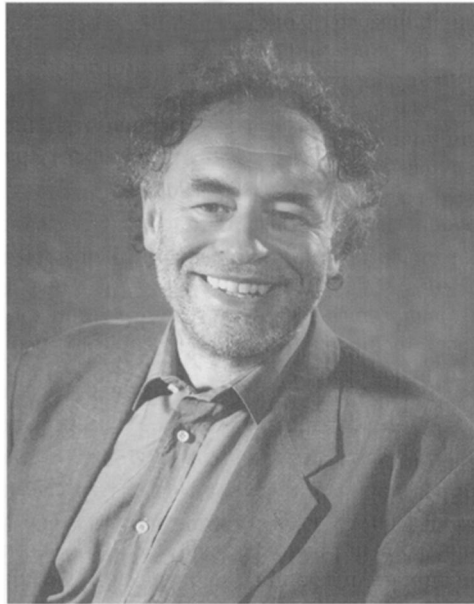


Obituary: Roy Sydney Porter (1946–2002)



Roy Porter's prodigious energy as a historian was matched by an astonishing output of words and such enthusiasm for life that many people were stunned by his unexpected death aged 55. For sure, it seemed unlikely that he would have gone on in that way forever. Just six months beforehand he had taken early retirement from the Wellcome Trust Centre for the History of Medicine at University College London (formerly Wellcome Institute, London) where he had spent much of his intellectual career. He said he wanted to slow down a bit, grow vegetables and learn to play the saxophone. There were several books still in the pipeline, several individuals still busy typing for him at the Wellcome, a lecture tour or two to fulfil, and yet it seems that he did begin to enjoy some of these activities in retirement based in a flat in St Leonards, with his wife Natsu Hattori – a location which was chosen, he remarked, because of its louche coastal atmosphere and the diverse social undercurrents that he always relished. In fact, there was at the Wellcome a decided feeling that he had not really left. There would be the usual scatter of post-its on people's doors, his mailbox would rise and fall, the customary pile of books that had been read overnight would still magically appear for photocopying next morning beside the machine. His appetite for hard work was phenomenal, even in retirement, and his ability to inspire loyalty, and engage the heart, remarkable. Few of us in the history of science and medicine communities have encountered anyone like Roy.

His many qualities were warmly recalled in a large number of obituaries and at a crowded memorial service in London, attended by more than five hundred people from different fields, each of whom felt personally touched by his death.

As a historian, he would, no doubt, have expected to be appraised rather more coolly. Roy's achievement (principally but not exclusively in history of science and medicine) is immense. Much of his personality can be discerned here and there in the works. He celebrated his working-class origins in *London: A Social History* (1994), describing his upbringing in New Cross Gate and conveying a very real familiarity with his native streets from years of bicycling, or more often on foot because the bike was yet again stolen. He made a hero of Edward Gibbon, of scribble scribble scribble fame, and cheerily identified with Samuel Johnson's grouchy misanthropy, seeing in them something of himself, and understanding and appreciating historical figures who triumph over poverty by writing for money with lucidity, wit and insight. Roy's book on Thomas Beddoes suggested that civilization made people sick, one of his favourite historiographical angles, while Erasmus Darwin was depicted not just as a physician but also joyously as fat and sexy. He loved to write about quacks, about the insane, and about the underprivileged who struck back. In full eighteenth-century mode, he would stalk the corridors a-jangle with heavy jewellery, his body vigorously on display, often with a disgusting cold or cough to disseminate, denims straining over the meals that one assumes he must have found time to consume, the epitome of the robust men of parts he characterized in *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (1982). At other times, he could as easily appear as the darling of the establishment, accepting jokes about his tie with beguiling charm. Despite the gusto, he was an extremely private person. Few knew him well. Few knew the full extent of self-discipline and management skills that lay behind.

Roy was proud of being a Londoner. He was educated at Wilson's Grammar School in Camberwell where he met David Rees, an inspiring history teacher who put him in for the Cambridge entrance exam in 1964, the first boy from the school to do so. Roy used to go back every year to give a talk to successive sixth form boys and said that it was the most nerve-racking thing he did. He read history at Christ's College, wrote his Ph.D. on the history of geology (published three years later as *The Making of Geology*, 1977), and became director of studies in history at Churchill College in 1972. Not surprisingly, Cambridge claims to have shaped him. Much of his personality as a historian was surely formed during those years from 1965 to 1979, first with Sir Jack Plumb and Quentin Skinner, and then through the period when an intellectually refashioned, combative and distinctively Cambridge-style history of science was emerging in the hands of Robert M. Young, Martin Rudwick and others at the History and Philosophy of Science Department and in a seminar group at King's College, Cambridge that subsequently attained mythic status. During those years Roy worked with all of these, but most publicly with Mikulas Teich, with whom he edited a series of comparative historical studies on enlightenment in national context, romanticism, the industrial and scientific revolutions, drugs, sexuality and the fin-de-siècle. Among a welter of other professional activities, he sat on the BSHS council during the 1970s, co-edited with Ludmilla Jordanova the Society's first monograph, *Images of the Earth* (1979) and organized a series of BSHS

conferences on new perspectives in the history of science that introduced a generation of British historians to each other and to exciting intellectual debate.

