



**Roger French**

## Obituary

ROGER FRENCH  
(12 April 1938—14 May 2002)

Roger French was University Lecturer in the History of Medicine at Cambridge from 1975 until 1999, and Director of the Wellcome Unit for the History of Medicine there from 1975 to 1995. He was a prolific publisher on medical history, producing eight books and numerous articles, primarily on the medieval period through to the Renaissance. His conception of this field, which he made his own, is summed up in the title of his final book *Medicine before science*, to be published by Cambridge University Press later in 2002.

Roger French's parents ran a butchering and cold-storage business in Coventry. After attending the King Henry VIII school there, Roger went to St Catherine's College, Oxford, to study zoology. Thereafter he began a PhD, but soon tired of knocking on the glass wall of an aquarium to watch how the fish rushed together into shoals. Instead he turned to the history of science and medicine and began a PhD under A C Crombie, then a lecturer at All Souls College. His subject was the eighteenth-century Scottish physician Robert Whytt, and the thesis was soon turned into his first book, published in 1969, *Robert Whytt, the soul and medicine* (Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine). The soul and its role in natural philosophy and medicine, was to be a continuing focus of his later interests.

Roger held lecturing posts at Leicester University (1965) and Aberdeen (1968), where his colleagues included George Molland and Andrew Wear, before arriving at Cambridge in 1975.

By that time on the research front his interests had turned to the medieval period and the Renaissance and particularly to the anatomical tradition. The main impetus to this was the access he had to the excellent medieval and Renaissance resources of Aberdeen University Library. Thereafter he was never to show any real interest in topics after 1657 (the date of William Harvey's death). Among the topics he pursued now were the history of physiological concepts of the heart, and the Renaissance development of the Galenic anatomical texts. He became a world expert on William Harvey's anatomical work, publishing several articles and a book: *William Harvey's natural philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 1994). His interests in this direction culminated in his 1999 book *Dissection and vivisection in the European Renaissance* (Ashgate), where he in effect produced a cultural history of anatomizing in Renaissance medical faculties. In addition to these monographs, he wrote in collaboration *Before science: the invention of the Friars' natural philosophy* (Scolar, 1996) with me, and *The great pox: the French disease in Renaissance Europe* (Yale University Press, 1997), with Jon Arrizabalaga and John Henderson. His approach was a combination of very close textual reading, together with an alertness to the

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structures—academic, religious, economic—within which his medieval and Renaissance figures thought and wrote, and which contributed to shaping what they thought and wrote. He was also involved in co-editing several volumes.

In person, Roger French was a man of few words, but he nevertheless headed a large and lively Wellcome Unit for many years, which had high productivity and excellent interpersonal relations among its staff. He avoided all the internal politics of the academic profession, which were never of interest to him. In his Unit the staff and scholars were able to pursue their own scholarly interests, alone or in collaboration, which is always the best environment for scholarly originality.

However, this approach had its downside, and Roger's career was terminated early when his relaxed approach to running the Cambridge Unit came up against the managerial ethos of the Wellcome Trust in the 1990s. Although the Unit (assessed as part of the History and Philosophy of Science Department) consistently received the highest possible grading in the government's Research Assessment Exercises, Roger resigned the Directorship of the Unit in 1995, and took early retirement from his Lectureship a few years later.

Roger was no great attender of conferences or seminars, nor a committee man. In the Unit his preferred form of academic socializing was in the 'Elephant Club' he founded. His love of Pliny had led him to be familiar with the ancient stories of the elephants which spoke Greek and climbed ropes, and the purpose of the Club was to discuss, over a friendly glass, the views of scholars from antiquity to the early modern period who had held accurate or fanciful opinions on elephants and other exotic animals. The Club typifies one aspect of Roger's approach to scholarly matters: at the same time both serious and with an eye to the whimsical. It was in this way, for instance, that his own love of Herefordshire was the original spur to his interest in Roger of Hereford, on whose map and astrology he published serious scholarly articles.

For such a private person it is perhaps surprising that his extra-curricular activities were such a talking-point among other historians of medicine. For Roger felt most at home as a country dweller, and spent all the time he could renovating his little cottage in Herefordshire, where he also planted trees and produced cider and mead. He published a book on the history of cider, *The history and virtues of cyder* (Hale, 1982), and was from time to time consulted by French and Spanish cider enthusiasts. The cider and mead were brought out every year at the Wellcome Unit Christmas party after everything else had been finished. The sight of Roger beaming while people tasted, discussed, and sometimes even drank, the cider and mead, will be an enduring memory of him for many former members of the Unit.

Roger French died from a rare blood disorder after a short illness. He was very happily married for thirty-five years to Anne, and they had three children.

**Andrew Cunningham**