

**An Infinity of Things: How Sir Henry Wellcome Collected the World. Frances Larson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. 343 pp.\***

Reviewed by Erin L. Hasinoff

The Fowler Museum at UCLA boasts a collection of some 30,000 objects amassed over a lifetime by Sir Henry Wellcome. 1965, the year of their receipt, was marked “Wellcome Year,” and with these credentials the new museum became a key player on the national and international museum scene (Hill 2006). So who was Sir Henry Wellcome, and why are his collections found not only in Los Angeles, but also in museums from England to Australia? It is the life history of this great founder of a pharmaceutical empire, and collector, that Frances Larson masterfully presents in *An Infinity of Things: How Sir Henry Wellcome Collected the World* by offering an incredibly detailed history of the collections he amassed, and the power they came to exert over his life. Above all, Larson’s impeccably researched biography of a collection raises the central question of what it means to write the life history of a collector.

Henry S. Wellcome (1853-1936) drew on his finances as a medical manufacturer to create one of the largest museum collections in the world. He was the founding partner of Burroughs Wellcome and Company (established in 1880), which, by the 20th century, was one of the most successful pharmaceutical companies. Today, he is associated with the Wellcome Trust, the largest source for biomedical research funding in the United Kingdom. Minnesota-born Wellcome began his career as a traveling representative in the pharmaceutical trade. Later, he moved to London to establish himself as an agent for two major American drug firms, but with time his company grew to become a manufacturer of their own products on British soil. In the years leading up to the First World War, the company produced new therapies, including antitoxins and vaccines for diphtheria, dysentery, antivenoms as well as veterinary products (p. 30). As Larson shows, Wellcome was not just a businessman; he was interested in the history of medicine and sought recognition from the academic world for his pioneering activities.

Wellcome’s success as a pharmaceutical tycoon and founder of a great historical medical collection are closely intertwined. For Wellcome, collecting was initially a source of inspiration for his advertisements and products. His collections grew to become an integral piece of the research arm of his firm and promised acceptance in the academic community. Wellcome’s company made innovations in medicine, notably in its compressed tablets trademarked as “Tabloids.” His innovations moved mortars and pestles to exhibition cases, and induced an interest and healthy competition in amassing medical collections (p. 94). He planned his Wellcome Historical Medical Museum, which opened in 1913, to lay out the story of human health through a collection of artifacts that documented everyday practices. The museum was not intended for the public as he insisted that it was an academic project open only to a specialist audience. Yet, as Larson shows, museum staff complained that they could barely keep up with the tasks of buying, accessioning, cleaning, and storing his growing collections, and museum research initiatives never came to fruition.

---

\* This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.

Interest in Wellcome culminated in the 2003 installation of the exhibition *Living and Dying* in the then newly inaugurated Wellcome Trust Gallery at the British Museum, and in 2007, the Wellcome Collection opened in the refurbished Wellcome Building on Euston Road, London (p. 281). Larson's book complements two edited volumes, *Medicine Man* (Arnold and Olson 2003) and *The Phantom Museum and Henry Wellcome's Collection of Medical Curiosities* (Blegvad, Byatt, and Cleary 2003), which accompanied the recent British Museum exhibition. Together, they celebrate, and are a response to, the story of Wellcome's failed museum, and the dispersal and recent exhibition of his once unmanageable and unparalleled historical collection. But, as Larson explains, her focus is different from the authors of these other books and a handful of other articles that discuss Wellcome's collection. For one thing, she concentrates on how Wellcome gathered his collection and not its after-life, which has been a sustained source of interest for scholars of museums, geographers, and museum curators. She further uses the history of his unmanageable collection as a vehicle to explore Wellcome's own "hopes and fears, his failures and successes, his ideas and interests, as well as those of the people who were drawn into his collecting world with him" (p. 5).

Adopting an approach that she and her Pitt Rivers Museum colleagues Christopher Gosden and Alison Petch developed in their ground-breaking *Knowing Things: Exploring the Collections of the Pitt Rivers Museum* (2007), Larson reconstructs Wellcome's social network. She succeeds in exploring the ways in which Wellcome's relationships informed his collections and constituted his identity. Through archival spadework, she laboriously pieces together his interactions with a range of agents who shaped his collecting practices and anxieties, and his own limited knowledge about the infinity of the things he amassed. As Larson demonstrates, Wellcome embarked on an eternal search for a "complete" collection while failing to develop museum plans and instead focusing his passions on the antiquities market (p. 89). It is of his collecting confidants, like his ex-wife Syrie (who would go on to become a famed interior designer and would marry writer Somerset Maugham) that Larson paints a rich picture. We see the difficulties Wellcome's collection and museum posed for Louis Malcom, a Cambridge-trained anthropologist whose work signaled a new phase for the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum, as he attempted to overhaul the museum as a teaching collection, providing "material resources" for anthropologists across the country (p. 200). Although the museum never became the resource Malcolm had envisioned it being, Wellcome did, to varying degrees, support individual anthropologists in the field in return for museum collections, thus establishing himself as a patron of anthropological research. These interpersonal stories do indeed have "their origin in the objects" and Wellcome's collection "hold[s] together the characters in this book" (p. 6).

In the end, we see a man who turned to objects for inspiration and enlightenment, but who underestimated the challenges they would present. The irony here, as Larson tells, is that in trying to accumulate the material history of human health, Wellcome had believed that the "material world contained the answers to history's great questions, and that if it could be gathered together in sufficient quantities it could reveal its secrets" (p. 255). Alas, the collection became an over-ambitious, unknowably messy and uncatalogued mass of things. When Wellcome passed away in 1936, the collection lost its singular identity as his private collection. His trustees were confronted with thousands of unpacked crates, and a profusion of artifacts lacking provenance and of unknown quality. From the late 1940s to the 1980s, the contents of

Wellcome's Historical Medical Museum were dispersed, becoming part of the collections of museums like the Fowler (p. 278).

In a recent article published in the *Journal of Material Culture*, Larson further discusses how Wellcome's material world had great consequence to him. In doing so, she reiterates the value of collections for life history writing. With so much interest given to examining the social life of things in museum histories since the 1990s, this recent work highlights the importance of collector biographies, for in the case of Wellcome "it is possible to see his life story as it was articulated with objects" (Larson 2010:83). Larson's account of Wellcome's ambitious collection amounts to a deftly-researched and poignant tale of an energetic collector and the social network that not only shaped his affinity for things but also shaped the contents of his immense collection.

## References Cited

Arnold, Ken, and Danielle Olson, eds.

2003 *Medicine Man: The Forgotten Museum of Henry Wellcome*. London: British Museum Press.

Blegvad, Peter, A.S. Byatt, and Helen Cleary, eds.

2003 *The Phantom Museum and Henry Wellcome's Collection of Medical Curiosities*. London: Profile Books.

Gosden, Chris, and Frances Larson with Alison Petch

2007 *Knowing Things: Exploring the Collections of the Pitt Rivers Museum*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hill, Jude

2006 *Traveling Objects and the Wellcome Collection in Los Angeles, London and Beyond*. *Cultural Geographies* 13:340-366.

Larson, Frances

2010 *The Things About Henry Wellcome*. *Journal of Material Culture* 15:83-104.

*Erin Hasinoff is a post-doctoral fellow in museum anthropology at the American Museum of Natural History and Bard Graduate Center. Her book Faith in Objects: American Missionary Expositions in the Early Twentieth Century will be published this fall by Palgrave Macmillan. Her areas of research are the history and theory of museum anthropology, collecting,*

*colonialism, material culture studies, anthropology of religion, biography, and the cultural heritage of Burma (Myanmar).*