

Book Review: "An Infinity of Things"

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

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Medicine Man exhibition (Wellcome Collection)

Photo: Rama Knight/Wellcome Images (<http://www.wellcomecollection.org>)

Frances Larson's latest work, *An Infinity of Things: How Sir Henry Wellcome Collected the World* (Oxford University Press, 2009) depicts one man's obsessive accumulation of objects for the study of the science of healing across human culture, and discusses the consequences (intended and otherwise) of the resulting colossal collection. It reflects the author's continuing examination into the material world of 19th- and 20th-century museum collections in Britain as shaped by the human relationships and interactions with objects that created and informed these spaces. This book stems from Larson's PhD thesis, "The Collection of a Lifetime: Creating Henry Wellcome's Historical Medical Museum" (University of Oxford, 2004) and intersects with her other publication, co-authored with Chris Gosden, *Knowing Things: Exploring the Collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum, 1884-1945* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

An Infinity of Things plays out amid Wellcome's life experiences and legacy. From humble beginnings in Minnesota as the son of a poor itinerant Adventist minister, Henry Soloman Wellcome (1853-1936) went on to earn a college degree in pharmacy and then worked as a traveling drug salesman in America; in 1880 he moved to London, entering into business partnership with fellow American Silas Burroughs. Thereafter Burroughs Wellcome and Company revolutionized and cornered Britain's pharmaceutical industry with their marketing innovations and extensive product range, generating tremendous wealth for both men. Larson convincingly parallels Wellcome's approach to designing items – like medical travel cases for the firm's construction –

with the objects he collected. Wellcome constantly sourced and sent his manufacturers a range of ordinary things bearing well-made or innovative details (hinges, handles, springs, metal/leather finishing, etc.) flagged as prototypes of his design ideas and vision. Larson effectively explains his fixation with minutiae as being an expression and extrapolation of data, connecting the significance of Wellcome's work habits with the assembly of his vast collection.

Wellcome assumed company control after Burroughs' sudden death in 1895, instituting the ventures for which he is universally remembered and which continue under the Wellcome Trust's auspice: philanthropic missions dedicated to advancing human and animal health, and private funding for scientific research and development as well as the medical humanities. The turn of the century also marked Wellcome's own burgeoning intellectual interests and academic aspirations, manifested in his driving aim to create a total history of human health and healing for scholarly research. Wellcome envisioned this happening through his creation of a comprehensive, encyclopedic artifact collection from cultures across the globe. However, only upon his determination of its completion would it be made fully accessible to scholars, reflecting the diffidence and paranoia that characterized and hampered his academic dealings. Larson thoroughly documents this aspect of Wellcome's personality throughout her work, extending the discussion to encompass the relationship between Wellcome's acquisitive thirst and competitive spirit that fueled his collecting practice.

Midway through the book, Larson comes to the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum (WHMM), which opened in 1913 after an eight-year delay caused by Wellcome's reticence to exhibit what he considered to be an incomplete collection. The WHMM channeled the aims and anxieties of its creator in its select displays from the collection with access limited to scholars and members of the public bearing letters of introduction from medical professionals. Despite the WHMM's critical acclaim, Wellcome still deemed his collection unfinished. For the next 23 years he and his agents continued to gather books, manuscripts, paintings, and objects of all kinds – Wellcome even collected other collections – resulting in several warehouses packed with tons of things (armor, instruments, fetishes, amulets, pillboxes, masks, tools, netsuke, artillery, skulls, photograph albums, textiles, furniture, etc. etc.), all of which eventually fell to Wellcome's trustees to deal with. The book concludes with a narration of the gradual disbursement of hundreds of thousands of artifacts in the years following Wellcome's death (i.e. sold at auction, supplied by container load to other museums and universities, and scrapped in cases of extreme deterioration). After decades of shedding unwanted books and objects, cataloguing and organizing the remainder, the Wellcome Building on Euston Road in London now houses the library together with the Wellcome Collection (that is, a permanent display called "Medicine Man" featuring around 300 objects from the original collection), open to the public since June 2007 following refurbishment. [1]

Larson's intent with *An Infinity of Things* is to present a biography of this gargantuan, amorphous, ethnographic collection (pg.4). The book is organized around the trajectory of Wellcome's collecting practices throughout his years as a pharmaceutical tycoon in London, and explored through the lens of his personal relationships and professional activities. The work is informative from the standpoint that it draws attention to an unprecedented ethnographic collection and sketches the contours of its collector's complex psychological makeup, duly identifying Wellcome's intentions, agendas and social networks.

