

Chapter 9

‘Bones of Contention’¹ and Brotherly Strains

*We blame each other for various things which are not our faults –
but due to the failures of the past ...²*

It might be supposed that the shared achievements of Burroughs and Wellcome would have drawn them closer together. They had, after all, known each other for many years; undertaken the same training at Philadelphia; had similar experiences as travelling salesmen; shared many mutual friends and business acquaintances on both sides of the Atlantic; and, not least, shared the same ambitions. Yet, even in these early years, strains in their relationship and bickering can be detected, exacerbated by their separation during Burroughs’s lengthy travels between October 1881 and March 1884. Disagreements arose from simple misunderstandings, aggravated by delays in communications and differences in their working methods; at times both men were under great stress, depressed or unwell. Financial worries and arguments over the partnership agreement compounded this, and resentments and grudges emerged in these early days which went unresolved and therefore festered.

Wellcome had not been idle during Burroughs’s absence and felt justifiably proud of all he had accomplished, implementing the many suggestions Burroughs had sent him, liaising with agents, dealing with official bureaucracy over taxes and patents, attending meetings of the British Medical Association and handling office moves and building works. He had travelled to France, twice to America, and wintered in Spain in 1883–4.

Sudlow, the general manager, and Kirby, the chief clerk, were proving invaluable assets, and they kept in touch with Burroughs throughout his travels. More travellers were employed, two in Britain and two abroad, their expenses monitored assiduously by Wellcome. Leaflets, sometimes drafted by Burroughs, were translated, printed in London and distributed internationally as Burroughs instructed; trademarks were registered abroad and in London; doctors in Britain continued to be visited; and eminent medics were solicited for endorsements of the firm's products. Imitation tablets and other goods were noticed increasingly by both partners, necessitating stern letters and threats of prosecution by Wellcome. Advertising in medical and other journals in England, India and Australasia continued to be identified as crucial to the firm's success, and the scale of the firm's promotions was stepped up. In addition to advertising in *The Lancet*, a *Medical Formulae* book was distributed to 'the grand Mogul Drs' in a sales campaign which took the medical profession by storm.³ Burroughs, 'much pleased', now considered the possibility of printing a book on modern medicine and pharmacy.⁴ As we have seen, the important Kepler Malt Extract Company had been acquired after long negotiation,⁵ and Fellows Manufacturing Co., New York, producers of Hypophosphite Syrup – who looked likely to give up their agency when Burroughs was in India – had been persuaded to remain. The two partners communicated at length on how to achieve the highest standards for their products and worked closely on producing attractively packaged items, as well as on the content and design of new medical cases.⁶ The firm's agencies were reassessed and renegotiated, and American agencies were reminded that distribution and marketing in England or India differed from their own practices. All this was essential in order to keep ahead in an ever more competitive market.

During Burroughs's absence Wellcome had successfully negotiated with HM Customs & Excise over the firm's interpretation of the Stamp Act, boasting to Burroughs of his 'ingenious and exhaustive defences', something Burroughs would have done well to remember in his later legal dealings with his partner.⁷ The partners knew that it was now imperative that the firm should develop its own manufacturing capacity to head off competition from newly established manufacturers in Britain and from lower priced imports from Europe and America.⁸ Initially they had used Wyeth's tablet-making machines sent from America, on which a much resented 20% royalty continued to be demanded. Attempts to renegotiate the agreement with Wyeths and manufacture their own compressed tablets continued: Burroughs feared being

made a 'catspaw' and mistrusted them, and Wellcome agreed that they were 'greedy spirited'.⁹ This prompted the dispatch of their chemist, Otto Witte, to America and Germany to report on new machines and design a prototype, leading eventually to the installation at the firm's Wandsworth factory of improved machines capable of greater output. With expansion in production and staffing came a need for more office space, so an additional floor was rented in their Snow Hill building. Then in March 1883 Wellcome leased buildings, a private dock for barges, and a fresh water supply at Bell Lane Wharf, Wandsworth,¹⁰ to accommodate the manufacture of their own compressed tablets in what amounted to the firm's first chemical works; it was managed by Otto Witte.

