

# Han Suyin

Family doctor, author, and a bridge between China and the West

**Han Suyin, family doctor (b circa 1917, q University of London 1948), died after a lengthy illness at home in Lausanne, Switzerland, on 2 November 2012.**

During the 1950s in Malaysia her patients addressed her as either Dr Chow, her Chinese surname, or as Dr Comber, her British husband's surname. In literary circles and in Hollywood she was known by the pen name Han Suyin, author of the 1952 bestselling novel *A Many-Splendoured Thing*, adapted in 1955 into an Oscar winning tearjerker and love story starring William Holden.

## Novels and family medicine

Despite her literary fame and financial success, Han continued through the 1950s to practise family medicine in the Malaysian city of Johor Bahru, part of the Singapore metropolitan area. Most of her patients were illiterate and did not know she was a famous author, says Tan Chow-Wei, a senior lecturer in family medicine at the Malaysia campus of Australia's Monash University. "She was not well known for her writings in Johor Bahru, except among the English educated," he says.

Han, whose father was Chinese and mother Belgian, could speak to patients in Chinese, Malay, English, or French, says Tan, who has studied Han's history at the local Chinese Heritage Museum and describes himself as "an ardent fan."

"She was based in Johor Bahru for about 10 years and practised general medicine, with special interest in tuberculosis, which was endemic at that time," Tan says. "Writing was her hobby and passion and eventually overcame her, and she decided to quit practising medicine."

Han published two additional novels while still practising medicine in Johor Bahru. By the early 1960s she had left Malaysia and medicine to focus on lecturing worldwide and writing novels, autobiographies, and historical studies of China.

She travelled freely in and out of communist China at a time when many Westerners were banned from entering, acting as a bridge of understanding between the East and West. She personally knew communist leaders Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, writing biographies of both that some felt were too laudatory. In the 1970s she was criticised for appearing to support Mao's Cultural Revolution, during



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**"Doctors are granted the veneration and treated with the awe once received by seers and priests. As a consequence our lust for power is phenomenal. Imagine how corrupting it must be to hold sway over life and death"**

which at least hundreds of thousands died. She later distanced herself from that position. "I write as an Asian, with all the pent-up emotions of my people," she once commented. "What I say will annoy many people who prefer the more conventional myths brought back by writers on the Orient. All I can say is that I try to tell the truth. Truth, like surgery, may hurt, but it cures."

## "All Eurasians want to become doctors"

Han was born Rosalie Matilda Kuanghu Chou, most likely in Xinyang in the province of Henan on 12 September 1917. As a child she adopted the first name Elizabeth. Her Chinese father, a railway engineer, met her mother while studying in Belgium. As a so called "Eurasian" child in Beijing, Han attended Chinese and Catholic missionary schools.

She sometimes felt discriminated against by Chinese classmates but nonetheless favoured her Chinese side. When she announced that she wanted to be a doctor her mother, unhappy in China, laughed and told her, "All Eurasians want to become doctors. It's their road to social acceptance."

At 17 she enrolled at Yenching University in Beijing to study medicine, and in 1935 she

received a scholarship to continue studies in Brussels. Returning to China by ship in 1938, she met Tang Pao-Huang, a young military officer aligned with Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist party. They married in Wuhan days before it fell to the Japanese military and fled with Chiang Kai-shek inland to Chongqing, where she worked as a midwife in a US missionary hospital.

Encouraged by a missionary doctor, she wrote the story of her perilous journeys with Pao, which was published in 1942 as the novel *Destination Chungking*. That same year she travelled with her husband to London, where he was posted as military attaché. When he moved on to Washington, she remained in London with her daughter and resumed medical training at the Royal Free Hospital. Pao died in 1947, fighting communist forces in China.

After qualifying in 1948 at the University of London, Han moved to Hong Kong, where she worked in a hospital. She fell in love with Ian Morrison, a married Australian war correspondent for the *Times* who died in 1950 covering the Korean war. The heartbroken Han began writing about their love affair, resulting in the highly autobiographical *A Many-Splendoured Thing*.

The novel is narrated in first person by a character named Dr Han Suyin, who occasionally makes observations about medicine, such as, "Doctors are granted the veneration and treated with the awe once received by seers and priests. As a consequence our lust for power is phenomenal. Imagine how corrupting it must be to hold sway over life and death. We are all megalomaniacs."

In 1952 Han married Leon Comber and moved to Malaysia, where he was a senior officer in the Commonwealth's Malayan special branch during the so called Malayan emergency. They divorced in 1958, but for the rest of her life her passport name remained Elizabeth K C Comber, with K C standing for her Chinese surnames.

In 1960 Han married Vincent Ratnaswamy, an Indian colonel whom she had met on a trip to Nepal. They lived in Bangalore, then later in Hong Kong and Switzerland. He died in 2003. Han leaves a daughter, a granddaughter, and two great grandchildren.

