

Letters from S M Burroughs: the birth of a worldwide pharmaceutical enterprise

L G Goodwin and M E Goodwin

L G Goodwin
MD FRCP FRS, former
Director, Wellcome
Laboratories of
Tropical Medicine
and Director of
Science, Zoological
Society of London

M E Goodwin
PhD, FRPharmS,
former Head of
Gastrobiology Unit,
National Institute
for Research in
Dairying, University
of Reading

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ABSTRACT – Letters from Silas Burroughs to his junior partner Henry Wellcome and other business associates have recently come to light. Written during his travels (1880–1882) soon after the establishment of their pharmaceutical company, the letters show how this energetic, resourceful and imaginative salesman developed and expanded the business overseas and tackled the problems of preservation, packaging and marketing of medicines in tropical countries.

One of the most influential founders of the modern pharmaceutical industry was Silas Mainville Burroughs (1846–95). In 1879 he formed a partnership with another young American, Henry Solomon Wellcome, and the firm of Burroughs & Wellcome became famous for innovation, style and quality. But they quarrelled and Burroughs died tragically when only 48. Wellcome carried on the business for another 40 years and a great deal has been written about him, the Wellcome Foundation and the Wellcome Trust. Burroughs, the senior partner, who started the business and lent Wellcome the money to buy his partnership, has been unfairly neglected. The recent discovery of papers kept by his grandson, the late Richard Stillwell, has renewed interest in this remarkable Victorian gentleman.

He was born in Medina, New York State, in December 1846, a member of a large family group probably founded by John Burroughs, a Devonshire man who crossed the Atlantic and landed in Massachusetts in 1634. It was a very old family, with a history in England dating back to the 14th century. Silas' father was a wealthy lawyer, a Senator and Congressman who had started life as a merchant.

Silas had some experience of the pharmacy trade before he entered the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy at the age of 30. He qualified in 1877 and his thesis described experiments that showed that powders compressed into tablets disintegrated much more rapidly in water than pills. Compressed tablets were becoming very popular in America and the market for them was expanding rapidly. Burroughs joined the company founded by the Wyeth brothers and travelled to London as their agent. He saw a great opportunity there for promoting the sale of tablets:

he had money and very soon started a company of his own, selling Wyeth's goods and extending his range with products such as Kepler's Malt Extract, Beef and Iron Wine, and Hazeline. Wellcome had also studied at the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy and was promoting the products of another drug firm, McKesson & Robbins. This agency, together with a selection of toilet waters and perfumes from Lundbergs, added further to the range of products offered by the new company.

The business, with its office in Snow Hill, London, prospered and Burroughs, who loved travel, decided to go on a tour to extend his trade and to seek new markets. He left England in October 1881 intending to take a short trip to the South of France but, as he wrote from India to his friends Mr and Mrs Wilson (Feb. 4th, 1882):

'... Arriving at Marseilles thought my business called on to Alexandria and so stuck to the good ship Ceylon... I have for the past year been thinking and planning for a journey round the globe, and when in Alexandria I received a letter from my good partner Mr Wellcome that all was going well with our affairs I felt that the tide was at its flood which should take me round the World – God willing – and make our fortunes too...'

He toured India, Ceylon, Australia and New Zealand and then returned, probably via China and Japan, to the USA.

By a fortunate accident, Burroughs' correspondence, written in 16 'letter books' on part of this journey – from the Middle East to India, Australia and New Zealand – were kept by his widow, Olive, and have survived. They contain orders to agents, instructions to Wellcome, letters to clients, friends and religious associates, personal observations, reflections and travel notes. They throw light on his character – a devout Christian interested in missions and good works, enthusiastic, bursting with new ideas, acutely observant and a brilliant salesman.

The letters that relate to the development of the pharmaceutical business are of particular interest and show how Burroughs thought, planned and operated. His principles and methods of conducting business are summarised in a letter written to a Mr Chatwood (Jan. 20th, 1882):

'...We push our goods through the distribution of samples to the medical profession, advertising in the medical journals and supply of picture cards to our customers for general distribution to the public. Upon these cards the customer's name and address is printed. We expect our agents to call on physicians and present samples and solicit orders from chemists and druggists said orders to be sent through us to the wholesale druggist or merchant in London who is to ship and pay for the goods.

We will send with chemists our samples for his doctors whose names and addresses he gives us and will send circulars to such doctors also to keep the goods before their attention.

P.S. ...I think that you will be able to obtain much information as to how to secure good agents both for yourselves and us through the British and American Consul....'

These principles frequently recur in the letters: there is a constant urge to visit and send out samples and information to doctors encouraging them to stock and use the medicines. Burroughs had no time at all for agents that waited for orders to come to them.

Pharmacists were persuaded to display lists of his products in their shops (Feb.6th,1882):

'If you will have them painted in artistic letters...in your elegant shop in Poona you will find that the lettering will add to the good looks of the place and give the medical profession... to understand that your houses are headquarters for the modern improvements in Pharmacy'.

It was also very important that after a promotional drive, enough of the goods should be available to meet the demand that had been created. Wellcome was in trouble for sending a large consignment of goods to Bombay instead of splitting it up and sending to other cities in India (Mar.21st,1882):

'Recd your letter here saying that 500 lots sples &c had been sent to Madras. As no other samples were mentioned I presume that no others have been sent to India in answer to my telegram from Alexandria. I am rather surprised that part of them were not sent to Calcutta, part to Bombay and also others to Colombo. I have telegraphed for them to be all shipped to Calcutta – that town and Bombay are the great commercial cities of India and Madras is a sort of out of the way place.

