Book review

Burroughs Wellcome & Co. Knowledge, Trust, Profit and the Transformation of the British Pharmaceutical Industry, 1880–1940

by Roy Church & Tilly Tansey

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Henry Wellcome and Silas Burroughs came to England from America in 1880 to start a trading company in pharmaceuticals. They used new technology, especially the compressed powder, which was to become the tablet and had great advantages in standardization and quality.

The social historian Roy Church and the medical historian Tilly Tansey have written a wonderful book about the development of the Burroughs Wellcome company from these days until the 1940s.

The book gives a chronological account of the development of the firm, with many excellent illustrations and quotations from the Wellcome historical archives. These are by themselves extremely amusing, but also show how far the field has advanced. In 1880 the firm is the agent for Bishop's Granular Effervescent Citrate of Caffeine ('the best known remedy for headache'). The *BMJ*, where the editors were apparently still engaged in collecting evidence themselves rather than asking for it, reported 'We have administered it in nervous headache and in the malaise following an alcoholic debauch with benefit'.

Wellcome was one of the first companies applying new marketing and sales techniques and the messages of the management to the sales reps make very interesting reading. Silas Burroughs traveled widely in an often unsuccessful attempt to internationalize. Some of his observations from the 1880s are enlightening and perhaps still true: '... Japan is very uncertain. Much depends on the whim of the council (Nimsho) who have the power to provide the stamp of approval or otherwise to permit medicines to be sold. Few English speaking doctors, therefore a problem. In Batavia, the Dutch are a lot of lazy Europeans ...'.

Early in the life of the company they also seem to have invented the hostile takeover of another pharmaceutical company, when they took over the Kepler Malt Extract Company for the heady sum of £9 per share (albeit for only 167 shares).

In the 1920s the company was one of the first to realize the value of scientific research and many basic research laboratories were established. Sir Henry Dale started work at Wellcome despite initial mistrust of science produced in a commercial environment. For example, most journals refused contributions from the address of Wellcome (rather than a university) because they were considered to be advertisements. The high-quality work, however, established trust and respect for industrial research; in the first decades this was probably more important than the emergence of new products.

Henry Wellcome was initially opposed to 'his' scientists making their work public, but was rapidly convinced by Alfred Fletcher, his friend and advisor, that he would not get any good scientists if he pursued this policy. This discussion, as many who work with pharmaceutical industries know, is not fully closed even today.

All these stories make great reading and are often still extremely relevant. The analysis of the business and scientific developments in the light of the momentous historical developments in the first half of the 20th century by the authors is equally good.

It is difficult to stop browsing through this marvellous history; anyone working with or in pharmaceutical research will find interesting information in this book. For the price it is an ideal present for one's favourite research fellow, for colleagues or for oneself to take along in the upcoming holidays.

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