

# Don Bates: The Medical Historian as Educator, Activist, and Historian of Science

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**Abstract.** The author outlines the academic and extra-academic career of Don Bates as a physician-historian, political activist, and creator of the interdisciplinary Department of Social Studies of Medicine at McGill University.

**Résumé.** L'auteur retrace les faits saillants de la vie et de la carrière de Don Bates comme médecin/historien, activiste et fondateur du département interdisciplinaire D'Études sociales de la médecine à l'Université McGill.

Don Bates's academic career was, from the beginning, highly unconventional and punctuated by dramatic transitions. He received his MD degree from the University of Western Ontario in 1958. After completing his studies and internship—an experience which included a summer aboard a Grenfell Mission ship serving the coastal communities of Labrador—Don abandoned medical practice for the history of medicine. In 1960 he went to The Johns Hopkins University on an NIH Fellowship to pursue graduate work at the Institute of the History of Medicine, under the renowned Owsei Temkin. In 1966, his dissertation not yet completed, Don came to McGill as Associate Professor of the History of Medicine and Acting Osler Librarian. Because he spent the best part of the next decade as an exceptionally creative administrator and teacher, he received his PhD from Hopkins only in 1975. His dissertation was entitled "Thomas Sydenham: The Development of his Thought from 1666-1676." One year later, in 1976, he was appointed to Thomas F. Cotton Professor of the History of Medicine.

During his tenure as Osler Librarian, Don oversaw a major re-orient-

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tation of the Library's mission and its practices. He initiated an aggressive and systematic acquisitions program, and most importantly, secured new sources of funding for continued growth, notably through the foundation of the Friends of the Osler Library. His methods and ideas often generated controversy, but the scholarly soundness of Don's approach, and his evident appreciation of the Library's Oslerian heritage (as evidenced by his own publications) eventually allayed opposition. In 1971, Don stepped down as Osler Librarian, but the Library and all it stood for remained close to his heart and central to his preoccupations. He worked closely with his successors on many projects, notably on acquisitions policy, fundraising, and the physical expansion of the Library, and served as Chairman of the Standing Committee of the Library's Board of Curators until the progression of his illness made him step down near the end of his life. He spearheaded the establishment of the annual Osler Lecture in the Medical Faculty, and from 1976 to 2000 served as Chairman of the Osler Lectureship committee, which brought a succession of outstanding lecturers to McGill.

Don's energies during the 1970s were devoted primarily to establishing and building a new department in the Medical Faculty. It began as the "History of Medicine" and eventually became "Social Studies of Medicine." This shift reflected Don's increasing dissatisfaction with the kind of erudite intellectual history in which he had been trained. But it also stemmed from a strong commitment to medical education. He believed that only in combination with other social sciences could history have a real impact on medical students. The medical sociologist, Joe Lella, became a part-time member of the department in 1973 and a full-time member two years later. Don himself was intrigued by anthropology and taught a graduate seminar in this subject with John Jansen. In 1977, Margaret Lock was recruited from Berkeley to become the department's first medical anthropologist. Don insisted that these were the three core disciplines of the department. Expansion for him meant creating depth and strength in these disciplines rather than introducing new ones. He always argued that disciplines mean something; if you want true cross-disciplinary communication, let alone collaboration, the disciplines involved must be complementary. The department was in every sense of the word his creation. And he took enormous pride in it.

As department Chair, Don combined strategic vision with what, to me, was astonishing tactical skill. He instinctively understood the forces in play and how far they could be moved—when to act and when to sit back and let events take their course. After he stepped down as chair he continued to wield enormous influence in the department. Like all his successors as department chair, I consulted with him on every major issue. He saw things with remarkable clarity. He stood for clear principles which he defended calmly and cogently. A series of long-term goals,

achieved by consensus, needed to be pursued on a continuing basis; he once told me that it was necessary to think in terms of the next 25 years. He increasingly saw research and graduate teaching as the central mission of the department but continued to believe that the department's role in medical education was critical and in constant need of reinforcement. This flexible and responsive approach is reflected in his numerous articles on the role of history in the education of young doctors.

