Henry L. Heyl, 1906–1975

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Henry Heyl was the Editor of this Journal for 10 years. In this short time he brought it to a standard of excellence that his successors will find difficult to maintain. Henry's wide scientific knowledge and piercing intelligence were joined with an acute ear for the written word. Of all the important posts Henry held, he valued his job as Editor of this Journal as the most important and as the one of which he was most proud. Henry's contribution through the Journal of Neurosurgery was as great as any made in the operating room or the laboratory, and his colleagues all over the world have reason to be grateful for his service in their behalf.

Major improvements in the Journal during his tenure as editor included the following: the introduction of a new logo and front cover illustrations; an increase in the number of articles from countries outside the United States and Canada; the redesign of the type and style inside the Journal; the addition of an abstract and key words at the beginning of each article; the development of new sections, including the Neurosurgical Forum, the use of experts around the country to review new books on neurosurgery and allied subjects, and an expanded notices section; strict supervision of the quality of advertising; standardization of the style of reference citation with that of the National Library of Medicine; publication of the Neurosurgical Bibli-Index as a quarterly supplement to the Journal; and the writing of an occasional editorial, at which Henry was adept. During his editorship, Journal subscriptions have quadrupled. His most recent innovation was a study of applications of the computer to bibliographic searching and indexing of the Journal.

Henry was born in Chicago on October 2, 1906, but lived as a small boy in Walpole, Massachusetts, where he began his life-long interest in the outdoors, fishing with his father. For a while he ran a trap line along his 5-mile walk to and from school. When the family moved westward again Henry attended the St. Louis Country Day School before entering Hamilton College where his major was English and from which he graduated in 1928.

From his father, who served on the Hoover Commission for Relief of War Victims, Henry inherited an interest in public service, which on graduation from college led him to consider a career in international law. After a summer as an observer at the World Court in the Hague with Elihu Root, Henry decided that the law was not for him and that he would prefer medicine. He then spent another year at Hamilton in order to complete premedical course requirements, and at the same time taught English at the college.

After graduation from Harvard Medical School in 1933, Henry served as an intern at the Johns Hopkins Hospital and later at the Children's Hospital of Boston (1935–1936, and 1937–1939). He was a Cushing Fellow at Yale from 1935 to 1936 and a Fellow at the Lahey Clinic in Boston from 1936 to 1937. From 1939 to 1940 he was a resident
neurosurgeon at the Massachusetts General Hospital, and was certified by the American Board of Neurosurgery in 1946.

During World War II, before the United States had entered the war, Henry volunteered for a year of neurosurgical service in England. He cherished this experience and kept throughout his life a warm affection and admiration for England and her people. It was an important period in his career. Assigned to Birmingham, he established there the Neurosurgical Service for the care of the head, spinal, and nerve injuries resulting from the frequent air raids over that city at the time. During that year he also made many visits to Oxford, for relaxation, where he enjoyed the intellectual atmosphere and made many good friends.

Henry also managed a few excursions to local trout streams to indulge in one of his favorite avocations, fly fishing. On one of these occasions he made his first and probably only really grievous mistake in angling. After fishing a certain stream, Henry carefully cleaned the trout at streamside as he always did at home. This proved a gross breach of local etiquette, for when he carried them to his host, the latter looked at them in horror and exclaimed: "Good God! You've gutted them!"

On returning to the United States in 1941, Henry became a member of the Hitchcock Clinic at Dartmouth for a brief period before volunteering for military duty when the United States entered the war. As Captain Heyl in the Army of the United States Medical Corps, he was chief neurosurgeon for the Sixth General Hospital, the Massachusetts General Hospital unit, and was sent with that unit for basic training to Camp Blanding, Florida. It was here that I first met Henry while I was serving in a similar capacity with another outfit. It was also here that Henry first met his wife-to-be, Katharine Agate. One day while fishing in a small river near camp his eye was taken by a young lady who was not only beautiful but who was casting on the river as expertly as he!

His unit was soon shipped overseas to Casablanca, and Henry served in the North African theater until he was sent home with tuberculosis to the Fitzsimmons General Hospital in Denver. On his recovery he married Katharine Agate on May 7, 1944.

From his North African experiences he distilled a delightful article on the difficulties in war time of obtaining wine and even the bottles to put it in. It was published in the Atlantic Monthly for November, 1943.

