

## ILLUSTRATIONS FROM THE WELLCOME INSTITUTE LIBRARY

CHARLES JOSEPH SINGER, DM, DLitt, DSc, FRCP (1876-1960):  
PAPERS IN THE CONTEMPORARY  
MEDICAL ARCHIVES CENTRE

by

JULIA SHEPPARD\*

In 1919, Charles Singer wrote that “England is almost the only country where there is no adequate provision for the teaching of medical history”. What was needed, he continued was the creation of two or three chairs “to be held by men who would devote their lives to the task of setting forth the history of medicine as a continuous whole.”<sup>1</sup> Further, a specialist institute should be established, preferably in London, which would be “in no sense a museum or a collection of old books, but a place where all the necessary aids to research are to be brought together . . .”<sup>2</sup>

Forty-two years later, Dr Edwin Clarke, writing shortly after Singer’s death, felt that the situation had hardly changed, and that Singer had failed in establishing his subject as an academic discipline.<sup>3</sup> And yet, in 1987, another quarter of a century down the road, it would be reasonable to interpret his influence more positively. Quite apart from the legacy of his scholarship, there was his contribution to the subject at University College London, where he was appointed in 1920 to a newly instituted lectureship in the history of medicine and from which he retired in 1942 as Professor Emeritus. University College was to enter into a Scheme of Association with the Wellcome Institute in 1976 whereby the teaching of medical history linked the Institute with the University of London and facilitated and encouraged the use of the Wellcome Library and its resources. The subsequent growth and achievements of the Wellcome Institute and the Academic Units (now in the universities of London, Oxford, Cambridge, Manchester, and Glasgow) fulfil to a large extent the aims that Singer had desired.

The contribution of the Wellcome Trust has, of course, been fundamental in this, and Singer himself was one of the earliest beneficiaries of a Wellcome Trust grant in the field of medical history.<sup>4</sup> He was probably doubly grateful to receive it, since his

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<sup>1</sup> ‘The teaching of medical history’, *Br. med. J.*, 1919, ii, 141-142.

<sup>2</sup> See also A. Rupert Hall and B. A. Bembridge, *Physic and philanthropy*, Cambridge University Press, 1986, pp. 123-124 on E. A. Underwood’s proposals to the Trust in 1955.

<sup>3</sup> Edwin Clarke ‘Charles Joseph Singer’. *J. Hist. Med.*, 1961, 16: 411-419.

<sup>4</sup> Hall, *op. cit.*, note 2 above, p. 121, also notes that many early Trust grants in the history of medicine were for the publication of historical works by refugee scholars with Singer’s assistance.

relations with Sir Henry Wellcome himself had not been cordial and he had been unhappy that Wellcome's collection had not been sufficiently accessible to scholars.<sup>5</sup>

During the second world war, Singer had been working on Vesalius's *Tabulae anatomicae sex* and in 1947, he wrote to Prof. T. R. Elliott (Wellcome Trustee 1936-55) requesting assistance to employ a Greek philological researcher to help with this and with his research on Vesalius's *On the brain*.<sup>6</sup> He noted (with the streak of humour that endeared him to his friends), "there is no need to answer immediately. But I shall be 71 towards the end of this year and must know if I dare undertake such work."<sup>7</sup> Singer was, in fact, to continue his highly productive work for another thirteen years until his death in 1960. In the course of his career, he published prolifically in the history of science, medicine, and technology. For many years he wrote the *Nova et Vetera* column in the *British Medical Journal*; and in the *Festschrift* volumes *Science, medicine and society* (1953), E. Ashworth Underwood listed over 400 items published up to that date.

The son of the Rev. S. Singer, a Hebrew scholar of distinction, Charles trained in medicine at St Mary's Hospital, London, after education at the City of London School and Magdalen College, Oxford, where he read zoology. In 1903, he passed the examination for the conjoint qualification. Until 1914, he travelled widely and held a variety of hospital posts in England and abroad, as well as having his own consulting practice. He gained experience of tropical medicine in the Sudan and, for six months, in Singapore, where he was a house surgeon at the Government General Hospital. During this time, he published several papers, chiefly relating to cancer, in particular gastric carcinoma, and to tropical medicine.

