

BOOKS

Wellcome's world: a biography of a collection

An Infinity of Things: How Sir Henry Wellcome Collected the World

Frances Larson
Oxford University Press; 2009.

If you have a passion, one that leads you to collect hockey cards or porcelain figurines, ask yourself this: Were it not for limitations of space in which to put your things, time in which to get them, money with which to afford them, and sense to tell you that enough were enough, what would become of you?

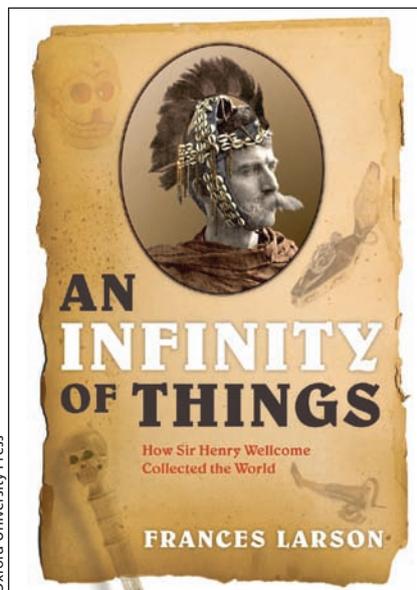
After reading Oxford-trained historian Frances Larson's captivating new book, *An Infinity of Things*, one wonders if Henry Wellcome ever asked himself that question.

Wellcome, a pharmacist by training but a collector by nature, was one of the founders of the pharmaceutical company Burroughs Wellcome. He was a pioneer in the manufacture of pills that made medicines more convenient to take than the traditional tinctures and powders; he was also a trailblazer in catchy advertising and tradeshow hucksterism. Consequently, Wellcome found himself very rich, and rid of many of the limitations that affect most men.

What did become of the unlimited Henry Wellcome?

Wellcome's childhood fascination with antiquities became an adult avidity for collecting, particularly of items connected with health and healing. His new wealth magnified and accelerated his hobby. Given unimaginable resources, Wellcome expanded his collection unimaginably, with the stated aim of putting together an unprecedented museum of the history of human medicine.

Although Wellcome's story is its



Oxford University Press

basis, *An Infinity of Things* is something other than the biography of a man. Wellcome's life before 1880, when he arrived in London to go into business with Silas Burroughs, is given only brief attention. A chapter detailing his disastrous marriage seems an unnecessary diversion. (And gives the feeling that Wellcome himself would likely have agreed with that assessment.)

The book, by Larson's own admission, is "the biography of a collection."

Thoroughly but not tediously, and with a good ear for anecdote, Larson observes the collection's birth and growth under Wellcome's obsessive micromanagement. There is a Dickensian proliferation of other players: buyers who acquired objects for the collection; the collectors from whom Wellcome bought items, and those with whom he competed for acquisitions; and the unfortunate souls whose task was to try, futilely, to store and catalogue the ever-

expanding collection. Particularly entertaining is a chapter on the amateurish skullduggery devised by Wellcome and his chief aide, Dr. Charles Thompson, to maximize their gain from the London auction house scene.

What did become of the unlimited Henry Wellcome? Larson observes that he "brought to his collection an unusual and, ultimately, rather debilitating open-mindedness." In other words, Wellcome acquired without discrimination, resulting in a collection that remained unmanageable in his lifetime. He had academic aspirations and planned to write a book — "a very full and complete volume which may run to 500 or 600 pages" — but published only two brief papers relating to his collection. Others attempted to study the collection, but were hampered by Wellcome's possessive and secretive attitudes. Larson believes that Wellcome's unattainable intention was that his collection and museum would "teach ... his audience ... everything they needed to know about the history of human health." Throughout his pursuit of such an unreachable goal, his relationships — with Burroughs, with Thompson, with his wife Syrie — were neglected and abused until ruined. Despite these costs, it was "[Wellcome's] death that provided the limitations that [the museum] had needed all along" to become the important institution that the Wellcome Collection is today.

Although *An Infinity of Things* is not simply a biography of Wellcome, it does paint a vivid portrait of a man who, despite becoming very rich, remained quite limited after all.

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