



## HISTORY OF MEDICINE

**C F L Leipoldt (1880 - 1947) — journalist doctor**

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His relatives called him Chris and to colleagues and others he was Louis, but to all whose paths crossed his, he was a man of fascinating and at times irritating complexity. When the accomplishments of this multifaceted man are called to mind, his medical activities usually rank low on the list or may even be forgotten. It is usually his editorship of the *SAMJ* that is remembered, and then more for the controversial if not outrageous opinions he expressed than for pronouncements on medical/scientific topics. What is not commonly known is that he was responsible for establishing school medical inspection in the then Transvaal, Cape Province and indirectly also in Natal at a time when there was a real need for such a service.

**A boy from Clanwilliam**

Johan Gottlieb Leipoldt, Louis' grandfather, founded the Rhenish missionary station Wupperthal in the Cedarberg and his son Christian Friedrich, also trained as a missionary in Germany, married Christina Esselen, daughter of the Rhenish missionary in Worcester. After their return from Sumatra, where Christian had worked, the couple lived with the Esselens in Worcester where Louis was born. When he was 4 years old the family moved to Clanwilliam where Christian Friedrich was appointed minister in the Dutch Reformed Church. Grandfather Esselen in Worcester maintained contact with Louis, who always remembered him with great fondness for the letters he wrote and for editing the letters Louis had written to him. The boy carried these corrected letters around with him, reading and re-reading them until they were worn through at the folds. Coming from such a scholarly family one would have expected that Louis would have received the best formal schooling available, but paradoxically he did not go to a local school at all because his mother did not approve of the company of the village boys! The fact that his schooling was provided by his parents and grandfather probably accounts for his wide-ranging knowledge of so many subjects, including languages — but not mathematics! In later years Leipoldt (probably correctly) attributed his behaviour, which sometimes verged on the antisocial, to this childhood isolation from other children.

In an autobiographical fragment published near the end of his life Leipoldt described an episode that led to his decision to become a doctor. Suspect as these explanations by doctors

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usually are, this event, which took place when he was about 8 years old, may well have had a considerable impact on a sensitive child. He was surrounded by newspapers and books and as an avid reader had free access to this literary paradise — except for one shelf, which was out of bounds. Like all trees bearing forbidden fruit, this shelf had a particular attraction to the one banned from the perceived enjoyment, and one fateful day he was overcome by curiosity and got hold of a volume which held special promise — Francken's surgical tome published in 1733. The woodcut prints illustrating various surgical procedures such as 'cutting for the stone' in explicit detail left little to the boy's fruitful imagination and the mixed feelings of fear and guilt proved a bit too much for him. He had an acute histrionic reaction of such magnitude that the family practitioner was called in, but he, not knowing what had gone before, was of course totally baffled by the boy's behaviour. The crisis was resolved by Louis' father, who had a long, gentle conversation with the boy and used the book to explain what the illustrations meant so that what had initially been horrifying became comprehensible and even acceptable. Louis pays touching tribute to his father: 'He stimulated my interest to such an extent that I was no longer horrified by the book. On the contrary, I was so taken by the wonderful work done by doctors that I decided there and then that I would also become one.'

**Education and early journalism**

It was easy for an intelligent boy growing up in Clanwilliam to become an accomplished amateur botanist and this hobby led to a chance meeting with the botanist Schlechter on a visit to the district, and also with Drs Harry Bolus and Rudolph Marloth in Cape Town, men of outstanding ability who all played a part in this bright and knowledgeable lad's unusual education. His education may have been somewhat lopsided, but he was extremely widely read in three languages and his home provided a strong concept of morality (not moralism!) which remained with him throughout his life. Clanwilliam was a small secure world from which he could explore wider worlds with confidence and understanding owing to his unusual education and inherent attributes.

Leipoldt passed the matriculation examination of the University of the Cape of Good Hope in the third class with English, Physiology, Greek, Dutch, History and Latin, in order of accomplishment, but without Mathematics! He fared better



in the Civil Service examination, but his arithmetic still left much to be desired. At the end of 1898 he turned 18 and went to Cape Town to train as a journalist for the next 3 years, a difficult time coinciding as it did for the greater part with the Anglo-Boer War. His fluency in German, Dutch, English and Afrikaans, his reasonable French, the wide scope of his reading and a remarkable memory coupled with his gift for writing, were useful attributes for his new career.

