Obituary

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In Memory of Arthur Rook

S.C.

Gold

London

Dr. S. Gold, British Association of Dermatologists, 3 St. Andrew's Place, Regents Park, London, NW1 4LB (UK)

Arthur James Rook died on July 30th, 1991, aged 73 years, having battled valiantly for more than 10 years against Parkinson's disease. His wife's illness to be fatal 10 months earlier must have taken a tremendous toll on his spirit, but seemingly even during this difficult time his brain remained agile, perceptive and eager.

Arthur Rook was a remarkable man, to many the greatest figure in British dermatology since the demise of his own mentors, Geoffrey Dowling and Hugh Wallace. A veritable ambassador for the specialty, he was acknowledged and respected throughout the world yet he remained totally untarnished by fame and honours, his quiet modesty and twinkling good humour being ever present.

He was born the elder child of a brilliant businessman, someone who was to become Churchill's nominee for masterminding sugar supplies to the embattled British nation during Hitler's war. Arthur was brought up in a privileged and cultured environment which was to nurture his agile mind. Privately educated he went to Cambridge University where he, at the last minute, decided to change from studying modern languages, at which he was already proficient, to medicine, a step which to the average student, without a scientific base, would present problems; this hurdle was negotiated speedily. From Cambridge he went to St Thomas's Hospital Medical School in war-time London for his clinical studies to be followed, on qualification, by 3 years National Service in the Royal Air Force.

Back as a civilian he returned to St Thomas's to study in the department which was to become the forcing ground for so many of the outstanding clinicians in the post-war era. There were Sweet and Wilkinson, Ian Whimster, the pathologist, and many others, all to be stimulated, educated and trained by the sparkling energy of Hugh Wallace and the wise experience of the 'headmaster', Geoffrey Dowling.

Arthur Rook made two major contributions in those formative years; the first was to define kerato-acanthoma,

a study he undertook jointly with Whimster, and the second was to clarify the pemphigoid group of conditions. The latter were already stimulating interest in France with Tzanck and then Civatte working in the same field of bullous eruptions. Rook had spent 6 months at the St Louis Hospital in Paris and with his fluent French was to remain an ardent Francophile throughout his life.

Indeed he admired greatly the precision of the French morphologists, a feature which endeared him to H.W. Barber, that brilliant individualist at Guy's and another Francophile.

Three short years as a consultant in Cardiff were to be followed by the move to Cambridge and Addenbrooke's Hospital; this was to provide the base for the rest of his professional life.

Addenbrooke's was being rebuilt so he was able to help design a spacious new suite, quite splendid in comparison with the pathetic departments elsewhere in Britain. Now his industry, his

learning and erudition were to lead to the development of his teaching skills. The postgraduates who came to Cambridge all enthused about his experience, clarity of thought and knowledge of the literature, but above all he was a human, thoughtful and kindly physician.

His organizing ability, a gene inherited from his illustrious father, enabled him to arrange the famous courses at Cambridge, linking Biological Sciences with Clinical Dermatology. This was a totally novel concept and was responsible for a changing attitude in many of those who hitherto had considered the subject unworthy of their interest! These courses continue to flourish.

His greatest achievement is without doubt the textbook which first appeared in 1968, jointly edited by D.S. Wilkinson, an erstwhile colleague from St Thomas's, and F.J. Ebling, the zoologist. The 'Rook Book' as it is affectionately known has just reached its fifth edition. His skill here was to assemble a team of first-class collaborators, to plan, to cajole but above all to lead by example. He was truly a 'circus ringmaster', but one who performed himself! In early editions much of the text was from his pen. Writing came easily, his style was clear and pleasing, his memory for the literature phenomenal, and being an avid reader his storehouse of knowledge could compete with any modern computer! Articles and books flowed, and he sought as eagerly to edit many other larger works. For 5 years he was the Editor of the British Journal of Dermatology, and its fortunes were transformed under his guidance.

His interests did not end here. History of medicine intrigued him as did history of dermatology. For a time he was the Willan Librarian at the Royal College of Physicians in London. Most recently he has been involved in writing, with two co-authors, the history of Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge; it has happily been completed. A splendid library enabled this bibliophile to enjoy and to profit from studying his favoured subjects; it can be no surprise to learn that he was a naturalist and an enthusiastic ornithologist.

Cambridge was a good environment for Arthur Rook. He lived happily with his growing family in the city before moving further out to the countryside into a moated Essex farmhouse. When the family had grown up and when health problems were assailing both himself and his beloved wife, he returned to Cambridge. His three sons – a farmer, an immunologist and a lawyer – had produced a fine cluster of children to fascinate and delight their grandparents.

On December 7th, 1991, a memorial service in the chapel of Trinity College, Cambridge, his alma mater, attracted an astonishing array of colleagues who came from far and wide to salute and respect this remarkable man.

S.C. Gold, London