Yet more office space was now essential. When a recently constructed and still unoccupied building became available opposite their Snow Hill offices, Wellcome informed Burroughs but said he considered it was too expensive. Burroughs, however, was very enthusiastic. He thought that the location was perfect and they should take it if the business could stand it, using it for offices and storage. If a lift was installed, another large floor could be added to the roof for a laboratory. 'We shall need large premises as large as Wyeth in Philadelphia someday,' he counselled Wellcome.¹¹ A lease was taken and fitting-out put in hand; it all took longer than thought, and the firm moved in early in 1884.¹²

Some English competitors derided the firm's achievements. As Wellcome said, 'the English people as a rule detest progress & novelty – whatever we have won here has been by persistent fighting.' He put down their success to the effort, patience and money that the partners had invested in it: no entrepreneur should attempt to follow in their footsteps in bringing American goods to the European markets without ample capital (which of course was what Burroughs had supplied) and the patience to wait for results. He reckoned that four times the personal labour and expenditure was needed in England to produce the same results as in America.

Burroughs's world journey had been costly, provoking Wellcome repeatedly to raise concerns about it. He urged Burroughs when in Turkey to adhere to their agreed regular terms of business because the firm was skating on thin ice and needed every penny of profit.¹³ Although there are lamentable gaps in the firm's financial records, they reveal what turbulent times it faced. Despite excellent growth in sales during the early years, good profits did not follow. There were various reasons for this, including relatively low capitalisation; the cost of carrying stock; the convention in the UK drug trade of long credits; the need for



16: Burroughs, Wellcome & Co., Snow Hill, in the 1880s.
The impressive new headquarters of the firm opened in early 1884.

investment in order to expand production; and the cost of acquiring the Kepler Malt Extract Co. A number of measures were needed at this time to keep the business afloat, among them the provision by Burroughs of a large personal loan and the extension of an existing loan.

Both men oscillated between expressing serious worries and steady confidence, depending on to whom they wrote. When communicating with Burroughs's aunt and uncle for example, Wellcome was always very positive. 'Our business is steadily improving,' he assured them, adding that without expenditure on advertising the business would not advance.¹⁴ Yet he was far less optimistic when writing to his partner a month later, reporting the extraordinary strain of heavy payments since Burroughs's departure. The enormous cost of Burroughs's trip added to these.¹⁵

Was Burroughs excessively lavish in his expenditure? Wyeths had once complained of this, and Wellcome criticised the quantity of free samples and literature he distributed.¹⁶ An assessment of any extravagance on Burroughs's part is hard to make, but the returns from it were substantial. Undoubtedly the firm's massive promotion spread its name and reputation at a key moment both for it and for expansion in pharmaceutical products.

Wellcome's concern about his partner's expenses was the cause of only one of many areas of friction between them. Simple misunderstandings were made worse by poor communications. They relied heavily on the telegraph, but this was expensive, not always available, and in any case did not allow any intimacy. Once Burroughs was hurt by a curt telegram; Wellcome agreed that the word 'please' might have helped but claimed he had deleted it on the grounds of cost. Another time Burroughs told Sudlow that he thought Wellcome had misinterpreted his telegram, 'which was much too brief for the sake of economy'.¹⁷ Inevitably postal problems occurred, such as letters going astray, being returned or crossing the Atlantic twice. Samples and leaflets did not arrive in time, leaving Burroughs irritated and frustrated that his sales orders could not be supplied – blaming this on Wellcome's inefficiency.¹⁸ The problem was compounded by his being continually on the move, changing his route and dates according to whom he met and what he found. Such flexibility was essential in allowing him to tailor his marketing and act on leads and instincts, but his hastily written orders and instructions, often jotted down on the move, were not always clear or easy to interpret. Wellcome's request that Burroughs report more systematically and use pre-printed forms provides an insight into their different approach to handling business.¹⁹

Stress and hard work began to weigh heavily on both men. Wellcome complained of feeling poorly and lacking strength during Burroughs's absence, although exhaustion from a busy social life may partly explain this; Burroughs told him to take better care of himself. At the same time Burroughs experienced several bouts of illness, in particular severe malarial fever when in India. He too suffered from exhaustion, and by the time he left India he was homesick and depressed. Physical and mental strains impinged on their business and personal relationship.