Leipoldt joined the staff of *De Kolonist* as a junior reporter but was not happy with this paper and in 1899 joined the staff of *The South African News* which had come into existence earlier that year. Here he found a political climate far more to his liking. As the war progressed and martial law was declared in some districts, Leipoldt, as reporter for this paper, attended the sessions of the special courts instituted to try rebels, and much of his knowledge of the facts of the war was derived from information and experience gained during this period. He wrote extensively on this topic for a number of foreign newspapers, for which he was a correspondent: *The Manchester Guardian* and *Daily Express* in Britain, the *American Boston Post*, the Hamburg *Neueste Nachrichten*, the *Petit Bleu* in Brussels and the Dutch *Het Nieuws van den Dag*. The letters of this young reporter to the latter paper from Cape Town beautifully portray the effect of the extraordinary boom the war had brought to this usually sleepy city. When the Editor of *The Daily News* was imprisoned because of his critical attitude to the British conduct of the war, Leipoldt, despite his lack of experience and aged only 19, was called upon to run the paper, which he managed with help, but it was closed down by Government order on 10 October 1901. There was little hope of another journalistic opportunity for him in Cape Town and he decided to go to London as a freelance journalist or to study medicine, an option made possible by Dr Harry Bolus who had offered to assist him financially in his studies.

## Life in London

In London he established contact with the *Manchester Guardian's* office and they sent him to Europe to report on strikes among dock workers in Holland, Belgium, Spain and France! In Holland he renewed his association with *Het Nieuws van den Dag* and arranged to continue as a reporter for them. Before his departure from London, Leipoldt obtained permission from Lord Lansdowne to interview President Kruger and also got letters of introduction to Dr Leyds and the President from his uncle Ewald Esselen. He eventually had a long and pleasant interview with President Kruger, who also seemed to enjoy talking to the well-informed young man. His conversation with President Kruger occurred a few weeks before peace was concluded at Vereeniging in 1902, just as he had had an interview with Lord Milner in Cape Town in 1899, a few days before war was declared — a unique journalistic accomplishment!

In September 1902 Louis, aged 21, was back in London ready to commence his medical studies at Guy's Hospital. Despite his youth, he was unusually prepared for this career. His journalistic experience in Cape Town during the war had provided unique insights into a complex world and this coupled with his background of wide reading in several modern languages, set him aside from his peers. He wrote to Dr Harry Bolus expressing his gratitude for making this study possible: 'It had always been my wish, however, to study medicine but I was debarred from that by the fact that a study of it would be an expense I could not afford.' This friendship between Louis and his much older benefactor and their mutual respect for each other despite political differences, finds expression in his letters, now collected into a small volume entitled *Dear Dr Bolus*. These letters also reveal the broad sweep of this young man's interests and his remarkable understanding of the new worlds he was entering. During his student years Leipoldt maintained his interest in journalism. He wrote for the *Guy's Hospital Gazette* of which he became the editor in 1906, and also became co-editor of Sir Henry Burdett's *The Hospital* and later editor of *School Hygiene*.

## Doctor and writer

Leipoldt passed both the MRCS and LRCP examinations in 1907, won the Treasurer's medal for clinical medicine and the gold medal for surgery and wrote to Dr Bolus: 'So far the two medals have only been won in the same year by 3 other men. My achievement is, therefore, a bit of a record in so far as London University and colonial students are concerned.' Later he wrote that these two pieces of metal were gathering dust in the company of his rejected manuscripts!

After qualifying he was appointed as an assistant intern in surgery at Guy's Hospital, an appointment regarded as a very important stepping stone for anyone intending to enter medical practice in London. But it held little attraction for Leipoldt. Although not overworked, he wrote of his normal clinical activities, 'All this takes time and ruffles temper.' For the first time he was exposed to sick children and realised how poorly many of them fared and this caused a spell of depression — attacks to which he had been prone since childhood. Probably because he had been so successful in surgery in his graduate examination, he decided to sit the examination for the Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons of England, a decision that baffled his colleagues in later life as this was the one profession for which he was not equipped. As he had some time on his hands before he could sit this examination Leipoldt was persuaded by Sir Henry Burdett to undertake a study tour to Europe, during which he would write regular contributions for *The Hospital* about educational opportunities for British students in Europe.

