

Allen, Sir Harry Brookes (1854-1926)

Sir Harry Brookes Allen (1854-1926), pathologist and medical administrator, was born on 13 June 1854 at Corio Terrace, Geelong, Victoria, second son of Thomas Watts Allen, bootmaker, and his wife Esther Elizabeth, née Odell, and younger brother of G. T. Allen. He was educated at Flinders School, Geelong, and in 1869-70 at Melbourne Church of England Grammar School where he showed unusual brilliance. He had passed the examination for the Civil Service of Victoria when 12. In 1871 he entered the medical course at the University of Melbourne where he topped the class every year and graduated M.B. in 1876 with first-class honours. He was then appointed demonstrator in anatomy, pathologist to the Melbourne Hospital and subconservator of the museum of anatomy and pathology, thus settling at once his future career.

In 1878 he obtained his M.D. and next year the recently introduced degree of B.S. He was honorary secretary of the Medical Society of Victoria in 1879-87 and in 1879-83 edited the *Australian Medical Journal*. While Professor G. B. Halford was in England in 1880, Allen lectured in anatomy, physiology and pathology. Appointed lecturer in anatomy and pathology next year, he prepared with Halford a report on the medical school which recommended a new chair. This was accepted in 1882 when Allen was appointed professor of descriptive and surgical anatomy and pathology, while Halford retained physiology. Allen served as dean of the faculty of medicine in 1886-90 and 1896-1924.

His administrative skills were sought by bodies outside the university, particularly the government. In 1883-84 he was a member of the Central Board of Health and the board of inquiry on tuberculosis in cattle. He was chairman from 1888 of the royal commission on the sanitary state of Melbourne: three reports condemned in the strongest language the scandalous state of Melbourne's sanitary arrangements, and led to the Public Health Act of 1889, the Mansergh report and the introduction of a water-borne sewage system. In 1888 Allen was also chairman of the intercolonial royal commission into schemes for extermination of rabbits in Australasia. Next year he was general secretary of the Intercolonial Medical Congress. In 1890 he visited Britain and Europe where he studied advances being made in pathology and the relatively new science of bacteriology. He secured recognition of Melbourne medical degrees by the General Council of Medical Education and Registration and was the first Australian graduate to be registered in Britain.

Returning to Melbourne in February 1891, Allen inaugurated the study of bacteriology under Thomas Cherry. He also presented to the Victorian government reports on information he had gained while abroad. The most substantial was on hospital construction and management, while other subjects included the recognition of Melbourne medical degrees, sewerage, the metropolitan water-supply, isolation of infectious diseases and establishment of an institute of preventive medicine.

On the voyage back to Australia Allen had met Ada Rosalie Elizabeth Mason, some eight years his junior, who was travelling with the countess of Jersey as governess to her daughters. On 11 November 1891, with vice-regal blessing, they were married at Sutton Forest, Moss Vale, New South Wales. They had three daughters: Edith Margaret, a journalist, who worked on the *Argus* and *Australasian* but was best known for her cooking notes in the *Herald* under the pseudonym 'Sarah Dunne'; Mary Cecil; and Beatrice (Biddy), a musician.

Allen was elected president of the Medical Society of Victoria in 1892. He was elected to the Council of the University of Melbourne in 1898, filling the vacancy left by the death of Sir Anthony Brownless. By 1906 it was possible to reduce his teaching load: R. J. A. Berry was appointed professor of anatomy and Allen became professor of pathology; the chair of physiology had already been filled by W. A. Osborne. In that year Allen drew up the deed of union between the Medical Society of Victoria and the Victorian branch of the British Medical Association, becoming president of the combined body in 1907. He was active in negotiating for establishment of an Australian Institute of Tropical Medicine which was opened in Townsville in 1909 under Anton Breinl. The eighth session of the Australasian Medical Congress was held in 1908 with Allen as president. For part of 1912 and 1913 he was overseas as a member of the executive committee of the 16th International Medical Congress, London. While in Britain he was admitted to the honorary degree of LL.D., University of Edinburgh.