Henry and "Kit" settled in a lovely hilltop farmhouse in Norwich, Vermont, directly across the Connecticut River from Dartmouth, where Henry resumed his faculty post. The next 5 years were extremely busy ones as he combined an extremely active neurosurgical practice with teaching and research. In 1950, however, a colleague noticed a small node in Henry's neck. It proved to be a lymphoma, for which he was given 2 mev x-ray therapy. The lymphoma disappeared but about a year later Henry noticed motor and sensory symptoms in his legs which rapidly progressed until he became paraplegic at the T-2 level.

With the onset of paraplegia Henry spent almost a year in various hospitals and underwent an operation by Dr. James L. Poppen: an exploratory high thoracic laminectomy that revealed no tumor, but advanced post-irradiation atrophy and scarring of the spinal cord. Later a second operation was performed for the relief of harrowing spasms. During all this Kit commuted to be with him although she had a 3-year-old child and a new baby at home. The experiences of all he went through, and the wise conclusions that resulted, culminated in one of the best articles on paraplegia one could ask for: his paper on "Some practical aspects in the rehabilitation of paraplegics," published in the Journal of Neurosurgery in 1956.

Although he could not practice when he returned to Hanover, Henry maintained a demanding schedule of teaching, research, and administrative duties at the medical school from a wheelchair. He thought nothing of driving himself alone to work on the snowiest days and even to Boston, New York, and Washington to raise money for the medical school when he was Associate Dean, and to establish the Hitchcock Foundation with its first grant. He also played a major role in the organization of its neurosciences curriculum and in its evolution from a 2-year to a 4-year medical school. Henry, in addition to his appointment as Associate Dean from 1960 to 1965, served as Associate Professor of Anatomy from 1963 to 1969, and as Professor from 1969 to 1971. On his retirement his former Dean wrote: "Well I know..."
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that all you did was not ‘just a job.’ It was an all-consuming, dedicated commitment, the kind of continuous application that transforms occupation into preoccupation and then rises above itself.’’

To the school Henry contributed not only his intellectual and administrative talents, but also his warmth and great interest in people. The farmhouse on the hill became a mecca for medical students, and indeed for many other young people who found a home away from home with Henry and Kit, and advice and support in times of trouble. There were many glorious picnics and much magnificent singing led by Henry’s superb voice.

From his wheelchair he also served as chairman of the Norwich School Board, and for a while was a town Selectman, Health Officer, and President of the Norwich Development Association, which was concerned with community improvements such as the construction and maintenance of a swimming pool for the town.

Henry was able to continue fishing not only on the local club lake where, by a chain hoist of his own design, he could lower himself into a boat and then row to the “hot spots” he knew so well, but also in Canada, California, and Florida. “To deny the place of fishing in my life,” he wrote in 1944, “would be to deny my soul.” His combined love of angling and science culminated in a series of papers on the histological changes in the salmon’s pituitary gland due to spawning, seasonal changes, exhaustion, and other factors. His last written contribution, in fact, was an erudite article on the Atlantic salmon, submitted to The Atlantic Salmon shortly before he died.

Henry’s talents were brought to their fullest fruition by his appointment as Editor of the Journal of Neurosurgery. He was able to use his experience and knowledge on a wider scale for an international audience. He thoroughly enjoyed the meetings he attended as editor, both the stimulus of the discussions and the fellowship of his colleagues. Certainly one of the outstanding events of his last years was the International Congress of Neurosurgical Societies in Tokyo. He was overwhelmed by the beauty of Japan and the care and courtesy with which his Japanese hosts had planned for his entertainment and comfort.

In addition to being chairman or member of various governmental and Society committees, Henry was a member of the Society of Neurological Surgeons, the American Association of Neurological Surgeons (Vice President 1969–1970), the American Academy of Neurological Surgeons, the Association for Research in Nervous and Mental Diseases, the Altasaurus Glider Club, and the Schussverein, one of the oldest ski clubs of New England.

In October 1974, after a summer of uneasy health, Henry detected a tumor in his abdomen. At operation this proved to be a lymphoma. Chemotherapy was instituted which reduced the mass and restored his health briefly. But he was hospitalized again, with pneumonia, which became progressively worse. He died on March 1, 1975.

Henry is survived by his wife, Kit, and two sons, Nicholas Eaton and Michael Livingston, and two brothers, Dr. James T. Heyl, of Exeter, New Hampshire, and Hamilton Heyl, of Avon, Connecticut.

He is also survived by the memories all who knew him share: memories of his wisdom, warm friendship, wit, and, above all, his very great courage.

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