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## John Stephens Bryden

**Public health consultant (b 1932; q Glasgow 1956; MSc, Dip Soc Med, FRCP, FFPH, FBCS), d 18 July 2012.**

After national service John Stephens Bryden worked in clinical medicine in orthopaedics and general practice and developed an interest in using optical character reading in patient identification. He became medical superintendent at the Royal Alexandra Infirmary in Paisley and chief administrative medical officer of the new Argyll and Clyde Health Board. From 1973 to 1981 he led a health informatics team from four health boards, which developed the community health index (CHI, now used throughout Scotland). An active member of the British Computer Society, John attended many European and world conferences as a chairman, speaker, and organiser and brought European health informatics to Glasgow in 1990. He leaves his wife, Grace; three children; and seven grandchildren.

**Grace Bryden**

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## William Armitage Hutchinson



**General practitioner Leven, East Yorkshire (b 1940; q Leeds 1965), died from lymphoma on 4 October 2012.**

William Armitage Hutchinson ("Bill") was a descendant of Sir Jonathan Hutchinson, a former editor of the *BMJ*. He enjoyed working as a GP and allied this with occasional anaesthetics at Beverley Westwood Hospital and work for the local flying doctor service. A firm believer in home visiting, he once trekked several miles in deep snow to deliver a baby. Outside work Bill enjoyed walking, skiing, bird watching, and spending time with his family. He leaves his wife, Mary; four children; and seven grandchildren.

**Tom Hutchinson, Ian Jollie, David Belbin**

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## John McCrae



**General practitioner Catrine, Ayrshire (b 1915; q Glasgow 1939; CBE), d 17 July 2012.**

John McCrae joined the Royal Army Medical Corps in 1940 and served in India. He met Eileen, a quality assurance nurse, at Ranchi, and they were married in 1943. After the war he became a GP partner in Catrine and developed into an outstanding leader of the local GP community. Chairman of the local medical committee from 1965 to 1974, he was also active in BMA politics, serving as chairman of Scottish Council from 1972 to 1975 and of the national medical consultative committee from 1974 to 1979. He was awarded the CBE in recognition of this service. Predeceased by Eileen and by their eldest daughter, John leaves a son; two daughters; six grandchildren; and four great grandchildren.

**David Watts**

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## Tessa Caroline Miller



**Former general practitioner (b 1954; q London Hospital 1979), died from leukaemia on 4 May 2012.**

After house jobs in medicine and surgery and senior house officer positions in paediatrics, accident and emergency medicine, and obstetrics and gynaecology, Tessa Caroline Miller (previously Moriarty, née Knott) joined our training practice in Cheadle Hulme, Cheshire. She spent the following 14 years as a full time GP, then two years as a part time GP, in a neighbouring practice in Heald

Green, Cheshire, the latter two years combined with an associate specialist position in psychiatry at Cheadle Royal Hospital. After a career break and a move to Devon, Tessa became a specialty doctor in palliative care at St Luke's Hospice Plymouth in 2007. She leaves her husband, John; a large family; and many friends.

**Peter Dootson**

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## John Barnes Spargo



**Former general practitioner Worthing, Sussex (b 1927; q 1950), died from myasthenia gravis and prostate cancer on 26 September 2012.**

John Barnes Spargo was educated at Charterhouse and studied medicine at Cambridge and St Mary's Hospital London. After house appointments at the National Temperance Hospital and two years' national service in the Royal Air Force, he joined his father in law in practice in Worthing in 1955. He had a mixed NHS and private practice and was medical officer to Ramsay Hall, a Church of England home for retired clergy and their wives. He was singlehanded for the 25 years until he retired. He enjoyed golf in his spare time. He leaves his wife, Wendy; four children; 14 grandchildren; and two great grandchildren.

**Peter Spargo**

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## Jean Struthers

**Former consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist (b 1928; q Glasgow 1954; MD, FRCOG), d 24 September 2012**

Jean Struthers is probably best remembered as a consultant at the Royal Alexandra Hospital in Paisley, and even a few weeks before her death, she was still being recognised and remembered as "the doctor who brought me into the world." In



1988 she became the first woman president of the Glasgow Obstetrical and Gynaecological Society. On her retirement, Jean finally found the time to engage in her love of painting and photography. She took the opportunity to travel around the world as well as spending time in her beloved North Uist. She leaves Colin, her husband of 23 years.

**Colin Paxton**

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## Bryan Frederick Warren



**Professor of gastrointestinal pathology Oxford (b 1958; q Liverpool 1981; MRCP), died from metastatic colorectal cancer on 28 March 2012.**

At the age of 6 Bryan Frederick Warren developed Crohn's disease, which was to influence his life, shape his career, and eventually bring about his premature death. During his training he was already establishing himself as an international expert in the pathology of inflammatory bowel disease, writing seminal papers in gastrointestinal pathology. He also remained involved in the clinical management of his patients and had a passion for teaching and training, as well as being active in many specialty societies. He set up the Bosnian British School of Pathology to provide training for pathologists in that war torn country. Bryan accomplished many of his achievements while he already had cancer. He leaves his wife, Tracy, and two stepchildren.

**Steve Hughes**

**Howard Rigby**

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