In 1912-15 Allen was deeply involved in establishing the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute. He approached the trustees of the W. and E. Hall Trust Fund with plans for a centre of preventive medicine, but R. G. Casey, one of the trustees, was more interested in general medical research. Negotiations between the trustees, Allen and the Melbourne Hospital were eventually completed by March 1915 when the institute was formed.

In 1914 the medical school celebrated its jubilee and in the New Year honours Allen was knighted. The profession presented him with his portrait by E. Phillips Fox; this was destroyed in the Wilson Hall fire in 1952 but a replica by his daughter Mary Cecil was hung in the pathology department. Late in 1914 he received an honorary LL.D. from the University of Adelaide.

From the early 1900s Allen gradually withdrew from commitments outside the university. By 1923 his health had begun to fail and after a succession of strokes he resigned his chair in 1924 and died on 28 March 1926. He was buried in the Melbourne general cemetery and was survived by his wife and daughters. He left his estate, valued for probate at £5939, to his wife. Lady Allen died in England on 12 December 1933. During World War I she had been very active on Red Cross committees and had organized the Army Nurses' Club. She was a founder of the Victoria League in Melbourne and was interested in the movement to establish a women's college at the university. A devout Anglican, she was president of the Mothers' Union in Melbourne in 1918-33.

Allen was an excellent pathologist and an able teacher who adopted a highly practical approach to the teaching of his subject, essentially based on post-mortem examination and study of the specimens so obtained. In his lifetime he built up a remarkable museum in his department containing some 15,000 specimens, most of which he mounted and described himself. It was, however, his quite outstanding administrative ability which placed him before the medical and lay public and gave him a unique position in medical politics. Aided by a remarkably good memory, he had the facility of being able to digest all the facts about some problem or discussion, read all related references and documents and prepare admirably succinct but complete memoranda.

Because of his ability, faculty left administration of the medical school largely in his hands. Once it was functioning to his liking he did not initiate or encourage changes. He developed the school on the firm basis laid down by Brownless and came to regard it as his personal responsibility. Both men made outstanding contributions to medical education at the university.

Tall and bearded with a commanding, almost imperious presence, Allen appeared aloof, even gruff, to his students. This aloofness masked an inherent shyness, for he had a deep interest in the students and kept notes on their later careers, particularly those who enlisted in World War I. His plans for expansion of the school to cope with the large numbers returning from active service were detailed and comprehensive and were completed and carried out before the close of hostilities. Always precise in his speech, he frowned on unusual idiom and colloquial phrases, for in all he did he strove for perfection. He was not an exciting lecturer, his voice was calm and monotonous and he seldom showed emotion; prepared notes were issued to students and references given for additional reading. His teaching was soundly based and closely related to the specimens in the museum.

To those interested in pathology he could be friendly and helpful and he inspired many whom he trained. He had fixed ideas and was intolerant of rebels. His staff received little encouragement to do research and he did none himself, yet good work was done in his department by devoted colleagues. He could be arbitrary and sometimes harsh to those he disliked, and in committee he was often severe and sometimes dictatorial. He made comparatively few close friends. Apart from his work, which to him was all-absorbing, he was fond of good literature and music, interested in art, a keen philatelist and, perhaps rather surprising to those who did not know him, wrote verse. His poem 'Australia's dead; Alma Mater and the war', first published in *Speculum*, the student magazine, was later included in an anthology of Australian verse. Although no athlete, he was a strong swimmer and enjoyed walking. Another side of his character is seen in his many carefully concealed acts of charity.

Allen wrote few scientific papers, but his notes for students were issued in book form in 1919. The bulk of his writing is seen in his presidential and other addresses and in the voluminous reports and memoranda he prepared for the government and the university.

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