

George Brownlee (1911-2010)

George Brownlee [GB], Emeritus Professor of Pharmacology at King's College, London and Honorary Fellow of the BPS died at the age of 98 on 19 May at Oxford. With his death, we lose a precious link with the early years and founding fathers of the BPS. He will be remembered by many former students and colleagues.

GB did not have a privileged start in life. He left school at 15, and began a four-year apprenticeship in a pharmacy in Edinburgh in 1926, studying part time at Heriot Watt College. He went on to degree studies at Glasgow University in 1932, and graduated BSc in Pharmacy in 1936. He had joined the Pharmaceutical Society's register as a pharmacist in 1935, and was awarded a Rammell Scholarship for research which enabled him to move to London after graduation in 1936 to work on "biological standardisation" under J. H. Burn in the Pharmacological Laboratories of the Pharmaceutical Society. (These Laboratories has been founded in 1926, under the direction of Dr J. H. Burn, who went on to become Professor of Pharmacology and Dean of what became The School of Pharmacy, London University, and into which the Society's college and laboratories were subsumed).

GB completed his PhD in 1939, and moved to the Wellcome Research Laboratories in Beckenham where he spent 10 years, becoming Head of the Chemotherapeutic Division.

GB was an early member of the BPS, joining in 1943, serving on the committee from 1946-1947, and then acting as secretary from 1947-1952. Thus, it is no surprise that he became acquainted with the leading pharmacologists of the time, including J. H. Gaddum, E. Bulbring and W. Feldberg, to name but a few.

The period at the Wellcome Laboratories coincided with the early years of modern chemotherapy, and GB published various research papers (with collaborators) on drug toxicity, and on antimicrobials. The latter included papers on the chemotherapy of tuberculosis and leprosy, and on the pharmacology of the antibiotic polymyxins.

In 1950, GB moved to King's College London, initially as Reader and Head in the newly created sub-department of Pharmacology, and was promoted to Professor in 1958. This was at a time, when it was unusual for non-medics to gain senior academic appointments. He continued at King's until his retirement in 1978. GB continued to publish on antimicrobials, inter al., with a review on the wider aspects of TB chemotherapy (Pharmac. Rev. 1954). Early colleagues included G. D.

H. Leach (later Professor of Pharmacology and Pro Vice Chancellor at Bradford University). Typically, GB ran a vigorous, well organised and efficient Department. This involved teaching undergraduate 2nd MB students by staff-intensive weekly practical classes in animal and human pharmacology and in vitro and in vivo methodologies. This used a course book produced jointly with J. P. Quilliam of Barts.

One of the most significant contributions made by GB's department was in teaching Pharmacology to a small number of intercalated medical students initially as part of a BSc (Physiology). In my view, this BSc course was a pivotal and critical experience in an otherwise turgid and dogmatic medical course. (The practical book from 55 years ago, is still in my possession). Typically, the intercalated BSc students went on to enjoy later professional successes in a variety of fields including clinical medicine, clinical pharmacology and the pharmaceutical industry. Later, the Department developed a successful BSc (Pharmacology) course.

Over his tenure from 1950 - 1978, GB's Department also attracted a variety of PhD students. His system was simple but rigorous – the student, not the supervisor, chose both the problem and the experimental approach, while GB was available for critical input as required. Hence the variety of research papers that emanated from Pharmacology at King's, with postgraduates publishing under their own names. GB did not take credit for his students' work. Departmental alumni included A. T. Birmingham who did his PhD in GB's department, and was later Professor at Nottingham. A measure of the high standing of the Pharmacology Department at King's is that when GB retired in 1978, he was succeeded by Professor Gustav Born, FRS.

When he was examining in Pharmacology in Jamaica, GB visited the grave of the famous physiologist, Ernest Starling. Starling had died at sea in 1927 and was buried in Jamaica, but his grave had been largely ignored until various external examiners to Jamaica, including GB, helped identify it. The Physiological Society and UCL are believed to have paid for the upkeep of the grave and a memorial plaque.

In 1953, GB was invited to become associate editor of the Pharmaceutical Society's research publication The Journal of Pharmacy & Pharmacology [JPP]. This was with a view to his becoming its part time editor on the retirement of the then editor, Dr C. H. Hampshire.

GB succeeded as editor of the JPP on the death of Hampshire in January 1955. With the increase in research

post-war and the necessary move to monthly publication, there was a significant workload for the staff of three (GB, John Fowler as assistant editor, and secretary Dorothy Watson). Under GB's aegis, the journal contents were remodelled, and papers were refereed and edited rigorously. The JPP contains proceedings of British Pharmaceutical Conferences, original research papers, critical reviews and communications with an emphasis on pharmacopoeial topics, standards and reports of work within the disciplines of the pharmaceutical sciences. GB retired as Editor in 1972 and was succeeded by J. R. Fowler, as full time editor.

I knew GB between 1953 and 1958 covering my time as a medical student, a BSc student and then as a PhD student. After I became a professor in London University in 1969, I renewed my acquaintance with GB until his retirement from King's in 1978. He was an incisive scientist and a man of great integrity, who had a profound influence on my life and academic career.

George Brownlee gave his time unstintingly to the Sir Richard Stapley Educational Trust as a Trustee and Council Member from 1959 to 1995, serving as Chairman from 1969-1977, and from 1983-1988, and finally as Bursar from 1989-1991.

In his private life, GB was a shrewd collector of antiques and antiquarian books. His wife Margaret died in 1970, and his three sons survive him.

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