

# Obituary

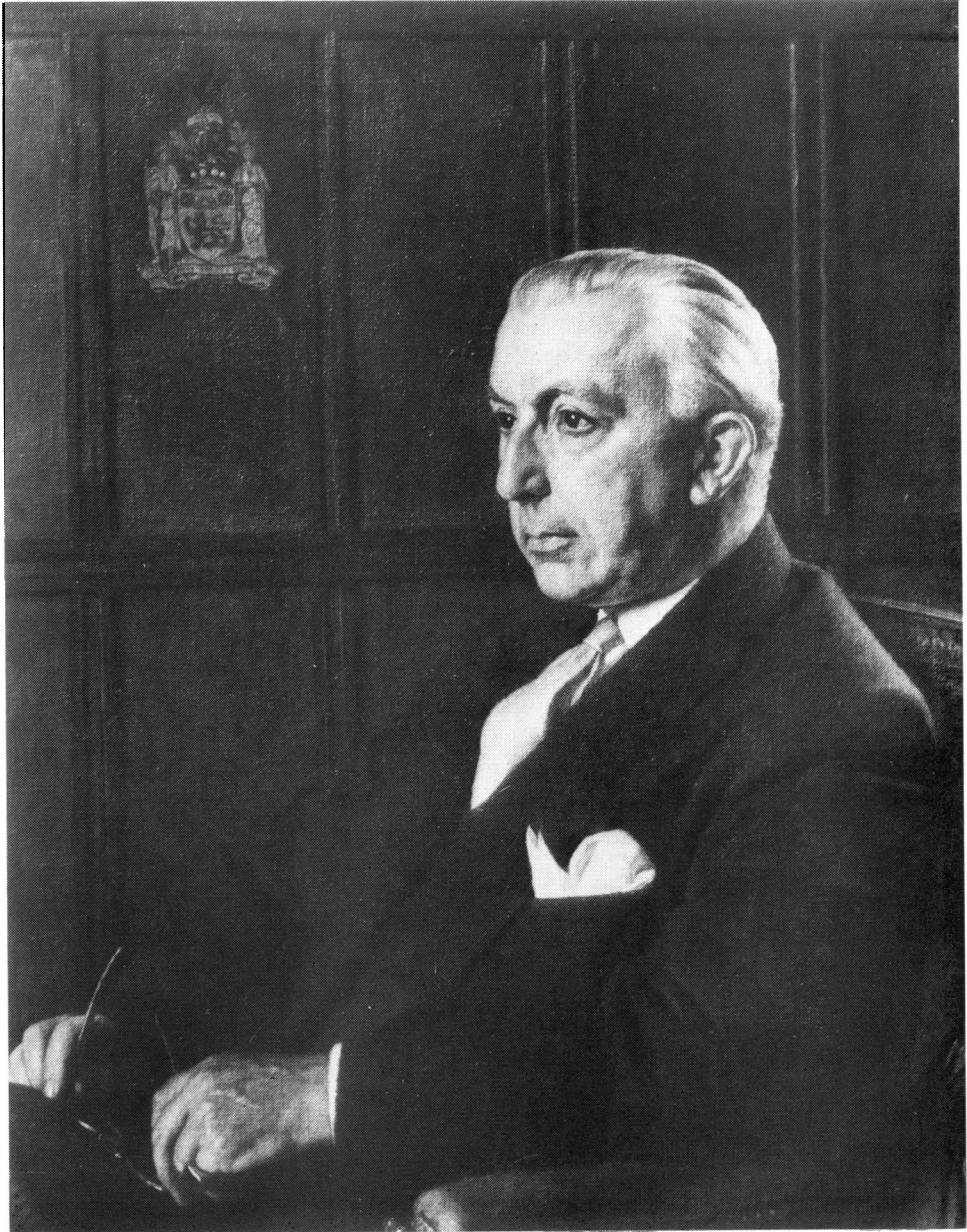
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LORD COHEN OF BIRKENHEAD, C.H., M.D., F.R.C.P.  
(1900–1977)

PERHAPS the best indication of the number and variety of Henry Cohen's contributions to medicine in Britain – and everywhere in the world where British medicine still has influence – is the widespread notice which has been taken of his death on 7 August 1977. From the highest circles of government to the smallest and most esoteric of specialist groups there are many who will recall with gratitude his contribution to the solution of some problem in which he acted as mediator, innovator or judge. Despite all the calls upon his time and energy made by a career which had more than enough achievements and responsibilities for three or four different men, Henry Cohen had the will – and therefore found the time – to take more than a dilettante interest in the history of medicine, to which he made substantial original contributions. He was on the editorial board of *Medical History*, and was for several years chairman of the History of Medicine Panel of the Wellcome Trust.

