

Hamilton Bailey: master surgical author

A small elite of surgeons have the happy ability to be great teachers whose choice of phrase, whose ability to make difficult subjects seem easy, and whose ability to stimulate their audience or readers with enthusiasm raise them high above their peers. Many great teachers merely influence their own group of students or postgraduates. Others reach a wider audience through their writings, but only a very few can be said to have had a profound effect on the teaching of surgery throughout the world and one of these was Hamilton Bailey. This year marks the 50th anniversary of his death.

I can speak personally on this topic. As I write, I have in front of me a very worn and annotated 9th edition of his *Physical Signs in Clinical Surgery*, which I purchased as a medical student at the beginning of my introductory course in surgery in Oxford in 1945, and which undoubtedly was one of the factors that made me decide that surgery was for me.

Bailey's career was remarkable. He was born in 1894 in Bishopstoke, Hampshire. His father was a family doctor. His mother was an alcoholic, his sister a schizophrenic who died in a mental hospital; Bailey was a lonely and neglected child. In 1912 he became a medical student at the London Hospital Medical College. At the outbreak of the Great War in 1914, Hamilton joined the Red Cross, was dispatched to Belgium and was promptly taken prisoner when the Germans overran the country. He was accused of spying, sentenced to be shot by firing squad, and was only saved by the intervention of the American ambassador.

He returned to the London Hospital Medical College, qualified in 1916, and then served as a medical officer in the Royal Navy for the rest of the war, which included being present at the Battle of Jutland. Returning to the London Hospital, Bailey passed his Fellowship of

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the Royal College of Surgeons in England in 1920 and became a surgical registrar. He then had the misfortune to lose his right index finger as a result of a prick sustained during an operation in a case of peritonitis – a common hazard to surgeons in those pre-antibiotic days. Bailey said this later proved to be a positive advantage – his hand was rendered smaller and he could perform a laparotomy through a smaller incision. Moreover, his middle finger, being half an inch longer than the lost index, meant that he had an extra reach in performing rectal examinations.

After consultant appointments in Liverpool, Bristol and the Dudley Road Hospital Birmingham, Bailey was appointed to the staff of the Royal Northern Hospital, London, where he spent the rest of his career. He also worked at numerous hospitals in London and the home counties; he had little interest outside his work.

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Although famous as a teacher, he never had a teaching hospital appointment.

From his early days. Bailey began to write, to card-index his experience and, as an enthusiastic amateur photographer, to collect photographs of his clinical cases. This photographic expertise was reinforced when he married a hospital photographer, Vita, who became an immense help to him in his writing career. His genius was his ability to express himself in vivid English coupled with an eye for apt illustrations. He was an early enthusiast for colour photography. In all, 15 books appeared with Bailey as author, co-author or editor. In addition, 150 articles, mostly characterized by their excellent illustrations, were published in surgical journals.

Several of his books made publishing history. His first, *Physical Signs in Clinical Surgery* that I have already mentioned, first

appeared in 1927, was translated into eight other languages, and is still current today under a succession of editors. Its sales have run into millions worldwide. His *Short Practice of Surgery*, written with his colleague at the Royal Northern Hospital, McNeill Love, got me through my finals, fellowship and mastership. It is still a popular book, again with a succession of distinguished editors. His *Emergency Surgery* revolutionized the teaching of operative surgery in the acute situation and was my bible as a young surgeon. Copies of this book, its pages much stained and turned, can still be found in hospitals around the world.

Writing of this nature, with a heavy clinical burden at the same time, required immense effort. Bailey employed three full-time secretaries and used an early dictaphone in his chauffeur-driven car as he travelled from hospital to hospital. During the war, when he brought out as editor the immensely important *Surgery of Modern Warfare*, he had a medical artist staying with him at his home in Totteridge. Any time of the day and night he would take her from hospital to hospital during the bombing of London to produce many of the vivid drawings for this book.

Other of his well-known publications was his editing of *Pye's Surgical Handicraft* and a particular favourite of mine, *Notable Names in Medicine and Surgery*. Many years later, I had the great pleasure of bringing this out in a new edition.

This amount of work took its strain on Bailey. A complete nervous breakdown in 1949 made him give up surgery. Although never returning to surgical practice, he was later able to take up his writing once again. It is often said that a doctor will die of his specialty. Hamilton Bailey died in Spain after emergency surgery for an obstructing carcinoma of the colon in 1961, at the age of 66 years. After his death, royalties from his books were used to fund the establishment of libraries in hospitals in the developing world. **BJHM**

Conflict of interest: none.