Singer's marriage in 1910 marked a turning-point in his career. His wife, Dorothea Waley Cohen (1882-1964), granddaughter of Prof. J. Waley of University College, was a scholar of alchemical and scientific manuscripts. Together they formed a close working partnership, and Charles Singer's first historical paper, on Benjamin Marten,<sup>8</sup> appeared in 1911.

In 1914, Singer went to Oxford at the invitation of Sir William Osler (1849-1919) with a studentship in pathology which involved mainly historical duties, and he and Dorothea spent some time setting up the History of Science Room in the Radcliffe Camera. In spite of serving overseas with the RAMC during the war, mostly in Salonika and Malta, he was able to continue his historical studies with the assistance of photostats of manuscripts supplied by his wife. The first volume of *Studies in the history and method of science*, edited by Singer, appeared in 1917.

<sup>5</sup> Correspondence between C. Singer and Dr C. J. S. Thompson in Wellcome Institute Archives FC 10c. Singer to Thompson, 26 January 1921, "After talking to Mr Wellcome the other night I came to the conclusion that he did not want his collection to be used freely by scholars." Thompson to Singer 29 January 1921, "You are quite in error in suggesting that Mr Wellcome does not wish the Historical Medical Museum to be used freely by scholars." Singer to Thompson 30 January 1921, "I gathered that while he was willing that the museum should be used for study, he would prefer that the material was not published until he regarded it as sufficiently complete." See also, Singer to Dr Ralph Colp on the subject, 22 August 1951 (PP/CJS/A.3).

<sup>6</sup> Letter 29 March 1947, Singer to T. R. Elliott, in E. Ashworth Underwood papers (CMAC/PP/EAU).

<sup>7</sup> Hall, *op. cit.*, note 2 above, p. 40, states that he received much assistance 1944-47 for the publication of notable works on Vesalius and Galen.

<sup>8</sup> 'Benjamin Marten, a neglected predecessor to Louis Pasteur', *Janus*, 1911, 16: 81-98.

His career was finally determined in 1920, when he settled at University College London, and during the next few years, could develop his key interests in the history of anatomy, Greek biology and medicine, early herbals, and medieval medicine, and in the history of science more generally. His books alone included *Early English magic and medicine* (1920), *Studies in the history and method of science* (vol. 2, 1921), *Greek biology and Greek medicine* and *The discovery of the circulation of the blood* (1922), an annotated edition of *Fasciculus medicinae of Johannes de Ketham Alemanus* (1924), *The evolution of anatomy* (the Fitzpatrick lectures) and an adaptation of Sudhoff's facsimilies of *The earliest printed literature on syphilis* (1925), and *A short history of medicine* (1928). There were also numerous articles, including 'The herbal in antiquity' and (with Dorothea Singer) a chapter on the Jewish factor in medieval thought, in *The legacy of Israel* (1927).

Throughout this period, too, Singer lectured regularly to his students and to the public on subjects ranging from Leonardo da Vinci's anatomical drawings to the birth of modern chemistry and theories of organic evolution. 'Cave men and their ways' (illustrated) was probably a lecture around the topic of Palaeolithic man, his drawings and their links with sympathetic magic. In a lecture on this subject at Gresham College in 1924 Singer evidently argued that Palaeolithic man was responsible for the first attempt at scientific anatomy.<sup>9</sup>

These were also important years for the growth of the subject internationally. The Singers played a central role in the 3rd International Congress of the History of Medicine in London in 1922 and in the 2nd International Congress of the History of Science and Technology in 1931. The early 1930s also saw the Singers in America, with Charles' appointment as visiting Professor to the University of California in 1931-32. He was apparently offered, and declined, the Chair of the History of Medicine at Johns Hopkins, which was taken by his friend Henry E. Sigerist in 1932.

