what he did to his literary executor. Oh yes, and I forgot that he informed Klebs in 1934 that I was ready to give my own library to Yale. When I heard about it from Switzerland, what else could I do?
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For a month after his death nothing was said about his biography. Finally in November, I felt that it was up to me to bring the matter to Mrs. Cushing's attention since enquiries were already being made and I knew that there were several persons who were interested in undertaking it. Mrs. Cushing looked surprised and said, "I thought you had already started it—doesn't a literary executor always write the biography? What do you think he made you literary executor for?" I explained that literary executors were usually advisers and that they didn't appoint themselves biographers; that my advice was to find one of Dr. Cushing's older pupils, that I had known him only since 1925, I wasn't a neurosurgeon and I wasn't practising, etc. But Mrs. Cushing insisted, or rather she didn't listen, and with reluctance as well as fright I consented.

Everyone I talked to about it referred at once with consummate tact to the Osler Biography; every time that happened, I had a fit of procrastination. One unfeeling soul, who had better be nameless, spoke bitter truth when he remarked, "No one in his right mind would undertake to write the life of the author of the 'Osler'." And so I have had moments of wanting to cast those two volumes out of the window. Unconsciously we have no doubt been influenced by it, for it was essential to the record of Dr. Cushing's life that some attention be given to the way the Osler Biography was evolved, but I have tried deliberately not to model the Cushing Biography on the 'Osler'—for the subjects were in most respects entirely different human beings. And while H.C. had to do infinite research to build up his initially meager source materials, the Cushing sources were well in hand—the Society had done his bibliography, and his files were remarkably full; indeed, I must have had ten or fifteen times more in the way of letters and other relevant documents than H.C. had for the 'Osler.' Our biggest problem was not one of search but of selection. For example, while H.C. had practically none of Osler's letters from school and college, we have nearly a thousand handwritten letters that he had sent to his parents while he was at Yale, at the Harvard Medical School, and at the Hopkins. I have used selected passages from only about fifty of these, but they all had to be transcribed and read.

If the Cushing Biography proves to be remarkable for anything, it will be for the richness of the primary sources, for I can recall no other medical biographer who had such a wealth of material. Think, for example, of his voluminous case histories which we have used continuously to verify dates and details. Whether we have chosen wisely from the vast assemblage is for you to judge; and I can only say that I could never have done it single-handed. If the book is in any way successful, it will be because I have had the sagacious advice of six virtuous women, three of them long associated with H.C., and also that of a learned and patient man, W. W. Francis, nephew of Sir William Osler who shared H.C.'s "latch-keyer" days in Baltimore. Julia Shepley of Brookline, who had prepared the entire Osler Biography for press and who had kept Dr. Cushing's war diary in France, came
down to New Haven in 1940 and for two years devoted her entire time to placing the files in chronological sequence and drawing up for each year a list of chief events, after each giving the whereabouts of the source. Madeline Stanton during this same period conducted correspondence with H.C.'s family, friends, and pupils, and it was fortunate that we began immediately, for men like Chittenden and many of his Cleveland contemporaries and family connections who contributed most valuable information have since died. We also collected H.C's handwritten letters, of which there were a great many throughout his life.

Having been heavily committed in war work and the non-biographical duties of being a literary executor, I was not able to begin drafting the text until June a year ago, although I had roughly blocked out the Harvard Medical and Hopkins chapters when I was in the hospital for three months early in 1942. I felt that the book could be better integrated if it could be written at a single stretch, so beginning the first of last July I virtually took six months off and drafted the text between then and the first of January. Julia Shepley and Madeline Stanton between them had left the files marvellously arranged, and the book practically wrote itself. Since it would have been impossible for one person to do all the typing in the time-schedule set, I was fortunate in discovering a person having unusual literary judgment, Miss Elizabeth Thomson, who is also one of the most rapid and accurate of typists. Finding that she could type about as rapidly as I could talk, I dictated all the first drafts directly to the machine. Miss Stanton and I then edited the drafts, and Miss Stanton's services in this connection were absolutely invaluable for her judgments were based on twenty years as H.C.'s secretary. Most of the chapters went through three drafts, the last one in four copies which were sent around to various readers, but particularly to Louise Eisenhardt and W. W. Francis who have enriched the text in countless ways and have spared me many a blush—as have other readers too numerous to mention. Elizabeth Thomson typed all three drafts and contributed much to the general editing and to keeping me conventional and consistent. Madeline Stanton gathered together all of the illustrations (and there were literally hundreds from which to choose) and supervised the drafting of the legends, a task which proved particularly burdensome.