Berlin, his first port of call, provided an opportunity to gain surgical and orthopaedic instruction which he thoroughly



enjoyed, but he could not bring himself to perform experimental surgery on laboratory animals. After Berlin he visited a number of academic centres including Breslau, Cracow, Warsaw and Prague, writing that the latter was the most beautiful city in Europe. His description of his brief visit to Moscow, 3 years after the 1905 uprisings, reveals his astute powers of observation and remarkable sensitivity to political tension. Graz in Styria was also a major educational opportunity where he focused on orthopaedics and paediatrics, revelled in the beauty of this small university city, and for the first time made the acquaintance of Tokay Essencia, which he described in lyrical prose! A selection of the articles he sent to *The Hospital* was published as a brochure entitled: *The Ideal Graduate Study Institution: What Germany Can Offer*, but apart from academic enrichment this visit provided him with great cultural enjoyment.

He did not pass the Fellowship examination as he had underestimated its magnitude and nature and was, therefore, inadequately prepared. At about this time Sir Alfred Fripp, for whom he had been a dresser at Guy's, suggested that Leipoldt should for a time become the personal doctor to an American millionaire on his private yacht. As a consequence, Leipoldt spent 4 months as personal physician to the blind American newspaper magnate and millionaire, Joseph Pulitzer, on his luxury yacht *Liberty* on a cruise to the Gulf of Mexico, various South American ports, Tenerife and then to Portugal, but he found Pulitzer unimpressive!

### School doctor

At the second attempt Louis obtained the FRCS (London) in 1909 and for a while toyed with the idea of obtaining a higher academic degree but as time passed he had to abandon this dream, in no small way because of his inability to pass London's matriculation examination, which was a prerequisite for an academic degree. An attempt at general practice in London's East End resulted in the situation described by Conan Doyle in a similar situation in 1891: 'He waited in the consulting room and no one waited in the waiting room.' This was not unexpected in Leipoldt's case as he had deliberately turned away from the system of medical practice in London, had also been very outspoken in his criticism of it and was not known to colleagues in the city. He did have a modest income from appointments at the German Hospital and at the Victoria Hospital for Children in Tite Street, Chelsea. The latter provided experience in paediatrics, his main field of interest in medicine at that stage. He supplemented his earnings with income from his editorial work for *The Hospital* and in 1910 became an assistant inspector of schools under the well-known Dr Kerr in London, a step that to a large extent determined his future career. To recuperate following an appendectomy in 1911, he became ship's surgeon on a cargo boat to the East

where he visited Sumatra, Java and Borneo, which had great personal significance for him because of his father's work as a missionary in Sumatra. His notes kept during this journey grew into a manuscript in English that was never published, but his impressions found expression in his poems *Uit my Oosterse Dagboek*, published many years later. On his return to London he became a school doctor in Hampstead, and while holding this appointment wrote *Common Sense Dietetics* in 1911 and *The School Nurse; Her Duties and Responsibilities* in 1912, both very readable and novel contributions to the field.

Leipoldt was appointed the first medical inspector for schools in the Transvaal in 1914. The next year he joined General Botha's force as medical officer during the South West African campaign, but following his discharge returned to his school medical practice in the Transvaal. Between 1916 and 1919 he also assisted with the establishment of medical school inspection in Cape Town and Natal. He was in the prime of life and many of his observations and ideas during this period found expression in his work *Bushveld Doctor*, written in 1916 but only published in 1937. It was never translated into Afrikaans and in the usual Leipoldt style, deals with a great variety of topics, directly or in passing. Among other things, it highlighted ethical problems posed by school medical examinations for the first time. This eventually led to the introduction of improved laws dealing with this aspect of medical care. In a chapter, 'The right to die', he dealt with euthanasia with revolutionary frankness in 1916, in a way that is still relevant today.

The well-being of children in all its many ramifications remained Leipoldt's primary responsibility and he never lost sight of this. In Britain he had been impressed with the educational value of providing children with opportunities to travel as a means of broadening their horizons and with the assistance of teachers he took classes of schoolchildren on weekend trips and school camps to places in southern Africa, including Lourenço Marques. For these outings he sacrificed his own holidays and weekends and in 1928 he took a group of children to England, the last outing of its kind.