But Don was not just an *eminence grise*; he took on a variety of administrative tasks that seemed to him to be essential for the future of the department. He single-handedly got the department fully computerized during the 1980s, but his finest hour, I think, occurred during the years of harsh budgetary cuts in the 1990s when the existence of a tiny department like SSOM seemed in jeopardy. He travelled to Toronto and held talks with the directors of Associated Medical Services Inc. which financed chairs in the history of medicine in the medical schools of Ontario. He convinced them that it was in their interests to support the history of medicine at McGill; the result was a \$500,000 donation to top up the endowment of the Thomas F. Cotton Chair which became subsequently the Cotton/Hannah Chair of the History of Medicine.

It is fair to say that politics dominated Don's professional life during the 1980s—the Reagan era, when the Cold War seemed to be heating up to a dangerous degree. Always in need of a large challenge, he took on nothing less than world peace. He was Canadian representative of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War when that organization won the Nobel Peace Prize. Locally he was founder and chairman of the McGill Study Group for Peace and Disarmament. He published a newsletter entitled *Thoughts on Peace and Security* for several years, was interviewed regularly on radio and television, and contributed trenchant articles on the medical and environmental consequences of nuclear war to the medical and general press.

This was undoubtedly the most unconventional part of a generally unconventional academic career. Don realized that his preoccupation with politics rather than academic publication was not appreciated in certain university circles. It is not that he did not care what others thought about him. He cared deeply, more than I imagined at the time. But the opinion of others was simply irrelevant, given the dangers that he perceived. Once it seemed clear that first Glasnost and then the fall of communism had substantially diminished these dangers, he moved on to other challenges. The chief of these in the final 12 or 13 years of his life was renewed engagement with historical research.

Despite his other activities, Don was for most of his career an active scholar who regularly published articles in his field. His dissertation on the medical ideas of Thomas Sydenham was an important work which probably should have been turned into a book. But by the late 1990s,

Don was exploring a new, and rather broader subject, one which appealed to his taste for grand themes and towering implications. He found the stimulus he needed in the debates about the nature of science that had broken out in scholarly circles. Briefly stated, the widely accepted status of science as form of knowledge uniquely suited to finding objective “truths” about the natural world was challenged by a variety of writers. While some were clearly hostile to science, others wished merely to look at science in new and more interesting ways. Don recognized the heuristic value of some of these new approaches, did not have a naive faith in science as a source of objective truth, and fully recognized that science was a socially constructed activity. But it was self-evident to him that science had an epistemological status that distinguished it sharply from every other form of knowledge. He became initially interested in studying Harvey’s discovery of the circulation of the blood because he believed that social constructionist perspectives were unable to account for innovations such as this theory, which has survived for centuries without being superseded. But increasingly he became convinced that Harvey’s work was critical for understanding the nature of the intellectual transformations that had occurred in the 17th century and that had made this special form of knowledge possible.

Don spent over a decade doing preliminary work for this ambitious study. He read widely and deeply, and in particular renewed his engagement with the Greco-roman tradition of medicine and natural science. He sought to compare the Western scholarly medical tradition with comparable traditions in China and India. He wrote a series of important papers on Harvey and edited a path-breaking collection of essays, *Knowledge and the Scholarly Medical Traditions*, published by Cambridge University Press in 1995.

In the fall of 2000, Don learned that he was ill with ALS. When it became clear that he would not live long enough to write his book on Harvey, he set out to write a long summary essay outlining the central ideas and arguments that he would have liked to develop more fully. Despite rapidly deteriorating physical powers, he managed to complete “Medicine and the Soul of Science” late in the spring of 2001. This essay—his intellectual testament, and the flagship article in the present collection—was circulated to his colleagues, collaborators, and friends in various stages of completeness prior to Don’s death. The meeting that took place in May of 2003, from which the other essays presented here emerged, was more than a memorial: it was a continuation of our conversation with Don about the topics that were closest to his heart.

For nearly 25 years, Don taught and influenced me by example. He was both fearless and highly effective in fighting for principles he believed in. He was fiercely loyal to colleagues he respected. After Don was diagnosed with ALS, he sent his colleagues a quite extraordinary

email explaining the situation, warning us of what was about to happen, and suggesting that we not take it personally if his behaviour became erratic and he became somewhat remote. This document was so telling of the man's strength of character, dignity and concern for the feelings of others, that it was circulated quite widely, somewhat to the chagrin of Don, who was a very private man. Unblinking lucidity in facing suffering and death was one of the very last thing that Don Bates taught by example.