During the 1930s, the Singers became increasingly preoccupied with the European political situation. Charles was a founder of the Liberal Jewish Movement in England and both he and Dorothea devoted a great deal of time and effort to helping Jewish refugees.<sup>10</sup> They were also deeply involved as founder members in the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning and the Council for Christians and Jews. In 1934 they moved to 'Kilmarth', Par, in Cornwall, and here they offered a warm reception to many guests and international scholars: Prof. John Ryle even wrote a poem about their hospitality.<sup>11</sup> Charles continued to build up his large library,<sup>12</sup> housed in a spacious room where he would sit at his desk and join in the conversation of guests when it suited him.<sup>13</sup>

The war years saw Singer teaching biology to refugees and evacuated schoolboys from King's School, Canterbury. His work on Vesalius resulted in the publication of *Tabulae anatomicae sex, a prelude to modern science* (with C. Rabin) in 1946, and

<sup>9</sup> *Morning Post*, 30 September 1924 (PP/CJS/C.17).

<sup>10</sup> G. Miller, 'Charles and Dorothea Singer's aid to Nazi victims'. *Koroth*, 1985, 8(11-12): 207-217.

<sup>11</sup> Prof. John Ryle's poem, 'Kilmarth', is enclosed as a postscript in a letter from his wife Miriam to Dorothea, 1 July 1949 (PP/CJS/A.15).

<sup>12</sup> The Singer collection contains correspondence and catalogues of the library which was sold mainly by Hodgson & Co. and Sothebys, 1959-60 and 1965 (PP/CJS/C.7-10).

<sup>13</sup> E. Ashworth Underwood, obituary of Charles Singer, *Med. Hist.*, 1960, 4: 353-358.

*Illustrations from the Wellcome Institute Library*

*Vesalius on the human brain* in 1954. The major work on the *History of technology*, which appeared in five volumes between 1951-58, was largely planned and directed by him.

With such full private and professional lives it is not surprising that a large part of the Singers' papers now in the Contemporary Medical Archives Centre,<sup>14</sup> should consist of correspondence, reflecting a period when writing was an everyday event (they can rarely have used the telephone). Much had been retained of purely ephemeral interest, and there was certainly little system in the organization of their papers. Indeed, one suspects that they operated on the borderline of chaos. Charles Singer would perhaps have been surprised how many of his papers have survived, in view of the comments he made in a letter to his niece in 1960:

I am sorry to hear that it takes so long going through your mother's papers. This has made me think out my own very considerably. It seems to me a great mistake that we should preserve records. They make the writing of history more, not less, difficult. You just would not believe the stacks of useless papers that have left this house for mashing up.<sup>15</sup>

The correspondence in general displays a combination of curiosity, stamina, great kindness and warmth and a genuine willingness by both Charles and Dorothea to help even casual acquaintances if they could. It is revealing to see many of the letters were marked "Nice Letter" in shorthand by Dorothea, the status of the writer having no bearing in this selection. Correspondence for the years 1958-60 has survived virtually intact and has been kept together. Another group of letter is Dorothea's in connexion with her deaf aids, 1939-61; correspondence conducted with the Ministry of Health, the press, commercial firms making deaf aids and batteries, and a whole range of researchers, scientists, politicians, and civil servants. Although the surviving correspondence is not comprehensive, it ranges widely and varies from everyday letters of complaint to orders for antiquarian books, comments on broadcasts, queries about local history, and discussions concerning research and publications. Apart from poor record-keeping, another reason for the incomplete correspondence is that Charles Singer frequently wrote letters by hand (in a clear bold script), and he did not always keep carbons of typed letters. Much was destroyed over the years and the collection now in the CMAC represents what survived Dorothea's sorting after Charles' death, and what his son-in-law, Dr Ashworth Underwood, collected. There is evidence that some of the letters were given away, and others destroyed.<sup>16</sup>

Apart from individual correspondence there are files of miscellaneous groups of papers relating to a number of organizations with which the Singers were associated, including the British Society for the History of Science, the Comité Internationale de la Science, and the Académie Internationale de la Science. The latter files include papers

<sup>14</sup> The collection was placed in the Wellcome Institute by Dr E. Ashworth Underwood, reference PP/CJS. It comprises approximately twenty archive boxes. An interim list and index is in preparation.