Some have asked about our choice of publisher—why not one of the more general houses such as Oxford, Doubleday, Little Brown, etc., which might have been more effective in securing distribution. We had been approached by some thirty houses, and since all royalties were to accrue to the Library I cold-bloodedly said that I would give the book to the highest bidder. Charles Thomas offered a straight 20 per cent royalty on receipts as well as an advance to help with my expanded secretarial staff. But quite apart from Charles Thomas being the highest bidder, there were many and substantial reasons for wanting him, with which most of the members of the Society are familiar. He had long been associated with H.C., from the Blood-vessel Tumor Monograph in 1928 to the Meningioma Monograph in 1938, fol-
lowed by the H.C. Bibliography, the Birthday Volume, and the Journal of Neurophysiology, and now the Journal of Neurosurgery. The Banta Publishing Company, which do a large share of Thomas' printing, came to feel as close to Dr. Cushing as though they were members of the family, and it was felt that they would take a greater personal interest than any printer with whom we had been previously associated. And if Mr. Thomas does not put on quite the high-powered promotion campaign backed by the New York literary dictators, I think this would have been in keeping with Dr. Cushing's own wishes. Mr. Thomas has kept the price down to five dollars, which will bring it within the medical student's range. Had he had full-page spreads in the New York papers, the book would have cost ten dollars instead of five, and I should prefer medical students to have it, rather than the general public, if a choice has to be made.

Working with R. F. Gehner, the chief designer of the Banta Company, has been particularly pleasant. He has not objected to all the small sketches from H.C.'s notebooks which had to be put in as work-arounds—the bane of a compositor's existence. He also designed the attractive jacket and for the most part phrased the blurbs. Everything seems to be in good order except what he had to say about the author.

In reading the book critically I hope you will try to visualize the rather formidable problem we have had in dealing with people whom the Chief in one way or another had annoyed. There were a good many such over the years, and they were usually quite vocal about it. Thus, Dr. Franklin S. Newell of Boston, who served under Dr. Cushing as a "pup" at the M.G.H., wrote me a long letter in 1940 about his grievances in 1895-1896 and asked me to be sure to use it, giving his name (Biography, p. 107); and there have been a good many others who wanted their side of the story told—men such as Conrad Jacobson and Walter Dandy. Prior to his death Dr. Dandy generously gave me access to his complete file of correspondence with H.C. The story of the relations between the two men could be made the subject of a poignant psychological novel. From study of the correspondence I have come to believe that basically they had respect and admiration for one another, but for some reason there was also mutual mistrust; indeed they seemed almost predestined for controversy, and each had a genius for saying things and writing things that irritated the other. I have given the details rather fully in the Biography.

In the unhappy situation which developed between them there is a plain lesson for all of us. It is particularly relevant today in this period of rapid expansion and keen competition in the field of neurosurgery. The Chief did not always appear in the best light in his dealings with Dandy, but in all fairness to him it must be stated that he often regretted his ill-considered and impulsive movements and attempted to make amends. Dandy, however, had become so sensitive to the Chief's thrusts that he always seemed to mistrust his motives and never really forgave him, even carrying his grudge to Cushing students who came to work at the Hopkins. Although they both
made great contributions to neurosurgery, it will ever be a source of regret that they could not have been made in the spirit of friendly association which I like to think characterizes the work of members of this Society. The Chief was no plaster saint—he had an intense and at times a tempestuous nature which many of you know, but, as you also all know well, he had the divine spark which led us to form this Society fourteen years ago and to name it after him. In 1931 when his students rallied around him at the first International Neurological Congress at Berne, he gave them this piece of advice:

Hold together. Keep up your friendships—form societies where you can meet together frequently to exchange ideas, and to criticize one another’s technique. Keep your finger on neurology, but don’t get lost in scientific minutiae—a medulloblastoma or a perineural fibroblastoma by any other name is just as sweet! Don’t let neurological surgery get too far away from general surgery. It is the greatest possible compliment that we have been adopted by the neurologists and accepted as one of them. Be this as it may, we did not grow wholly out of neurology, for our roots are in the fertile soil of general surgery. I like to think that our specialty is perhaps the richest in the field of Medicine, and it will be if you make it so.

I began this evening with some more or less facetious observations on the Chief’s adroitness in taking care of my leisure time for a good many years to come. Actually, of course, I deem it a very great privilege to be charged with the responsibility of carrying forward the plans he left unfinished, and so far as possible I am attempting to do this in his humanistic tradition which may one day be regarded as his most enduring gift to medicine.