It was while he was working as school doctor in the Transvaal that he became aware of the need of parents and teachers for practical, easily assimilable information pertinent to South African conditions. Here his paediatric background combined with his skill as a journalist enabled him to provide the required information relevant to conditions in this country in readable form. His publications on aspects of this topic continued for many years and included: *Eerste Gesondheids- leesboek vir Afrikaanse Skole*, *Die Afrikaanse Kind in Siekte en Gesondheid*, *Skoolgesondheid*, *Eerste Gesondheidsboek*, *Praatjies met die Kinders* and *Praatjies met die Oumense*. Reading these works today one is struck by his masterly ability to describe the structure and function of the human body in a simple, understandable and effective way. These books about the South



African child were a valuable contribution to the field of community health and preventive medicine, but when told this Leipoldt said that he did not know what these words meant!

## Return to Cape Town

In 1923 Leipoldt temporarily abandoned medical practice to become a full-time journalist with the *Volkstem* in Pretoria, and in the historical parliamentary elections of 1924 he stood as a United Party candidate for Wonderboom, but was unsuccessful. He lasted another year with the *Volkstem* before his deteriorating relationship with Gustaf Preller, the newly appointed editor, led to the termination of Leipoldt's association with the paper. The next year he returned to Cape Town as the first paediatrician in private practice and was also appointed as part-time lecturer in this subject in the medical faculty of the University of Cape Town. This was somewhat of an anomaly as he had dealt with a great number of sick children but was in reality not trained as a paediatrician. A number of senior colleagues, who had been Leipoldt's students and house physicians, remembered him for his eccentricity, controversial views and rather for the things he didn't teach them than for the gems of knowledge he left them. They carried with them an endless store of anecdotes illustrating his unpredictable points of view and judgements, of which his unconventional approach to therapy topped the list. 'Pumpkin seeds used for treatment of worms', 'Wine being safer than milk for children in Cape Town', 'All newborn babies can swim' and 'All adults have syphilis', were but a few of these statements. He was never dull, but no one knew whether he was serious or just being provocative and trying to stimulate thought or argument. He was most amused to find some of them taking notes of his paediatric pronouncements! Despite their criticism of Leipoldt as a scientific doctor, his students remembered him with great fondness and in particular recalled his understanding of children, his ability to conceptualise a child's world and the way in which he handled them as individuals. In his inimitable way he introduced his junior colleagues to worlds that they would never have encountered without his guidance, worlds much larger than their small technical domains to which they devoted their entire attention and linked their ambitions. Where there was suffering and misery he always had understanding and sympathy, and all who knew him agreed that at all times he displayed a complete absence of colour prejudice. In 1939 the final-year students openly revolted against these lectures as they failed to find substantiation of many of their lecturer's statements in standard textbooks of paediatrics, and he resigned.

As a paediatrician in private practice Leipoldt fared somewhat better, but not financially as he was completely disinterested in money, seldom sent accounts, and when he did, wasn't really interested whether they were paid or not. A

case in point was that of Dr Geyer, a journalist whose child had been seen by Leipoldt. An account for the visit was never sent and in desperation Dr Geyer eventually phoned Leipoldt to bring this oversight to his attention. Leipoldt explained that he did not send accounts to colleagues and when Geyer reminded him that he (Geyer) was not a medical doctor, Leipoldt responded: 'You seem to have forgotten that I am also a journalist!'

## Medical journalist

Considering his lifelong interest in journalism and his practical journalistic experience in England and South Africa, Leipoldt's editorship of the *SAMJ* could almost have been predicted, and when this became a reality in January 1927 he was in his element as he had clearly stated that journalism was his first love. He was also appointed as Organising Secretary of the then Medical Association of South Africa and it is a mystery how he managed all these responsibilities as this was also the period during which most of his non-medical writing, the greatest bulk of his literary work, was done. For the next 17 years as Editor of the *SAMJ* these two forces in his life, journalism and medicine, were never in open conflict, but which was the dominant one remained unresolved.

At heart Leipoldt was not a scientist and certainly was not single-minded about medicine, which during his term as editor, was undergoing a transformation from an empirical clinical science to a laboratory-orientated applied science. The significance of this change was either not appreciated or deliberately ignored by Leipoldt so that he was not able to provide leadership or wise guidance in this field as editor. He seriously misjudged some advances such as the use of iodised salt in the treatment of endemic goitre and the use of sulphonamides for some infections.

Although somewhat shaky when it came to science, his editorials dealing with medico-political problems were often of outstanding quality, probably far in advance of most of his colleagues and certainly beyond the comprehension of most politicians of his time. He consistently opposed attempts to train black doctors to a lower standard than that available for whites and believed in a unified health care system for all South Africans irrespective of race or colour to be run by the government. In 1932 he said: 'In South Africa we have a Black population whose interests are so closely related to and whose ill-health is so closely associated with the ill-health of the smaller White and Coloured communities that it would be madness on our part to draw up a public health programme purely for the white community. In 50 years one shudders to contemplate what might be the effects of so one-sided a programme.' The Gluckman report of the late 1940s proposed just this, but was rejected by the government of the time.