Henry Cohen was born in Birkenhead on 21 February 1900 and was educated at the Birkenhead Institute and the University of Liverpool, where he graduated in medicine in 1922 with distinction in every subject before proceeding to the M.D. two years later. So impressive was his performance that he was at once invited to join the staff of the Liverpool Royal Infirmary. His remarkable clinical skill, combined with an unusual capacity for hard work and organization, enabled him to build up one of the largest consultant practices in northwest England, and his advice was often sought in important cases throughout the country. At the early age of thirty-four, he was appointed Professor of Medicine in the University of Liverpool, a post which carried with it the responsibility for the four general teaching hospitals in Liverpool, but which was still only part-time and had to be combined with his ever-enlarging private practice. Yet his appetite for work and responsibility was so insatiable and the demands for his services so continuous that from 1943 on, when he became a member of Council of the Royal College of Physicians, he was always a member of some important national committee and usually presiding over its deliberations.

He had always been interested in law and his brilliant grasp of administration at all levels made his advice on new organizations of the utmost value. He became closely associated with the Ministry of Health and the new National Health Service in 1949 as first Vice-Chairman (and later Chairman) of the Central Health Services Council, and in the same year he was knighted in recognition of his services. Despite a serious cardiac illness in 1952, he recovered to exercise his rare abilities in the cause of British medicine for another twenty-five years, giving up his own private practice in order to do so. He was President of the British Medical Association in 1952 and of the Royal Society of Medicine in 1964, but it was as President of the General Medical Council from 1961 to 1973 that his name became widely known to the general public through the press reports of the proceedings of its disciplinary committee. Here his undoubted legal ability and his power to master a brief in record time proved of the greatest value. In 1956 he became the first physician from the provinces to be made a peer, and he



**LORD COHEN OF BIRKENHEAD**

Portrait by Harold Knight, which was commissioned and presented to Lord Cohen in 1958 by "Members of the Liverpool Medical Institution and their friends". The portrait now hangs in the Liverpool Medical Institution, and is reproduced by kind permission.

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chose 'vivisection' as the theme of his maiden speech in the House of Lords. As an orator he was superb and his after-dinner speeches sparkled with wit and erudition so that he was much in demand. From 1950, when he gave the Harveian Lecture, to 1970, when he delivered the Harveian Oration, hardly a year went by when he did not give some well-known memorial lecture or address. It was probably these demands which first stimulated his interest in the history of medicine. The subject of his Harveian Lecture was 'Harvey and the scientific method'; a few years later he called his Hunterian Oration 'Reflections on the Hunterian method'; his Nuffield Lecture in 1967 was on 'The fruits of error and false assumptions' in scientific discovery; his first John Ash Lecture at the University of Birmingham in the same year was on Erasmus Darwin, and his Harveian Oration in 1970 on 'Motion of blood in the veins' in which he drew attention to the pioneer work of James Carson of Liverpool. A similar spirit of local patriotism had inspired his account in 1959 of the pioneer investigations into electrophysiology of Richard Caton of Liverpool in the 1870s. His Sherrington Lectures given at the University of Liverpool were published as a monograph in 1958 with the title *Sherrington, physiologist, philosopher and poet*.

Lord Cohen was for two years the President of the British Society for the History of Medicine and organized a most successful congress of the society at Liverpool in 1971. On that occasion some of us were privileged to see his own historical collection of medical silver and also to obtain a more intimate glimpse of the courtesy and kindness of the man as well as to enjoy the fruits of his superb organizing ability. His death leaves a gap in British medicine, and particularly in historical circles, which will be hard to fill.

NOËL POYNTER

## *News, Notes and Queries*

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### FACULTY OF THE HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY OF MEDICINE AND PHARMACY OF THE WORSHIPFUL SOCIETY OF APOTHECARIES OF LONDON

The Faculty, which was founded in 1959, has now been enlarged to include the Philosophy of Medicine, and its constitution has been revised. The purposes of the revision are to strengthen the link between the Society and the Faculty, to enable the membership to take a more active part in its organization, and to make the Faculty more effective in its role as a co-ordinating body for the history and philosophy of medicine and pharmacy. A new grade of Fellowship has been instituted.

Copies of the new constitution may be obtained from the Honorary Secretary at the Apothecaries Hall, Black Friars Lane, London EC4V 6EJ.