

From the Editor

The story of Axel Munthe

Most young doctors are enchanted and captivated on first reading *The story of San Michele* by Axel Munthe.¹ The author describes his first visit, as a young man, to Capri in the Bay of Naples where he is welcomed by Gioia whose 'black eyes sparkled with fiery youth with her red lips like the string of corals round her neck'. Gioia leads him along a steep winding hillside path to the village of Anacapri and then he continues alone to the deserted chapel of San Michele with the whole bay of Naples at his feet. From that moment Munthe was determined to purchase the ruins and rebuild a villa on the site where some 2,000 years earlier there had been one for the Roman Emperor Tiberius.

Munthe soon returns to reality as a penniless medical student in Paris and then as a doctor treating the poor without charge and the wives of wealthy Parisians with functional illness. After 10 exhausting years in the French capital he purchases the ruined chapel and successfully builds the foundations of his villa before his funds run out and he is forced to move to Rome, renting the house occupied earlier by Keats in the Piazza di Spagna. He again becomes a fashionable doctor but also continues to treat the Little Sisters of the Poor and many of the poverty stricken in the city.

After many summer visits to continue building, the villa was at last completed. In the later part of the book Munthe describes his life of unalloyed happiness at San Michele living alone but among the local island community. As his sight fails, he moves to live nearby in the old tower, Torre Materita, and learns to type, 'a useful and pleasant past time I am told for a single man with a single eye'. *The story of San Michele* was completed in 1928 and was published the following year. The book closes with him apparently near death, 'I understood that the hour for parting was drawing near', and he imagines his appearance before St Peter to account for his life.

The book, which was astonishingly successful and reprinted many times, reads like an autobiography and was often reviewed as such. A later preface addressed whether or not the book was autobiographical but its true nature remained a mystery. The book contains no dates and few clues as to the real sequence of events. Munthe is surrounded by friends, acquaintances

and a great variety of animals but no relatives and he lived alone. He did not marry: 'there is only one possible escape for you, answered the colonel in a weak voice, either you get married or you will take to drink. I did not get married and I did not take to drink'. Later in the book after the author retrieves an illegally fostered child in order to return the boy to his rightful parents, the colonel's wife on seeing the child comments, 'I did not know that you were married. I said I was not married'. A biography of Axel Munthe published by Gustaf Munthe, his cousin, and Gudrun Uexkull in 1953 included some surprises.² The introduction was written by Malcolm Munthe 'the only reason that I have been asked to introduce this book is that Axel Munthe was my father'. The biography is short on dates and detail and there are no references to primary sources. Some of the mysteries of the life of Axel Munthe have been unravelled by Alex Paton.^{3,4}

Axel Munthe was born in Sweden on 31 October 1857 and qualified in Paris as a doctor of medicine aged 23. He returned to Stockholm and married Ultima Hornberg on 24 November 1880. They travelled to Capri and spent a year there – a strikingly different version of his first visit to Capri as described in the book's opening chapter. After his divorce in 1888 he spent two years on the island and started work on rebuilding San Michele. He moved to Rome in 1890 where he was in medical practice, often returning to San Michele to continue building his life's dream. At the age of 50 in 1907, and already blind in one eye, he married a 25-year-old English beauty, Hilda Pennington-Mellor, much against her parents' wishes. They lived initially in London, built a large home in Dalarma, Sweden, and she inherited two large houses in England: Hellens Manor in Much Marcle, Herefordshire, and Southside House in Wimbledon. Their first son, John Axel Viking, known as 'Peter' was born in London on 3 April 1908 and his brother Malcolm on 30 January 1910.

Axel Munthe was appointed court physician to the Swedish royal family in 1909. At the outset of the first world war he took British nationality and, despite his 57 years and his disabilities, served with the British Red Cross in France. After the war he returned to San Michele which he describes in his book as a time of unalloyed happiness but he also travelled widely with the Swedish court. In 1928 Munthe moved to Torre Materita where he wrote

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his book. From 1939 he lived in rooms in the palace of Gustav V of Sweden in Stockholm where he died in 1949 more than 20 years after 'being near death' as he finished his book.

And there matters might have rested but recently a definitive and fascinating biography has been published by Bengt Jangfeldt with access to original sources.⁵ There are many extraordinary revelations including a long-standing affair with Sigrid von Mecklenburg, which led to the breakdown of his first marriage, and a long-standing personal relationship (in addition to being her physician) with the Crown Princess of Sweden, which was kept secret for many years. The true sequence of his life is unravelled and it becomes evident that many events are either imagined or at least embroidered. His villa was designed not on his own with pencil and paper but with an architect friend. The antique contents were not discovered by chance locally but were mostly bought from dealers in Rome and Naples.

Thus his 'autobiography' must be regarded as only based on his experiences but no one can dispute the remarkable villa perched on the hillside above the village of Anacapri where his presence can still be keenly felt. Perhaps in the end it is better to approach the book in innocence and be carried away to another era by:

*a compassionate, cosmopolitan, cultured man who was introspective, sentimental and whimsical, an expert linguist, well versed in the classics, a student of architecture, a knowledgeable collector of antiques, a pianist and lover of Schubert's music with a lifelong concern for animals.*⁶

Perhaps he might be forgiven for not paying too much attention either to fact or to his family.

Editor's note

During the preparation of this editorial, it became clear that Dr Alex Paton was an authority on the subject. He has kindly reviewed the recently published book by Bengt Jangfeldt⁵ and his review can be found on page 292–3 of this issue.

References

- 1 Munthe A. *The story of San Michele*. London: John Murray, 1929.
- 2 Munthe G, Uexkull G. *The story of Axel Munthe*. London: John Murray, 1953.
- 3 Paton A. The mysterious Dr Munthe. *J Med Biogr* 1993;1: 31–4.
- 4 Paton A. Alex Munthe. In: *The dictionary of national biography*. www.oxforddnb.com
- 5 Jangfeldt B. *Alex Munthe: the road to San Michele*. London: IB Tauris, 2008.
- 6 Bayliss R. Axel Munthe's: *The story of San Michele* revisited. *Clin Med* 2003;3:179–81.

Pandemic flu

Financial crises on an unprecedented scale have created all the headlines recently but there are other, and potentially more devastating, threats on the horizon. The RCP, together with input from the medical specialties, has recently collected guidance and advice from a variety of sources as a basis for planning in the event of a pandemic flu outbreak. The full guideline is available at www.rcplondon.ac.uk/pubs/brochure.aspx?e=276 and a summary is available in the current issue of *The College Commentary*.

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