Ronan O’Rahilly 1921–2018: A Personal Remembering

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Ronan O’Rahilly, who had been one of the two Editors-in-Chief of *Acta Anatomica* (now *Cells Tissues Organs* or *CTO*) from 1981 till 1988, passed away on June 24, 2018. With him, we lost one of the most eminent embryologists of our time, a dedicated morphologist, a meticulous researcher, and a person of exceptionally wide knowledge. On a personal note, I may add that he was also a dear friend. When I started working for this journal in 1992/1993, Ronan was kind enough to provide me with his advice based on his experience with editing, and, over the years, an extensive correspondence developed while Ronan watched the development of the journal and commented on it. I must admit that I was not always able to satisfy him completely with what I did, in particular regarding questions about the appropriate use of the English language in the journal. An Editorial by Ronan was already famous at that time and was perhaps hated by certain authors [O’Rahilly, 1988]; in this paper, he not only reminded authors of the importance of using idiomatic English so that the thoughts they wished to express could indeed be understood exactly as they might have been meant, but he also insisted, e.g., in sticking to the official international anatomical terminology (*Nomina anatomica*), in using Latin correctly (the genitive case, in particular), and in caring about accents and diacritical marks in words taken from other languages and in authors’ names. This was at the time when *Acta Anatomica*

still used to accept contributions in English, German, French, as well as Italian, and it was only later on that we restricted language use to English. Ronan was able to come up with acidic comments on texts that were written in improper language. Some of the people working in the Publishing House may still remember how challenging it was to try meeting his high standards of quality publishing. Also typical for Ronan was the fact that, with regard to scientific correctness and clarity, he insisted that authors pointed out (in the title, abstract, or keywords of their articles) which species was studied in order to avoid unjustified extrapolation to the human.

Within the broader scientific community Ronan O’Rahilly is probably best known for the books he published together with his wife, Fabiola Müller: notably the classic, unsurpassed comprehensive reference on the developmental stages of human embryos [O’Rahilly and Müller, 1987] and their textbook *Human Embryology and Teratology* [O’Rahilly and Müller, 2001], as well as their impressive series of original publications on the morphology of human embryo development, which are based on their investigations scrutinizing the specimens of the Carnegie Collection. *Acta Anatomica/CTO* can be proud of having published a large number of these papers. A complete list of his publications as well as an obituary can be found online [Young et al., 2018].

In 2001 a symposium was held in Freiburg/Fribourg (Switzerland), where Ronan had moved from the USA together with Fabiola after his retirement, in order to celebrate his 80th birthday, and the contributions to this symposium were published in a special volume [Rager and Holderegger, 2003]. Besides essays on recent developments in experimental embryology and stem cell research and their ethical relevance, this book contains a chapter by Günter Rager describing important stations of Ronan's life in detail [see also Rager, 2019]. I had met Ronan first in 1981 in Davis (CA, USA) when I spent a sabbatical there, and I still enjoy remembering how I visited him and Fabiola often in the building where the Carnegie Collection was housed at that time, i.e., a fire-resistant barrack-like construction, located about half-way between the two places where I used to work, the university campus and the California Primate Research Center, in the middle of tomato fields. In front of that lab building, under an enormous tree, he and Fabiola enjoyed having lunch in the warm Californian climate together

with visitors, some of them usually coming all the way from the university clinics in Sacramento. One time, Ronan would ask us to step inside, and he gave us a lecture on the architecture of Gothic churches in France; he was an admirable expert in that field, too.

As curator of the Carnegie Collection, and as the person who has probably most extensively and carefully studied these unique specimens (together with Fabiola Müller), Ronan O'Rahilly has intensely contemplated the ethics of using human embryos as research objects, including the question of how early or late individual life might begin. The motto Ronan and Fabiola had chosen for the frontispiece of their textbook on human embryology [O'Rahilly and Müller, 2001] illustrates this well:

It is to be remembered that at all stages the embryo is a living organism, that is, it is a going concern with adequate mechanisms for its maintenance as of that time.

C.H. Heuser and G.L. Streeter [1941]

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