

In Memoriam: J. Worth Estes, 10 May 1934–22 October 2000



ON 22 October 2000, J. Worth Estes, M.A. (Pharmacology), M.D., professor emeritus of the Boston University School of Medicine and editor of the *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* from 1997 to 1999, died after a long illness. He was one of the most respected, influential, and innovative historians of his generation. It will be a long time before those who knew him as a friend and colleague or who benefited from his work will be able to appreciate fully what a treasure we have lost.

Estes's roots were in the Bluegrass region of Kentucky, but he was a New Englander by adoption, and his personality and character were a delightful blend of the two regions. He was born 10 May 1934 in Lexington, where he also was raised. His education took him to Phillips Exeter Academy, Harvard College, Boston University Graduate School, and finally Boston University School of Medicine, where he spent his entire career.

While at Harvard, Estes spent a summer at the vacation home of Dr. Paul Dudley White, helping to care for his children. (In 1959, he would act as White's interviewer for the NBC series "Wisdom for Our Times.") Following graduation from Harvard in 1955, he spent two years in the Army. He was stationed at the personnel office in Yokohama, Japan, where he taught English to Japanese children and developed an interest in Japanese language and culture.

Returning home in 1957, he worked for two years as a research assistant at the Massachusetts General Hospital. While there he met and married Cynthia Thatcher Waggoner of Williamsport, Pennsylvania. Her father, a physician, was a friend of Dr. White and Dr. Gordon Seagrave, "the Burma surgeon." From the beginning, Worth and Cindy were inseparable soul mates.



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In 1959 Estes enrolled in the Boston University School of Medicine, receiving his M.D. in 1964. While enrolled at the medical school, he also took a master's degree in pharmacology at the Boston University Graduate School. Between 1964 and 1967 he served an internship in pathology at the Massachusetts General Hospital, was an National Institutes of Health trainee in clinical hematology at University Hospital, Boston, and held a National Institutes of Health postdoctoral fellowship in hematology at the Clinical Genetics Research Unit, Institute of Child Health, University of London, and at the Hospital for Sick Children, Great Ormond Street, London.

In 1967 Estes returned to the Boston University School of Medicine as Assistant Professor of Pharmacology. In the summer of 1982, he was Visiting National Endowment for the Humanities fellow in the

Program in the History of Sciences at Princeton University. By the time he retired in July 1998, he had risen to the rank of Professor of Pharmacology (History of Pharmacology) and Professor of Socio-Medical Sciences. Upon retirement he was immediately awarded the title of Professor Emeritus.

Although he had developed an early interest in the history of medicine, Estes first achieved an international reputation in pharmacology and experimental therapeutics, becoming a leading authority on the drug heparin. In addition, he served as course manager for the Pharmacology Teaching Program, a position he held for twenty years. Over the years, however, his interest turned more and more to the history of medicine. By the time of his death, he had written forty-five articles and six books on the subject. The titles of his books illustrate his broad range of interest: *Hall Jackson and the Purple Foxglove: Medical Practice and Research in Revolutionary America, 1760–1820* (1979); with D. M. Goodman, *The Changing Humors of Portsmouth: The Medical Biography of an American Town, 1623–1983* (1986); *The Medical Skills of Ancient Egypt* (1989); *Dictionary of Protopharmacology: Therapeutic Practices, 1700–1850* (1990); with Dean King and John Hattendorf, *A Sea of Words: A Lexicon and Companion for Patrick O'Brian's Seafaring Tales* (1995); and *Naval Surgeon: Life and Death at Sea in the Age of Sail* (1997).

Varied and prolific as his historical writings were, most of them centered on one basic and understudied question: What did health caregivers of the past actually do to alleviate the suffering and assist the recovery of their patients, and why did they do it? Answering this question was a difficult task, requiring not only the thorough examination of a formidable array of primary sources, but also a mastery of the medical theories of the past. His investigations raised the understanding and study of the topic to a new level of insight and sophistication.

Estes's love of books led him to serve as vice-chair (1973–1981) of the Governor's Conference on Libraries and Information Services, and as chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Westwood Public Library. But his contribution to the study of medical history was not confined to the written word. For a number of years, he was the president and moving spirit of the Benjamin Waterhouse Medical History Society at the Boston University School of Medicine. He served as an able and resourceful secretary-treasurer of the American

Association for the History of Medicine during a particularly critical time (1989–1998). In addition, he acted as medical advisor for the film *A Midwife's Tale*, based on Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's Pulitzer Prize-winning book, which was shown on PBS and in selected theaters. He also had an interest in local history, serving as president of the Westwood Historical Society.

Although he accomplished much as a physician, scientist, and historian, I always thought Estes's greatest achievements were as a teacher, whether in an academic or an informal environment. Like most master teachers, he could instruct and inspire, enlighten and humble. Many fine things have been said about Estes, but I believe that the words that best describe him are found in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Act 5, Scene 5, lines 73–75:

His life was gentle, and the elements
So mixed in him that Nature might stand up
And say to all the world, 'This was a Man!'

PHILIP CASH