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## FROM CHAPEL HILL

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### A celebration

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1983 marks the centenary of the birth of one of the most remarkable American general practitioners. William Carlos Williams was many things to many people during his life and his stature has grown since his death in 1963. He practised medicine in a small working class town in Northern New Jersey, spending most of his life at 9 Ridge Road, Rutherford, New Jersey—an address particularly important as a centre of art and literature for the avant garde of the 1920s and 1930s. Williams deserves honour, not merely for the enormous energy he applied to his work, and his support of the most important cultural movement in America in the early 20th century, but also for his tenacity and commitment to his patients—he practised full-time for over 40 years while continuing to write his poetry and prose. It is this dedication that makes him unusual in the history of physician-writers.



Photo: Irving Wellcome

William Carlos Williams

FROM his youth he was surrounded by literature and artists but chose to practise in a working class community in the midst of the depression both from his desire to serve people who needed it the most, and in his need to be near New York City with its art and ideas. His roommate in college was Ezra Pound with whom he carried on a lifetime of correspondence, continuing to visit Pound in St Elizabeth's mental hospital in Washington during Pound's confinement after the Second World War.

Williams' home was a centre of the American avant garde, with visitors such as Stieglitz, Man Ray, Charles De Muth, Marsden Hartley, John Marin and Marcel Duchamp. Williams edited and contributed to most of the short-lived but important literary journals in the 1920s and 1930s. During this time, he continued to produce poetry that, 50 years later, was to be accepted by many as the most important and influential voice in American poetry in this century. He was a man who, despite continuing contact with the literary lights of his age, drew his language from the words of his patients, from their pain and joy. He said, 'The physician

enjoys a wonderful opportunity actually to witness the words being born. The actual colours and shapes are laid before him carrying their tiny burdens which he is privileged to take into his care with their unspoiled newness. . . . No one else is present but the speaker and ourselves—we have been the words' very parents. Nothing is more moving.'

While Williams' international reputation is based primarily on his poetry, his views of medicine and the life of the doctor can best be seen in his short stories and novels. He used and fiercely defended the American idiom against the much larger influence of Eliot and Pound. His poetry was rejected as simple and unsophisticated. Yet he worked into the night, between patients, writing stories which are classics of American realism, full of the despair that pervaded medicine in the pre-antibiotic era. His stories of urban immigrant America during the long depression would rival the grimmest stories from Victorian London. He spent his life trying to tell, to explain, to get others to understand that while the life of art and medicine was exhilarating, full of energy and ideas, it was not elegiac but hard and mean; a fearsome place where sensitive men went only at great peril; a place lurking with cynicism and despair.

He delivered babies, watched children die of meningitis from suppurative otitis, made house calls in the tenements of urban America, all the time recording his thoughts on scraps of paper, prescription pads, or the typewriter in his office.

His stories are like transcribed conversations with his patients. His sharp, clean language contrasts markedly with the ornate allusional and highly footnoted poetry of the imagists of Europe. His stories are simple line drawings, yet full of rich surprises and tenderness. Reading Williams is like reading the thoughts of someone who is too busy to stop and explain, who wants to tell you but has no time for questions. It is almost unimaginable that a busy solo practitioner could have worked as hard at medicine as he did and still have produced the body of literature that he did. To read Williams is to understand that it would have been impossible for him not to have done both.

In his autobiography, Williams said of medicine and poetry, 'One occupation complements the other . . . they are two parts of a whole, . . . they are not two jobs at all . . . one rests the man when the other fatigues him.'

For an overview of Williams' stories, read *The Farmers Daughters: The Collected Stories of William Carlos Williams* and *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* both published by New Directions Books, New York.