I hope that you have not neglected to send goods to Calcutta. It is of the first importance to have the goods in the market at the time the samples are distributed. Doctors invariably prescribe the goods directly after they have got the samples and it makes them furious and disgusted too if the patient brings back their prescription saying that it cannot be had in town. I think that 100£ worth of our goods would have been consumed in Bombay alone during the month before and after I canvassed it and gave out samples if they had been there in the market. The chemists would have taken them off my hands and paid cash for them or else paid through their merchants in London.

Now by the time the goods do arrive in Bombay the ardour of the doctors will be cooled. They have found such difficulty in the way of prescribing them they will swear never to do so again. This slipshod way of introducing our goods is an invitation to the chemists who get prescriptions for them to imitate them. More than this they are compelled to offer a substitute for what they have not got.

Unless you are going to pay some attention to such matters of vital importance which I have to depend upon you to do my labors here and elsewhere will be to a great degree nullified or destroyed and the result will be I had better stayed at home and avoid the considerable expense of this trip...'

At the time, suffering from the heat and humidity of Calcutta, Burroughs was irritated by Wellcome's complaints (Mar.28th,1882):

'A fearfully dusty day. Hope such a big wind will blow up some rain. Saw Scott-Thompson first a precious lot of old fossils. No more enterprise about them than in an old cow. Kernot thinks himself a remarkably sharp and enterprising fellow but Bathgate & Co are the real pushing people though they don't make so much blow about it. In rather ill humor on account of Wellcome who is in want of a dose of liver pills a Turkish bath and shampoo sleep diet Pil Phos Nux Iron and Quin Val Zinc &c. A thorough reorganizing in fact for I believe he has got the jaundice bad and sees things green and black with no end of snakes in the grass and blue devils everywhere.'

The post from India and Australia to London took between six and nine weeks so the response to an order could take more than three months to arrive. It is not surprising that confusion sometimes occurred. Orders could be sent more rapidly by telegraph but this was expensive. Burroughs adapted Landbury's telegraphic code of giving code names (all out of the Classical Dictionary) to assortments of the goods most frequently ordered. Thus an order for 'Alexander' would bring 2 dozen Malt, Malt and Oil, Beef & Iron and an assortment of pills and tablets. 'Xerxes' would bring twice and 'Maccabeus' three times this amount. In this way a customer could get supplies by sending a single word to London.

He avoided paying Customs duties whenever he could. On discovering that the Indian authorities charged no import duty on quantities of perfume less than four ounces, he instructed Wellcome to get a supply of bottles to hold just under four ounces for export of Florida Water.

Burroughs himself worked tirelessly to make his goods known. He had no hesitation in using his contacts among the civil and military authorities and at the missionary stations: he wrote to and called upon all the most important and influential people he could find. He was supremely confident and was prepared to approach anyone. He cheerfully told Wellcome to send samples of Hazeline to Prince Bismarck's doctor for the treatment of the Prince's gout (Aug.15th,1882). Wellcome must have been exasperated by the arrival of new demands by every post.

The British Army in India was a fruitful source of orders and Burroughs cultivated the medical officers in charge of the drug supplies to the Forces. He also made friends with the Indian doctors and visited their homes. He made no distinctions of race, creed or colour in business affairs, but he regarded all who were not Christians as benighted and lost.

His methods apparently paid off, as he wrote from Sydney on Oct.19th, 1882:

'The doctors treat me first rate and like our stuff. If we keep it before

them constantly we are in for a fine trade here. I think we should have a salesman or traveller constantly here in Australia looking after our interests...I really believe that Australia is the best field we shall find anywhere for our goods and that the Australian will be worth more than the English trade.'

It is interesting to note that the first overseas branch of the company opened in Melbourne.

It was Wellcome's duty to register trade marks for the company and instructions to do so appear in some of the letters. We have found no reference to 'Tabloid' (which was registered in 1883) but Burroughs is already using the suffix 'oid'. He suggests 'Ovoid Pills' or 'PIL-OVOID' as a trade mark (Sept.2nd,1882), and supposes that Wellcome has already registered 'Elixoid' (Aug.30th, 1882). Although Wellcome claimed to have been the sole inventor of the title, 'Tabloid' cannot have been very far from the thoughts of either.

Burroughs became aware of the fate of packages of medicines in tropical climates. Paper packets of pills did not keep, corks, leather and leatherette were consumed by moulds and termites, loose stoppers let in moisture and the tablets and pills stuck together and went mouldy (Feb.2nd & 13th,1882). Wellcome was instructed to change the packaging to overcome these problems, and stock that had become unsaleable was replaced without charge. Wellcome was also told to heat Malt Extract and pack in heated bottles with corks soaked in salicylic acid.

The letters show how new medicines were devised at the time. Burroughs found that *Euonymus* (the bark of an American species of spindle tree) had a good reputation in India for relieving intestinal upsets. Wellcome had to prepare and market

'Burroughs Compound Euonymin Pills' containing euonymin and a range of other herbal products that Burroughs guessed might improve its effect (probably Dec.1882):

'The above formula will I believe produce the best Liver Tonic pill ever brought out and will gain an immense sale in India and tropical climates generally.'

This brief account can only indicate the flavour and richness of the information contained in the letters. In addition to those concerning the business, there are personal communications with colleagues and friends and accounts of his travels and religious meditations. They make fascinating reading and provide an entry into the personal world of the late nineteenth century.

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Address for correspondence: LG Goodwin, Shepperlands Farm, Finchampstead, Wokingham RG40 4QF