## MASA's problems with Leipoldt

Leipoldt's individualistic approach to matters, sharp intellect and wide-ranging interests shaped the *Journal* during the years of his editorship, and as Organising Secretary of the Medical Association his influence was felt throughout the South African medical fraternity. As an accomplished journalist he could and did comment on a great variety of topics but not always in soothing terms when he did not approve. His linguistic ability was a great journalistic asset as it gave him direct access to a variety of foreign sources but he did not make use of these opportunities effectively, or for that matter, always wisely. He had an unmitigated dislike for arrogance and humbug and early in his career wrote to Dr Bolus: 'There is only one greater humbug and hypocrite than the average general practitioner and that is the average specialist consultant.' This kind of remark, which may well portray a very clear insight, also demonstrates a lack of tact, but was characteristic of the man and was sure to offend at least some of his colleagues. At times he could be very gruff in his interaction with people and seemed to take delight in shocking colleagues, attributes that did not help to oil the machinery of the organisation of which he was the organising secretary. Dr Sichel, President of MASA, said of him in 1947: 'He could be excessively rude when he chose, but he was always approachable. He could be provoked to anger but also to merriment; besides being caustic he could be kind. His reluctance to co-operate with the officials of the Association in their decision to find a suitable candidate to succeed him in the event of his death, or retirement, unnecessarily tinged the later years of his office with unpleasantness which his many friends recall with regret.'

## Break-up and the end

Matters between him and the Medical Association came to a head when the Federal Council of the Association terminated his editorship of the *SAMJ* in 1943. There was much bitterness and lack of appreciation on both sides but the full story of this saga will probably never be known. Leipoldt was not an easy person to work with and in his previous appointments there had also been major or minor crises. Professional organisations do not as a rule provide unlimited scope for imaginative thinking and could hardly have been expected to accommodate a man so complex and, at times, unpredictable and unmanageable as Leipoldt. That he could be a difficult man goes without saying, but a man of such complexity would have friends as well as enemies which was clearly evident from the interviews with doctors who had known him in his prime. After his retirement from the *SAMJ* he became progressively more isolated and lonely, moved to Sea Point where he took two

rooms in a private home, continued writing to supplement his meagre pension but visited Clanwilliam and his beloved Hantam on several occasions and consolidated the lifelong friendship with Dr Nortier. He was working on two books, *300 Years of Cape Wine* and *Cape Cookery*, at the time of his death of a cardiac ailment in 1947. A simple, non-religious ceremony accompanied his burial in the Cedarberg.

It is impossible to comprehend or define this enigmatic man fully or to evaluate him as a medical practitioner. If nothing more, his life demonstrated that a medical practitioner could be much more than a mere technological being. Although he was involved in many activities outside his profession, he remained a lonely man who was an independent thinker at all times and not afraid to express his thoughts. He was one of the few true liberals this country has known. As a medical practitioner in this country, one is proud to remember a man of this calibre, as one of our profession. His obvious intelligence, prodigious memory, wide-ranging interests, his gift for languages and the special talent of the poet may all be attributed to his genes and unusual education. Perhaps he inherited his mood swings and some of his gaucheness from his mother as his Leipoldt relatives believed, but this may not have been a fair assessment. His capacity for hard work, the drive to take on more and more tasks and the ever-present burdens of duty and responsibility may well be explained by his origins, as pointed out by another son of a missionary who had also been editor of the *SAMJ*, Dr Andries Blignaut. He said that one should read Leipoldt's poem *Sendeling Kinders* if one wants to understand him or, for that matter, any child of a missionary. Leipoldt himself in later years produced an English variation on this theme, not a true translation but in reality a new poem, *The Mission Child*, which ends:

*'You are the Mission Child; your task is set for you to do.  
A simple task, but one that taxes patience, power and pride;  
To go your way and grasp your work that all and naught  
beside  
To struggle through to reach the star that lights the long  
ascent  
And learn at last before you die what Ebenezer meant.'*

(1. Sam. 7:12. Ebenezer, saying 'Hitherto hath the Lord assisted us.')

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