Shortly after Burroughs left on his travels, Wellcome warned him against undertaking a 'superficial jaunt', criticised his 'happy go lucky' manner in setting up agencies and appointing sub-agents overseas who were expensive and not always effective, and advised against opening direct foreign accounts and giving credit.²⁰ His subsequent complaint about the meagre information Burroughs sent back unsurprisingly irritated Burroughs, who by then was working hard in India, needed to cover a lot of ground and was desperate to receive samples. Unless Wellcome paid attention to his orders, he wrote, his work was 'nullified or destroyed', and he might as well have stayed at home and avoided the considerable expense of the trip. When he failed to hear from Wellcome for three months and no samples had been sent to Calcutta or Bombay, he wrote: 'It seems very discouraging to me after working hard and getting up a healthy demand for our goods that you pay no attention to my telegram for goods and thus throw cold water upon the enterprise.'²¹ This was a stern rebuke, but two months later he mellowed and addressed Wellcome as 'Dear old boy', sending greetings to a long list of their mutual friends.²²

His reply crossed with a 24-page letter from Wellcome: its tone was conciliatory but firm. He had written as he did with friendly motives and never in an 'offensive or dictatorial manner' and in turn had accepted when Burroughs had written plainly to him on several occasions noting his faults. They both knew each other's qualities well enough and did not need to exchange compliments. He was glad to know that Burroughs had intended to discover India thoroughly, that his costly telegram was unnecessary, and that he had not needed to repeat his advice about appointing agents but wanted figures and/or statements of facts, 'deeming it only proper that you should know the "whys and wherefores".'

To Burroughs's suggestion of bearing the expense of his voyage himself, he responded that he would 'positively never consent', although he agreed to being credited £2 per day, presumably for his extra workload.

And he denied saying anything that indicated that Burroughs had not worked most energetically: 'in fact I know full well that to canvass the towns in the brief time allowed by the brief stay of the Ceylon at each port would require mighty lively work' – a statement that sits at odds with his use of the expression elsewhere in the letter of 'pleasure trip'. While he acknowledged the difficulties of doing business in a proper manner when travelling, he asked why Burroughs had not used sailing time to write out full tabulated lists of doctors and chemists visited. And in emphatically pointing out how barren of profitable results the trip had been until India, he impressed on Burroughs the importance of changing tack and doing the rest of his trip thoroughly.

In our friendly acquaintance, and in our more intimate relations as partners you have never found me niggardly nor inclined to shrink my burdens – I have only a feeling of liberality towards you, I speak plainly and always shall – you have found me most severe face to face. ...

Sometimes my persistence may appear to you like conceit – but you cannot say that I am boastful ... You may not fully appreciate it but nevertheless it is a fact that if I had coincided with & put through all of your schemes for advertising, such as picture cards, show cards, handbills show cases etc we should have been in a tight squeeze long ago. You must more seriously consider that money is the motive power of business.²³

Burroughs in response also bared his soul:

You know I am rather impulsive ... perhaps too much given to saying and doing things in a hurry, and so may injure the feelings of others without any thought or wish to do so. ... True friends are not so many that one can afford to lose any, and I have for some time regarded you as my dearest and best and always true friend. It is therefore with regret and grief that I apprehend any lessening of the old friendship between us. If at any time I express myself strongly on any business matter, upon which we have different opinions, I hope you will not find in this any source for personal offence, but if I have given such occasion, I am very sorry, and ask your pardon for it, though you may be sure it has been an act of thoughtlessness on my part.

He went on to say that, after consideration, he agreed to short credits and the avoidance of foreign credits, concluding that Wellcome was right that this was the only safe policy, especially since the business was increasing faster than their capital. 'As this has been the bone of contention, we can now consider it disposed of thoroughly.'²⁴

The relationship had been patched up. Yet this exchange reveals how fundamentally the partners differed in their approach to work and relationships; this difference was entrenched. Wellcome's natural caution, his desire for statistics and evidence before taking decisions, and his more formal, severe – even lecturing – manner were completely at odds with the methods of Burroughs. Wellcome asserted that everything he had done had been for the good of the firm, and he could not be blamed for lost letters, misunderstandings and the rest. Burroughs, while recognising his tendency to be impulsive, did not push justification of his actions in the way Wellcome did and was more generous in apologising. His attitude remained one of warmth, the emphasis being on friendship rather than on 'friendly acquaintance'. Significantly, Wellcome's belief in money as the essential ingredient of a business was not entirely shared by Burroughs, who was strongly influenced by his faith and the poverty he witnessed on his travels; he had higher motives of being able to improve mankind's lot.

