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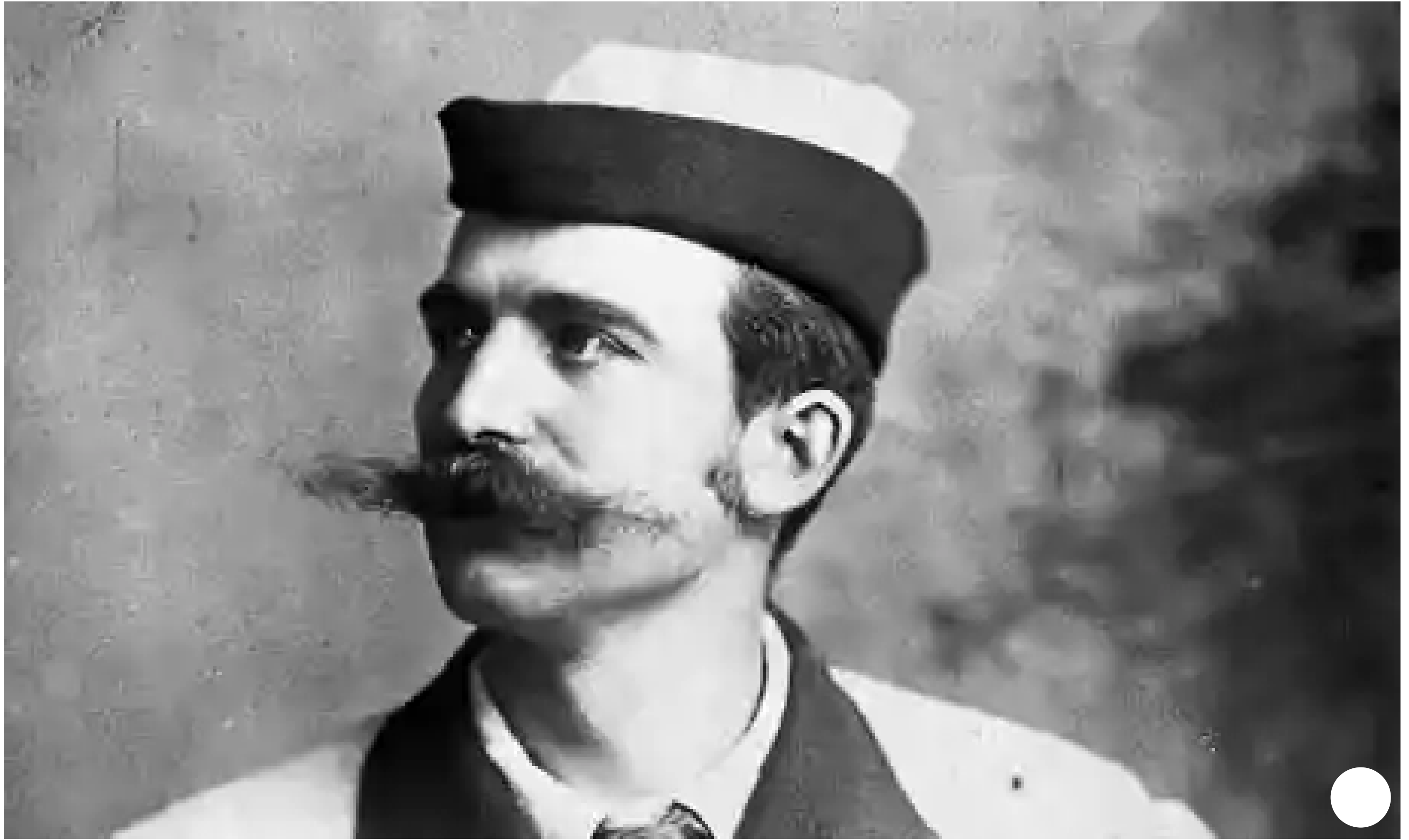