<sup>15</sup> Letter Singer to Dr Phyllis Abrahams, 9 March 1960 (PP/CJS/A.21).

<sup>16</sup> Dorothea Singer to E. Simpson (Society for the Protection of Science and Learning), 24 August 1960, wrote that she was distributing actual records of Nazi Germany to the Wiener Library and to James Parkes. (PP/CJS/A.37). The archive of Parkes is now at Southampton University Library. Miller op. cit., note 10 above, describes Singer's gift to Johns Hopkins Library of his correspondence with Fielding H. Garrison. In *Freud forty years after* there is a reference to a letter from Freud to Singer 31 October 1938 which is no longer in the Singer collection. In spite of dispersal, however, additional material in all these cases remains in the Singer collection.

in connexion with the discussion during the 1930s about the possibility of holding a Congress in Berlin, which Singer and various colleagues felt would be used for political gain by the Germans.

Drafts of lectures and typescript notes, sometimes with related reviews and correspondence are also to be found in the collection. Again, there is little logic to what has survived: it includes material relating to Singer's 1913 essay on the history of tobacco, his entries for the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, a file of correspondence, 1956-60, on *A short history of scientific ideas*, and a considerable amount about the publication of *The Christian approach to Jews*, a pamphlet published in 1937 based on a memorandum prepared for the International Missionary Council.

Judaism and the Christian inactivity towards the victims of persecution deeply affected Singer, and according to the Rev. James Parkes, Charles "retired into his shell after the church failed to respond to the publication of *The Christian Failure*".<sup>17</sup> The collection unfortunately contains comparatively little about the assistance given by the Singers to Jewish refugees,<sup>18</sup> although they played an important role in this work, assisting, amongst others, in placing Prof. Max Neuburger (1868-1955) at the Wellcome Museum in 1939.<sup>19</sup> There is also a box of material relating to the Central Office for Refugees, and a certain amount of correspondence with organizations such as the Board of Deputies of British Jews, the Jewish Historical Society, the Liberal Jewish Synagogue, and the Christian Council for Refugees.

Many celebrated names appear in the index to the Singers' correspondence, including Sir Clifford Allbutt, Sir Russell Brain, the Bishop of Chichester, Harvey Cushing, Sigmund Freud, Sir Frederick Gowland Hopkins, Sir Ernest Kennaway, Sir George Newman, Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, Sir Charles Sherrington, Sir Grafton Elliot Smith, Sir Arthur Salusbury MacNalty, John Ryle, and Lord Zuckerman. A large amount of correspondence with, amongst others, Joseph Needham and Rev. James Parkes (1896-1981) has also survived. Friendship and contact with many historians can be traced in letters from Fielding H. Garrison, George Gask, J. H. G. Grattan, Sir Zachary Cope, Sir Geoffrey Keynes, Sir William Osler, A. L. Rowse, Max Neuburger, Walter Pagel, Cecil Roth, George Sarton, Richard Shryock, Henry Sigerist, Karl Sudhoff, William Welch, E. Ashworth Underwood, A. Rupert Hall, and Edwin Clarke.

Many of the friendships lasted for years, for example with the Huxley family. Singer probably met Sir Julian Huxley (1887-1975) in Oxford after the first world war, and their families remained close friends thereafter. Most of the correspondence is available at Rice University, Houston, in Julian Huxley's papers, but there are thirteen letters from Juliette Huxley in the Singer collection. More unexpectedly, the collection holds six drawings by T. H. Huxley (1825-95), Julian's grandfather.<sup>20</sup> A covering note from Julian Huxley dated 12 February 1920 explains the provenance of three of the drawings which are dated 1887-88.