Their most serious difference of opinion arose out of discussions over their 1880 partnership agreement. This stated that the original distribution of profits (3/5ths to Burroughs and 2/5ths to Wellcome) could be amended at any time after two years if Wellcome's capital equalled that of Burroughs. Burroughs wanted Wellcome to postpone his claim to equal partnership until September 1884 and also that a 'verbal understanding' made previously between them concerning the purchase of Kepler shares be conditional on delaying this partnership change: 'I think this will be agreeable to you especially as the two years here referred to in agreement will be up [to] my return to London to talk it over,' wrote Burroughs. He completely misjudged how this would be received.²⁵ Unsurprisingly, Wellcome was not at all enthusiastic: he told him that he found the suggestion 'insulting' and had taken advice from a QC. He also pointed out that not only was Burroughs's agreement with Kepler out of date but he had never signed it and had no right to claim royalties under it. As for the delayed equal partnership, his fury was emphasised with much underlining:

I must express my very serious regret and chagrin at your proposal ... You know as positively and clearly as man can know any fact that I have worked as sincerely and devotedly

for the success of this business and have spared no effort and care to gain that end. You know that when the management fell into my hands the business was in such an entangled snarl that had you gone on in the old ways you would have been ruined. You know that as the result of my care and hard work the whole snarl has been cleared away. You know that the policy which was adopted by the firm under my management (though such policy was strongly opposed by you) has been thoroughly successful – while if the course urged by you had been carried out we should have been ruined and I have proved such to you in figures.

For good measure he added that, although Burroughs had worked hard, he had shared very little in the conduct and responsibilities of the firm, in particular handling the difficult negotiations with Kepler. 'You must not entertain the fallacious idea that you alone have made the success of BW&Co.' He concluded that he hoped that Burroughs would read and re-read his letter. 'I am very sorry that such a matter should arise between us for our relations have been unmarred by any serious misunderstanding but I cannot with any self-respect permit my rights in this matter to be treated as lightly as you seem to.' At best such differences were 'not pleasant'.

In spite of these words, Wellcome's letter enclosed a new draft agreement in which he offered to accept the delayed partnership arrangement until the following year – September 1883 – if by then he had made his capital equal. He had 'sacrificed' certain parts of his rights rather than endangering their relations by allowing differences to arise. It is not inconceivable, however, that this postponement actually suited Wellcome, who at this point did not have the funds to add to his capital and make it equal to that of Burroughs, a requisite of equal partnership.²⁶

Two weeks before Wellcome wrote this angry letter, Burroughs was in Adelaide, reacting with grief to the news of the death of his sister Emma, who, unwell for years, had died in April. His diary noted that he had written to 'dear old Wellcome' that morning before breakfast and in the evening received a long, most kind and friendly letter from him. 'I had great hope and joy in the Lord today.' After discussing Emma he reflected on his dealings with Wellcome and opened up his heart. He apologised for failing to write social letters, believing Wellcome would be too busy and not bothered about this, taking for granted that their friendship and mutual regard was understood. 'In future we will be

as brothers ... Let me hear soon of your forgiveness and the renewed confidence and dear friendship of the old days. ... Ever your friend and Brother – Maineville.²⁷

Soon he wrote again in a more cheerful, almost flippant vein, invigorated undoubtedly by his marriage proposal to Olive and his move to Melbourne:

Hope you will write and tell me all about your trip and visit and flirtations if you ever should go for anything of the kind. I think we once started what we called a little flirtation which ended as such affairs sometimes do. I was smitten of course as I might have expected but as you were not it ends in a friendship that is very dear to me and which I hope will grow deeper and stronger as the years go by. I mean to write to you again by the next mail. Hope you'll do as much for me.