Henry Wellcome: from backwoods boy to medicine man

Born in a log cabin to a poor farmer, Henry Wellcome brought innovations such as tablets to pharmacy and went on to be a giant of the medical industry. And, writes Robin McKie, his importance lives on in the institutions he founded

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On the first floor of the Wellcome Collection's lavish headquarters in central London, a suite of rooms, panelled with polished wood, has been dedicated to the memory of the organisation's creator. A giant photograph of Henry Wellcome, sporting a fine Edwardian moustache, dominates the entrance. On one side, there is a cabinet containing a dozen masks including a stainless steel Portuguese executioner's face-plate and a human skull, crusted with paint and plaster, that was used by New Guinean tribesman during dances held to honour the dead.

On the other side of Wellcome's portrait, there are three chairs: one used by patients attending a 19th-century dentist; the second has most of its central seat removed and acted as a birthing chair that allowed Victorian women to sit up during labour; while the third is constructed out of spikes and blades on which Chinese torturers forced their victims to sit. Elsewhere there is a row of

enema syringes, the death mask of Benjamin Disraeli, and, perhaps most disturbing of all, a mummified human from Peru, who lies huddled in an alcove in the exhibition's deepest recess.

The displays are eclectic, to say the least. Yet this permanent exhibition, *Medicine Man*, is no mere leftover of an Edwardian man's obsession with the ghoulish and the physiologically odd. This is the handiwork of an individual whose impact on British science was profound in its day and whose influence has only strengthened over the decades so that it now exceeds that of any other individual in the nation. Put simply: the Wellcome Trust, which runs the collection, dominates medical and physiological research in the UK today. Not a bad legacy for a man who was born in a log cabin in the wild west.

This year the trust celebrates its 75th birthday following its establishment in 1936 under the terms of Henry Wellcome's will, an anniversary that provides an opportunity to tell the remarkable story of its creator and his continued influence on science over the decades. Last year alone the trust that he set up gave away more than £600m in grants to scientists and funds for research centres, a greater expenditure than that of the government's own Medical Research Council.

"We take a simple approach to giving out money," says Sir Mark Walport, the trust's director. "We only fund the brightest minds that work in biomedicine. We exist to empower good scientists with time, money and facilities."

It is an attitude that has produced dramatically effective results. But how did this scion of a troubled family from the American midwest end up having such a remarkable effect on the course of science on the other side of the Atlantic? What was the secret of Henry Wellcome? The answers to these questions are surprising.

Henry Solomon Wellcome was born in Wisconsin in 1853. His father was a farmer who went bankrupt after his crops failed in 1861. The family headed for Garden City, in the newly created state of Minnesota, in the company of dozens of other settlers as protection against the members of the Great Sioux Nation who lived in the area. In Garden City, Wellcome's father, Solomon, turned to God and became a Second Adventist preacher, while Henry went to work for his uncle who ran a surgery and drug store.

"This truly was the wild west," says Ross MacFarlane, research officer for the Wellcome Library. "A year after the Wellcome family settled in Garden City, there was a bloody uprising by the Sioux and an even bloodier put-down by the army. This was Wellcome's first contact with another culture."

It proved to be an educational one. When Garden City was besieged by Sioux, under their chief Little Crow, Wellcome led a group of children who melted lead and cast rifle bullets for the defending settlers and helped his uncle in caring for the wounded. In this way, he acquired a combined fascination with medical treatments and with the behaviour of peoples from other cultures.

In 1871, Wellcome went to study at the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy. At the time, medicine was emerging as a proper, scientifically rigorous business. For the first time, drugs that had been carefully formulated were being administered by qualified doctors. It was Wellcome's genius to see that serious money could be made out of this business.

"He was assiduous about how products should be marketed and very quickly made a name for himself a first-class medical salesman," says MacFarlane. "As a result the US pharmacist Silas Burroughs asked him to join him and form a company in Britain. Between them, Burroughs and Wellcome revolutionised the pharmaceutical business in Europe, through imaginative marketing and proper attention to good science."