<sup>17</sup> James Parkes, obituary of Singer in *Common Ground*, 1960, 14: (3): 17-18.

<sup>18</sup> Presumably, most of this was handed over to the Wiener Library and Parkes Library, see note 16 above.

<sup>19</sup> The collection does have some correspondence by and about Neuburger, 1939-43 (PP/CJS/A.13).

<sup>20</sup> Ref. PP/CJS/C.31.





Plate 1. Photograph of Singer in his study at 'Kilmarth', Par, c. 1950s. (PP/CJS/c.30)

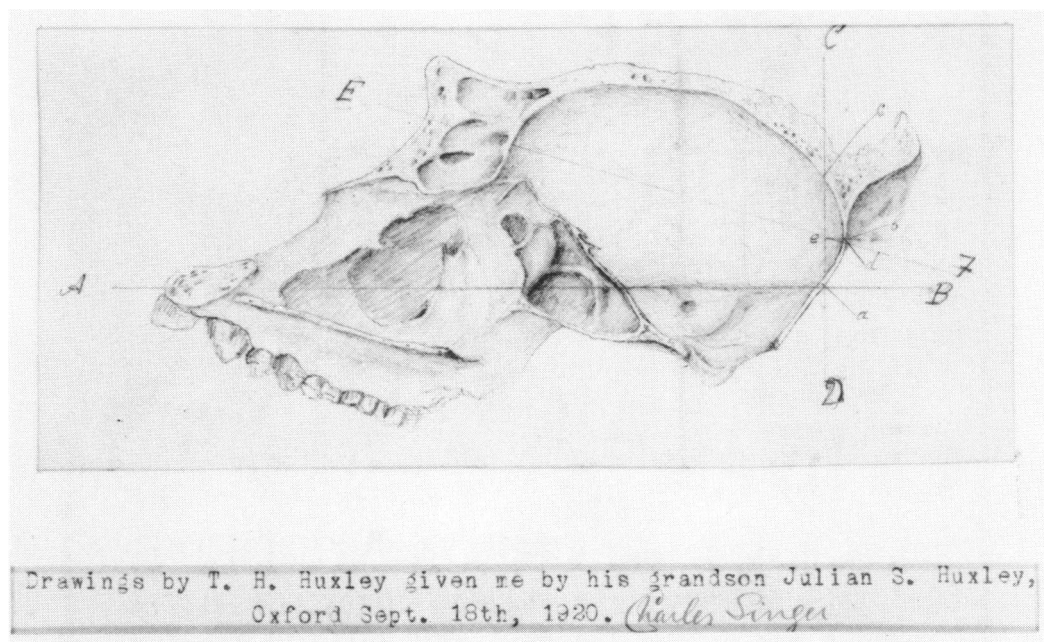


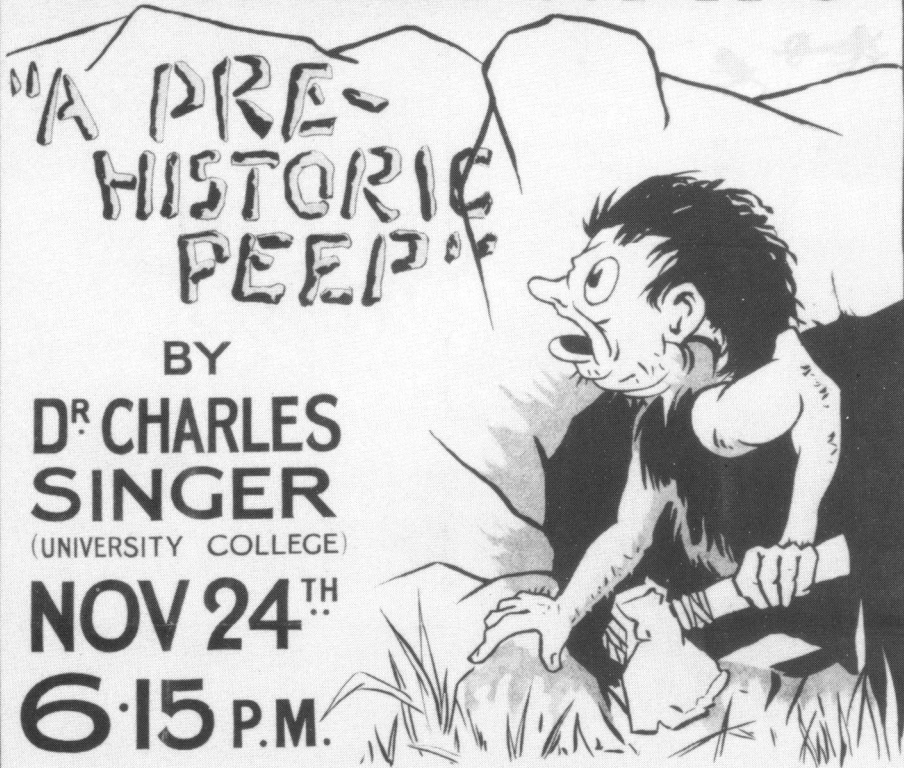
Plate 2. One of the T. H. Huxley drawings given to Singer by Julian Huxley in 1920 (undated). (PP.CJS/c.31/6)