At the London Wellcome from 1979, he was accustomed to say that he was given the freedom to become himself. He rapidly metamorphosed into a powerful social historian of medicine with a commitment to exploring the patient's point of view. By taking the social character of medicine as a point of departure, he showed how to keep the doctor and patient as well as their cultural context in proper view, and often examined the thesis that disease, or the threat of disease, was a socio-economic process that involved a range of civic issues beyond those of just health. Roy's preferred form of history was democratic and – what has been less remarked – collaborative. With George Rousseau he edited *Ferment of Knowledge* (1980) and a number of important other volumes. With Bill Bynum and myself he edited the *Dictionary of the History of Science* (1981), a pleasant time of cheese rolls and red pencils between 7 and 9 every morning. Bynum and Porter went on to edit many medical history volumes, the largest of which is the *Companion Encyclopedia of the History of Medicine* (1993) but which also included *The Anatomy of Madness* (1985, 1988), *Medical Fringe and Medical Orthodoxy* (1986), *Medical Journals and Medical Knowledge* (1992) and *Living and Dying in London* (1991). Other collaborative works included *Rape* (1986) with Sylvana Tomaselli, *The Social History of Language* (1987) and *Languages and Jargons* (1995) with Peter Burke, *In Sickness and in Health* (1988) with Dorothy Porter, *The Hospital in History* (1990) with Lindsay Granshaw, *Consumption and the World of Goods* (1993) with John Brewer, and *The Facts of Life* (1995) with Lesley Hall. He became editor of the journal *History of Science* in 1972 and continued, with Michael Hoskin, until 2001. He was joint editor of the *Journal of Historical Sociology* from 1987 and of a new quarterly *History of Psychiatry* from 1990. All the while, his generosity to young scholars, and willingness to think innovatively and rapidly, endeared him to those with whom he worked. This voracious appetite for words could sometimes magnificently implode. One Wellcome colleague left a review for an American journal on his desk for advice only to see it soon after published in Roy's *History of Science*. Similar stories abound. On the other side of the coin, people had to accept that a full response from Roy might comprise two, maybe three, words, at least one of which was illegible.

Most of all, Roy is known as an advocate of the patient's voice. This shift in the angle of vision, while not Roy's alone, revealed many exciting facets of the history of medicine and gave him a wide audience among the general public. His surveys, *Mind Forg'd Manacles* (1987), *Disease, Medicine and Society in England 1550–1860* (1987), *A Social History of Madness* (1987), *Health for Sale* (1989) and *Patients' Progress* (1989) are among the best known, and his largest single contribution, *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind* (1997), followed by *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (2000), combine broad narrative outline with lively vignettes that reveal medicine as inseparable from the social and intellectual framework in which it takes place. The latter nearly won the 2001 Wolfson Prize for history but was instead turned into a television programme, something Roy felt was pretty fair consolation. In *Gout* (1998), co-authored with George Rousseau, he showed in more detail how ailments intermesh with cultural and literary identity. His last work was on visual imagery, *Bodies Politic*

(2001), a new venture for him. In all this, Roy was a serious, synthetic historian, never trite or intent on simplification. His attempts to make our subject more widely understood were ultimately carried out with a wish to show the liberating aspects of knowledge – a politicized agenda that was always graciously delivered. The variety of his media appearances, reviews, radio talks, lectures and so forth defy description. A full listing is being compiled by Carole Reeves at the Wellcome Trust Centre for the History of Medicine at UCL.

Of course, people wondered how he did it. In retrospect, it seems that he must have swiftly learned how to regulate his time to achieve the maximum range of desired results with minimum but sufficient effort. If thirty seconds would do it, then that was all it usually got. As Bill Bynum announced at the memorial service, if Roy had been there he would have left ten minutes ago. He treated book-writing in much the same methodical way. As soon as he had mastered the computer, the machines in his office seemingly worked away on their own, sometimes even when he was abroad. He revelled in a field where ‘quick’ was useful, and broad, rapid pen-sketches did not matter too much because it was all changing anyway. This worked wonderfully well in his early career, where his zest for sweeping through a subject could materially change the way colleagues approached the history of science or medicine. The breadth of coverage of his later works increasingly led to repetition and minor slips. Often he found these mistakes uproariously funny, and would be the first to declare that he had inadvertently printed part of one book in another (and that no one had noticed). Over the last decade or so, he employed an army of female research assistants, indexers, picture-researchers, proofreaders and so forth, each group working on different books, some paid by the Wellcome, some from his own pocket, some probably out of personal devotion. This little-known, comprehensive division of labour maintained what might be seen as frantic output. As well as wondering how he did it, there remains also the question why. Yet even so, for his Ph.D. students, his undergraduates and others within and outside the profession, his patience and attention were legendary.

For all that Roy was here, there and everywhere, he rarely entered a new academic environment. He spent part of 1989 as Clark Professor at the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library in UCLA, followed by visiting professorships at Princeton and Stanford, delivered the Fielding Garrison lecture for 1992 to the American Association for the History of Medicine, and was on research leave as a British Academy Fellow in 1998–9. In 2000 he reluctantly became Director of the then Academic Unit of the Wellcome Institute, London, for one year only, and steered his colleagues through a difficult time of changing institutional status. Although he might not have wished particularly to be remembered for his skill at this academic task, he inspired genuine respect as a departmental leader. Roy was an honorary fellow of the Royal College of Psychiatrists (1993) and the Royal College for Physicians (1998). He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1994, and was about to become an honorary fellow of UCL. He died of a heart attack while bicycling home from his allotment on 3 March 2002.

JANET BROWNE