An early Wellcome appointment was that of the UK biologist Henry Dale, who went on to win the 1936 Nobel prize for medicine for showing that the chemical acetylcholine plays a key role in the transmission of nerve impulses, work that had important medical implications. At the same time, Wellcome - who took over complete control of the Burroughs-Wellcome company after Burroughs's death in 1895 - began marketing pharmaceuticals with considerable imagination. He invented the word tabloid - a combination of tablet and alkaloid - to describe the easily packaged medicines his company was making. The word caught on and became synonymous with notions of compactness and usefulness - to the extent that the word was adopted by the newspaper industry to describe the new line of dailies and weeklies it was printing. Wellcome was displeased and complained to newspaper magnates such as Harmsworth about this usurping of his marketing ideas - albeit to no avail.

"He also developed lightweight medicine chests and gave them to explorers such Blériot, Lindbergh, and Henry Stanley," says MacFarlane. "Scott was also given one which he took to the south pole and which was brought back when his body was found. It is now in the collection. Other individuals, including Edward VII and Gladstone, were given Wellcome medicine chests. The aim was to promote the Wellcome brand through stressing the company's association with empire and expedition. It worked extremely well and the company prospered."

Wellcome also made himself useful as a society party organiser, arranging lavish events that helped him network with politicians and celebrities including the likes of Oscar Wilde. Given that Wellcome was a teetotaller, this was some achievement.

By contrast, Wellcome's marriage was a disaster. In 1901, he met Syrie Barnardo - daughter to Thomas Barnardo, founder of the children's charity - and they married soon after. Syrie was 22, 26 years her husband's junior. She went on to become a noted interior decorator and also to have a number of affairs; these included one with the department store magnate Harry Gordon Selfridge and another with the novelist Somerset Maugham. Eventually, Syrie became pregnant with Maugham's only child, Mary Elizabeth who, when she was born, was given Wellcome's surname. Wellcome promptly sued for divorce, naming Maugham as co-respondent - creating a splendid scandal for the very tabloids he had come to resent.

By the time he died, Wellcome had set up a foundation, a library, a trust, a collection and a host of other organisations that all carried his name. This stream of different Wellcome institutes still causes confusion and also reveals the man's intense desire to have a meaningful impact on future generations. "He was driven and was always trying to prove himself. He was after a legacy and after legitimacy," says MacFarlane. So are most people, of course. The strange thing about Wellcome is that he actually succeeded, at least through the Wellcome Trust.

Wellcome had one child with Syrie, a son also named Henry and who appears to have had some form of learning difficulty. He was left money in his father's will which he used to set himself up as a farmer, his grandfather's occupation. "There is a trajectory to the Wellcome story," MacFarlane acknowledges.

As to the trust, it remains in resolutely robust condition. "Its one asset was a single company, Wellcome pharmaceuticals, which - fortunately for British science today - turned out to be an incredibly good company," says Sir Mark. "In the 80s, the directors decided to sell it completely to Glaxo to produce the company GlaxoWellcome. History has shown that was a very wise move indeed." This is putting it mildly. The money raised by selling the company was put into a portfolio which is today worth more than £13bn.

"That portfolio is our only asset and our greatest risk," adds Sir Mark. "If we give a duff grant to a researcher whose work produces nothing of worth, that is just the way things happen occasionally. But the investment portfolio is the bedrock of the trust. It has done extremely well even in the last two years but I would never want to be complacent about it. We cannot afford to take any chance. So much British science depends on how well the Wellcome portfolio behaves."

Thus the name of Wellcome continues to reverberate among the researchers of his adopted country. And given the resources that he accumulated, it is a process that is likely to continue for some time. What it will produce, scientifically, remains to be seen.

Medicine Man is a permanent exhibition at the Wellcome Collection, London NW1. For other events and exhibitions, see www.wellcomecollection.org

The Wellcome Trust was established in 1936 to administer the fortune of Sir Henry Wellcome. With an endowment of £13.1bn, it is the UK's largest non-governmental source of funds for biomedical research. Photograph: Wellcome Images

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