Your affectionate old bean, M.²⁸

It is hard to know how to read this intriguing reference to 'the little flirtation': does this refer to the relationship with a third party or between the two of them? If the latter, then it indicates that Burroughs's feelings for Wellcome were quite deep and Wellcome's for him less so and is evidence that Burroughs's desire that Wellcome join his firm was based on a very close friendship as well as being a business decision. Although more letters from Wellcome remain than from Burroughs, Wellcome sometimes repeated the latter's comments. Burroughs wrote in haste, often changing his mind as soon as he had written; Wellcome's letters have been given more thought and are carefully worded, the impression being that they were penned with an eye to the future when they might be produced in evidence.

When the SS *Ceylon* returned to Southampton from her world cruise in August 1882, with Burroughs still being abroad, a curious Wellcome took the trouble to go and look her over. Christmas gifts were exchanged: Wellcome said he would always treasure his fine writing desk and slippers, and Burroughs received a magnificent travelling trunk. Early in 1883, on his return from America, Wellcome reported to Burroughs on their many mutual friends who enquired very specially after him and took pains to congratulate him on all his hard work, complimenting him on the style of an advertisement and an 'exceedingly well written' communication for *The Lancet* in March 1883; Wellcome reckoned they did Burroughs 'much credit' and sent copies to Wyeths and the Burroughs family. When Burroughs planned to return from Australia

via America, Wellcome considered a further visit there, where together they could attend the American Pharmaceutical Association meeting in Washington or meet up in New York or Medina. In the event, a fire in the firm's offices in the Saracen's Head inn and delays to the building works at Snow Hill persuaded him to cancel this trip.²⁹

Despite all these efforts to smooth over their differences, more discord arose in the autumn of 1883. Burroughs's ambitions for the firm were as bold as ever; he wanted the best firm and the best headquarters in London. That included customer service, and he placed great importance on achieving the highest standards. So he was furious when he thought that Wellcome had been negligent in completing orders and had written imprudent letters to customers – thereby causing some reputational damage. Back came Wellcome's riposte, condemning Burroughs's 'thoughtless impertinencies ... You treat me as if I were one of the errand boys of the house to deliver your messages ... These rash expressions do not harmonize well with the opening clause of your letter wherein you manifest a desire that nothing shall mar our cordial relations.'³⁰ Burroughs's irritation mounted when he discovered that Wellcome had not paid attention to his letters from Australia regarding Eucalyptia, although Wellcome had said he could see some potential for it. As things turned out, Eucalyptine, produced the following year, was to become a popular product of the firm.

In late 1883, uncertain when Burroughs would return, Wellcome nevertheless planned a reception for him. It was from their mutual friends the Terrys that he was to learn that Burroughs had arranged his passage on the steamer from America. He now looked forward to their meeting – the first for over two years – when they could 'discuss things verbally and communicate much better than by letter.' For their part, Wellcome's letters betray a range of emotions at this time: on the one hand, keen to have Burroughs home to discuss matters; on the other, displaying an underlying nervousness about their changed relationship and its implications for both of them and for the firm. 'I am very anxious for your return,' he wrote, yet went on to add: 'but there is no urgency.'

Ahead of their meeting he wrote Burroughs a very long letter, covering business but focusing on personal matters; it was one of unusual frankness and openness. He hoped to be able to attend Burroughs's wedding, while reiterating that he was more than likely to become an old bachelor looking at Burroughs's fireplace with envy. Maybe Burroughs could find a suitable woman for him? Was this a serious suggestion, or, more likely, was Wellcome attempting to elicit sympathy and renew the old friendship? An apprehensive Wellcome admitted some of his own

failings and uncertainties. The last two years had been long ones for him, as he had not been able to discuss issues with Burroughs and had had to rely on his own judgement. He was anxious that Burroughs should recognise that no difference of opinion between them had for a moment ever changed his feelings from the warmest and sincerest friendship and hoped that this would continue.

