

Tom Rivers

Reflections on a Life in Medicine and Science

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Reflections on a Life in Medicine and Science

*An Oral History Memoir prepared by
Saul Benison*



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For

Professor Allan Nevins

*Known to my generation at Columbia
as the Little Shepherd*

From one of the sheep

Whoever elects to study history, as far as I am concerned, may bring to bear the most pathetic and childish belief in the classifying power of our spirit and methods, but apart from this and in spite of it he should have respect for the incomprehensible truth, reality, and singularity of events. To deal with history my friend is no jest and no irresponsible game.

Herman Hesse, *Magister Ludi*

Historyans is like doctors. They are always looking f'r symptoms. Those iv them that writes about their own times examines th' tongue an' feels th' pulse an' makes a wrong dygnosis. Th' other kind iv histhry is a post mortem examination. It tells ye what a counthry died iv. But I'd like to know what it lived iv.

Peter Finley Dunne, *Observations by Mr. Dooley*

Introduction

On February 5, 1962, one hundred distinguished microbiologists, virologists, and biochemists, including four Nobel laureates, met in a New York hotel to pay tribute to Dr. Thomas Rivers, a member emeritus of the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research. A fifth Nobel laureate, Dr. John Enders, ill in Boston and unable to attend the festivities, telegraphed the following message to Dr. Rivers: “We the members of the church salute the apostolic father.”

The recognition that Dr. Enders and others accorded Dr. Rivers that day was singularly appropriate. For a period of almost forty years, Dr. Rivers had been a dominant figure both as an investigator and as an administrator in virus research in the United States. Three months later, at the age of 73, he was dead. Dr. Rivers’ death did not mark the end of one era in virology or the beginning of another. His career in essence spanned the development of virology from its status at the beginning of the twentieth century as an adjunct to bacteriological study to its current position as an independent discipline, as much concerned with the fundamental problems posed by molecular biology as with the diseases caused by viral agents.

This oral history memoir is an attempt to chart the evolution of Dr. Rivers’ career. Oral history is a relatively new phenomenon in American historiography, and a note as to its development, purpose and procedures may serve to put Dr. Rivers’ memoir in perspective. In 1938 Professor Allan Nevins, in his handbook of historiography, *The Gateway to History*, urged his fellow historians to establish an