That said, there are inherent issues with the book's structure and content that undermine Larson's stated aim. Foremost, her chronological framework facilitates a rather journalistic account of Wellcome's life experiences with emphasis on his social interactions, raising the question as to whether the work is actually a monograph about Henry Wellcome. Perhaps if Larson had begun with the 1913 WHMM opening (which is not broached until Chapter 10), parsed the collection and its *raison d'être* from that point, and then pivoted around it to explore her subject from various angles, the collection would indeed have been the focus of this work. Within the book's existing arrangement, Larson has the collector take the lead and the collection assigned a supporting role. The WHMM was the closest Wellcome came to realizing his goal as well as coming to terms with his collection and desire to establish himself within the scholarly community he so wanted to be part of. Certainly, in undertaking a biography of Wellcome's collection, the WHMM constitutes a fundamental event, institution, and ideal, but its relegation so far into the study diminishes its significance, and casts it as yet another point in an ongoing narrative about Wellcome's doings. Also problematic, *An Infinity of Things* is heavily anecdotal throughout as Larson is in the habit of relying on the voice of correspondents through excessive quotation in order to articulate the workings of Wellcome's social world. These are drawn from the Wellcome Archives and the Wellcome Foundation archive (both in the Wellcome Library, London). Unsurprisingly, Larson's footnotes generally function as an archival catalogue. Conversely, this itemized account also serves to reveal the richness of the sources that Larson has clearly mined extensively. But this underscores a missed opportunity as the author's deep knowledge of the archival material is not reflected in her use of images. These follow a standard format whereby 18 color plates meant to embody the collection's range are inserted into the book's center, with assorted black-and-white images (usually depicting an exhibit or building exterior/interior) tagged on to in-text points where they are dissatisfyingly self-explanatory. Black-and-white photographic portraits are put in chapters appropriate to the person under discussion, with which the author stages the cast of characters related to Wellcome's life and collection. The result is a deepened conviction that the book's primary focus is indeed the collector and his social world. The incredibly diverse panoply of *things* that comprised Henry Wellcome's material world presents the opportunity to feature object lessons as both springboard and framework to an interpretation of the collection, and so to explore its meaning and significance within the collector's mind and the world around him. Instead, Larson's conventional choice of illustrations and absence of object analysis disappoint, and her orthodox use of images detracts from her thesis.

With Wellcome's life story taking the spotlight, ways that his collection related to/differed from contemporaries in Britain, Europe and America are eclipsed. Larson concentrates on Wellcome's consumer interests as a competitor within the antiquities market – an important line of investigation, but it is unanchored to the wider, complex collecting dynamic engendered by the interests and aims of his peers. Larson does provide a cursory discussion around Pitt Rivers (pp.88-90), mainly to contrast his anthropological collection with Wellcome's artifacts. However, continued references to Pitt Rivers as well as periodic allusions to Wellcome's perceived trans-Atlantic collecting competition between himself and "the Americans" (to the reader's puzzlement, recalling his nationality by birth) are not thematically developed, merely repetitious. Moreover, but for Darwin's brief mention with regard to Pitt Rivers' progressivist ideas (pg.88), an integrated discussion

around contemporary evolutionary theories is absent, which is surprising especially given the objectives and scope of Wellcome's ethnographic interests. What is needed is a clear demarcation of Wellcome's place amid the scientific interests and debates that engaged Britain's public and academic milieu, and a sense of how contemporary professionalizations of science and medicine correlated with Wellcome's collection as it developed across the shifting socio-cultural landscape that characterized Western society during his lifetime. The reader does get an idea of ways that Wellcome's artifacts related to 19th and early 20th century anthropology, ethnography, social and cultural history from the bibliography, which could have been broadened to include literature on history of medicine and science as well as scientific and antiquary societies. Interface with such allied topics would complement and open up discussion around Wellcome's collection to encompass popular curiosity about the life sciences as well as their contested meaning and social impact in both public and learned spheres.

My final observation highlights another missed opportunity, as the breakup of Wellcome's collection and its relevance to the growth and/or transformation of other academic institutions and museums worldwide is not sufficiently developed. The intellectual objectives that shaped Wellcome's collection, the impossibility of its realization, and the way in which the unfinished project finally became functional is a fascinating foil to its dismantling, distribution and ongoing educational legacy. The inherent irony in Wellcome's failure to be an effective patron during his life, and the applications of his collection after his death, deserves more attention and better analysis than the brief discussion given toward the book's conclusion.

Overall, *An Infinity of Things* provides a disappointingly narrow treatment of Wellcome's collection, as its focus is really about the mechanics of "How Sir Henry Wellcome Collected the World." The work would have benefited from both a sharpened discussion around the ontology of the collection, and wider-ranging intellectual and cultural contextualization of the collector and his artifacts. But Larson is on to a compelling topic; Wellcome's character and collection are interesting enough in and of themselves to engage the reader's attention, notwithstanding issues with form and content. This book will have broad appeal for those interested in biography and the social history of museology and collecting practices in Britain from the turn of the century leading up to WWII. In terms of its scholarly contribution, this work is useful as a general introduction to Wellcome's life and the objects he collected, but its aspirations are held in stasis by the author's handling of primary texts that do not sufficiently get beyond Henry Wellcome to plumb the fathoms of his collection itself.

NOTE 1. Reading this work brings to mind Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*, analogous to Wellcome in terms of presenting another case of a lifelong collecting project whose epic intellectual scope foreclosed its fulfillment, overwhelming the altruistic intentions of its creator and only finding containment in its afterlife as a library archive. So, irony underscores Wellcome's material legacy; only in the breakup and public access to the collection (the very things Wellcome strove to avoid) could his possessions be appreciated, studied and used.

For online images of objects from Henry Wellcome's original collection in the permanent exhibit, "Medicine Man" go to www.wellcomecollection.org/press/press-images.aspx, which includes the following four objects featured among Larson's selection of color plates: a skull mask from Bhutan,

Charles Darwin's whalebone walking stick, an 18th-century gold memento mori pendant, and a 17th-century ivory anatomical model of a pregnant female.