LYONS CLUB DEBATING SOCIETY

A LECTURE

CAVE MEN  
& THEIR WAYS



BY

DR CHARLES  
SINGER

(UNIVERSITY COLLEGE)

NOV 24<sup>TH</sup>

6.15 P.M.

To be held in the CHECKING DEPT.  
ALL CLUB MEMBERS AND FRIENDS CORDIALLY INVITED  
ADMISSION FREE BY TICKETS TO BE OBTAINED FROM CLUB DELEGATES

Plate 3. Poster advertising a lecture by Singer at University College, London, c. 1924. (PP/CJS/C.2)

*Illustrations from the Wellcome Institute Library*

Dear Dr Singer, I enclose a botanical drawing of my grandfather's as an earnest. If you could come down to my rooms in the Museum any morning next week, I'll show you the others. The Laboratory assistant will find me for you.

The other three drawings, one of which is coloured, have notes by Singer that they were given by Julian, in Oxford on 18 September 1920.

The skull (illustrated) is undated, but the larger series of drawings have a note that they were made in 1892 and 1893 to illustrate T. H. Huxley's memoir on spirula, "his last scientific work". It seems more likely that they were drawn earlier, in 1878, when, according to Leonard Huxley, T. H. Huxley had begun a monograph on the spirula for reports of the *Challenger* expedition, based on his dissections of a single specimen.<sup>21</sup> Ill health had prevented him from completing this, although Leonard noted his drawings were actually engraved, and nothing remained but to put a few finishing touches and to write detailed descriptions of the plates. In 1893, he "put all his plates and experience at the disposal of Professor Pelseneer, writing to Mr Murray, Director of the Challenger Reports on 17 September 1893 'If the plates of Spirula could be turned to account, a great burden would be taken off my mind'." It is almost certain, therefore, that the 1892/3 date represents rather the date when Huxley re-borrowed his spirula drawings from the Royal College of Science and did not return them.<sup>22</sup>

Singer was described as a "Socratic gadfly" by Sir William Osler, a description that aptly hints at the zealous nature in which he inspired others, acquired knowledge of great breadth, yet remained a devoted seeker of the truth. His legacy to historians of medicine and science remains not only in the example he set but in the works he published and in the papers he left behind. Students of the historiography of science and medicine could usefully delve into these papers. They would discover an eclectic and eccentric collection.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> L. Huxley, *Life and letters of Thomas Henry Huxley*, New York, D. Appleton, 1901, (1)430, (11)383.

<sup>22</sup> See J. Pingree's introductory notes to *T. H. Huxley: list of his scientific papers*, London, Imperial College, 1968.

<sup>23</sup> It complements collections of other historians of medicine held in the CMAC: Dr E. A. Underwood (1899-1980) and Dr Walter Pagel (1898-1983).