Hal Downey

1877-1959

Hal Downey was one of the foremost hematologists of our age. Soon after his death on January 9, 1959, at the age of 81, a colleague wrote from Seattle: “. . . This is the day when a loyal friend and great student of anatomy is laid to rest. . . . We will not see his like again, but we can still be inspired by his devotion to the things we held dear and above price . . .” (E. A. Boyden). Prof. Downey trained hundreds of students who now carry on his work all over the world. He regarded the search for truth as more important than the possession of it, and he continued that search until a few days before his death. His last scientific paper reports his attempt to produce cancer cells in rats by means of tobacco tar (Surgery 1959, in press).

He was born in State College, Pennsylvania on October 4, 1877. His father was a mathematician who served as Dean of the Academic College, University of Minnesota. His mother was a singer. As a boy, he studied for six years in Hannover, Germany. As soon as he had become fluent in German, he was admitted to the Hannover Real-gymnasium. Since his teachers there were all men with Ph. D. degrees, his early experience must have been a major factor in his cultural and professional growth. Back in Minneapolis, he finished High School in 1 ½ years. He enlisted for the Spanish-American war, and served in the Philippines in Co. A of the 13th Minnesota Volunteer Infantry, 1898/99. He was graduated from the University of Minnesota in 1903, and was granted the Master’s degree in Zoology in 1904.

In 1905 he was married to Iva Clare Mitchell whom he had met at the University. Her gifts included drama and creative writing. She appreciated his unique talents and always endeavored to give him ample time for his scientific work. Their three children, Phyllis, Richard and Jean, were graduated from the University of Minnesota; Phyllis as a medical technologist, Richard as an electrical engineer and Jean as a home economist.

The interest in hematology grew out of his study of the urogenital organs in a Mississippi-river fish with many primitive characteristics, the Spoon-bill Sturgeon, Polyedon spathula. He found that in this species the kidney is the chief hematopoietic organ (Ph. D. dissertation, Folia haemat. 8: 415-466, 1909).

Hal and Mrs. Downey lived and studied in Germany in 1910/11. He was in Pappenheim’s laboratory at the University of Berlin in 1910 and with Weidenreich at the Institute of Anatomy in Strassburg in 1911. Except for this period abroad, he was continuously an active member of the staff at the University of Minnesota from 1903 to 1946. He was Professor of Zoology in 1929, the time when he became Professor of Anatomy. After his retirement in 1946, he lectured for two years at the Mayo Clinics and Foundation. Thereafter, he kept busy in his office in the Department of Anatomy, up to the Christmas holidays of 1958/59. From 1913 to 1959, except during World Wars 1 and 2, he served continuously as American Editor of the Folia haemat., Leipzig. His scientific publications include 45 definitive contributions and many abstracts and critical reviews. He edited a Handbook of Hematology, 1938. He contributed Chap. 16 (Monocytic Leucemia and Leucemie Reticulo-endotheliosis) and Chap. 25 (The Myeloblast).
He received many honors. The Regents of the University of Minnesota granted him the Outstanding Achievement Award in 1951. The Minnesota Chapter of the Society of the Sigma Xi gave him its Distinguished Service Award in 1957: “... You have given this University fame in hematology . . . Although your world-renowned paper on infectious mononucleosis describing the cells which now bear your name is known for its correlation of critical morphologic detail with clinical conditions, many other prophetic contributions on reticular and lymphatic tissues as well as on all types of blood cells are the foundations for much active research...”. The Durban Medical School of the University of Natal, South Africa, established the Hal Downey Laboratory of Hematology. Katsuji Kato’s Atlas of Hematology in 2 volumes is “respectfully and affectionately dedicated to Hal Downey...”. Prof. Downey was an honorary Fellow of the International Society of Hematology and of the European Society of Haematology. The world will find knowledge, data, the earliest experiments in many of the morphologic phases of hematology, incomparable reviews of literature and superb illustrations in Dr. Downey’s publications. Those who studied under him, including hundreds of freshman medical students of histology, will recall that his lectures even upon seemingly static subjects were philosophical and inquiring. He did not carry lecture notes; he thought checking attendance insulting to both student and professor. His students in hematology would attend his lectures on the same subjects for many consecutive years if possible, for always something new was added. He loved best to teach in the laboratory, but here he would let the student flounder for just the appropriate length of time (a pipeful) because he firmly believed that the student would profit more from his initial struggle for understanding than from a rapid clarification of the problem.

The world will correctly say he was a scholar, but it is doubtful that the world can ever find in Dr. Downey’s publications the essence of the man. Perhaps that essence was gentleness, personal humility, intellectuality, humor and a certain horror of poor histological technique (“histological garbage”) and slip-shod scientific contributions of any type. His alert and sparkling brown eyes almost always betrayed a quiet amusement with, as well as a sincere concern for, the activities of cells or people. He never forgot what either did. His students were his colleagues not his underlings; he worked for them though they did not know it. He never stopped elevating the spirits and stature of his associates or visitors, yet how he did this only those who knew him could say.

He began his work in hematology in Minnesota when many still thought platelets were parasites on red cells. This he often admitted with a grin which indicated that he had managed to discover and teach a few things, but he more often confessed that once he forgot about malarial parasites and missed them in a blood film. Another consoling and human confession was the one he generally offered his doctoral candidates on the eve of their dreaded preliminary examinations. He claimed he had been asked at his own doctoral examination to name the cells of the blood. He had been incensed at the question, but he found he had to be asked to name them several times before he “got around to remembering the red cells.” If he could comment upon what is written here, he would probably smile modestly and offer some clever anecdote designed to shift attention from himself.

Attention will never shift from Hal Downey. His memory will hold, his contributions to knowledge stand through time, his students carry on his work. These glories we remember at each moment of sorely missing the man.
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