‘On reflection’, he wrote, ‘I sometimes think I am too angular and that I take too much liberty in criticizing my friends in a manner that they regard as severe & unkind. I fear that I have sometimes [?treated] you in this way.’ He emphasised how hard he had been working, starting his letter with a pronouncement that his health was good, but ending it by declaring that he was fatigued, with a nervous weakness and needed a complete change.³¹

Other letters followed in which Wellcome justified his neglect in writing sooner on business matters because he thought it best to wait until Burroughs returned, and, besides, Burroughs overlooked his letters and rarely answered them. Further criticism ensued:

While you are excessively sensitive yourself, you unintentionally but very often do say things which cause others a good deal of pain ... I say the above as a friend to a friend whom I love with all my heart and with a hope that you may give it more than a passing thought. For your own happiness as well as for the happiness of our friends you must think more carefully before you speak – wait & consider both sides ... I sincerely hoped that this long voyage around the world would prove to you how much easier life could be passed by avoiding friction – haste makes waste and a deal of unhappiness. ... You may rest assured that whether referred to or not in my letters everything you write is carefully read, weighed and considered. I have sometimes wondered if you ever carefully read my letters.³²

Hurt sensibilities and resentments surface, almost as though they were the squabbles of a married couple! Their see-saw relationship by correspondence continued. Burroughs responded regarding Wellcome’s health: ‘I am very glad to read in the beginning of it your comfortable health and sorry that at the time of closing it that you are suffering from another attack of prostration. Dear old fellow you have had enough on hand to tire you out. You have had such labours & responsibilities to

tackle and then the discouragement of my unreasonable fault finding besides. I know you have done your best and am satisfied with everything you have done.²³³

Such friendly words were all too soon replaced by stern ones, once again over their partnership agreement, although this time the context had changed and Burroughs provoked their next disagreement. Concerned that it would be difficult for him to leave America before the spring because of his aunt's health, and aware that Wellcome needed help, Burroughs now suggested that John van Schaak should become Wellcome's assistant. John was the son of Peter van Schaak, an old business and social friend of Wellcome from his time in Chicago, and his son had joined him in business. Burroughs also knew them both and reckoned that Wellcome would be pleasantly surprised with arrangements he had discussed with John, whereby the latter would be involved at a senior level in their business on the continent, holding out an inducement of partnership in the main business. 'He seems to be just the man to assist you in carrying out important details which you have not time to attend to owing to the growth of the business.'²³⁴

Predictably, Wellcome angrily rebutted the whole scheme: he did not need another partner or a representative on the continent and should have been consulted. John might be clever and active, but he was 'in no way suited to our business'. Burroughs had placed him in a very awkward situation, since John was also his friend, and it would be difficult to extract himself from such a compromising agreement. He added: 'I look upon partnership as next to matrimony in serious importance and there are very few men in this world I would associate myself with as a partner ... I am afraid that you have been somewhat indiscreet in holding out a partnership – I am quite certain that you did it thoughtlessly and without intent to do me an injustice ... It seems to me that you have too light a view of partnership matters.'²³⁵

Although Burroughs's agreement with John was conditional on Wellcome's willingness to accept it, he undoubtedly overstepped the mark in acting in this high-handed way without prior consultation. It demonstrated a failure on his part to appreciate Wellcome's contribution to the firm in his absence, still regarding him as a junior partner and subordinate. Wellcome insisted that Burroughs withdraw from the arrangement and tell John there was no opening for him. In the event a compromise was reached: John came over to England and Wellcome admitted that he had much improved. After discussions John agreed to

join the firm without the encouragement of a partnership: he worked for BW&Co. on the continent for a period before returning to the US. Fortunately, friendship with the van Schaak family was retained.

By the end of 1883 a great deal of business needed to be discussed. With Burroughs still in America, Wellcome determined to sail there as soon as possible and meet him in Medina. Burroughs almost certainly dissuaded him, since Wellcome instead spent the winter in Spain, leaving the steadfast Sudlow to manage the firm. Burroughs married Olive on 2 January 1884, and the couple left New York on the SS *Gallia* on 14 February. He had been away for nearly two and a half years.³⁶

Burroughs's absence abroad was an astonishingly long period for the business. Undoubtedly his world tour was hugely successful, but it created more than simply a physical distance between the partners. During that time both men had developed and changed: each of them had, in a sense, been able to carry out their work with some independence. Their first serious difference of opinion came with the suggestion of a revised partnership agreement. Irritations and angry exchanges kept surfacing, only to be repeatedly patched up. The London office meanwhile became accustomed to working with Wellcome, and a pattern was set for the future when the partners would increasingly take turns in being absent from the office. The fundamental personal and business reasons which caused disagreement between them were not likely to be resolved with Burroughs's return to London. Quite the contrary, they would reappear in the future.