

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF GORDON ARTHUR RANSOME *

Seah Cheng Siang

Last year, when it became known that Professor G.A. Ransome was due to retire soon, the Council of the Academy of Medicine decided to inaugurate this Oration to do honour to him. Funds rapidly poured in from his well-wishers and doctors who were his former students. This Oration will be presented bi-annually at Singapore during the Congresses of Medicine to follow.

When the Chapters of Physicians, Surgeons and Obstetricians and Gynaecologists nominated me to deliver this Oration, I accepted it with anxiety and questioned my own qualifications to this privilege. Perhaps, it will not be out of place here to say that I have been an ardent student and a disciple of Professor Ransome since 1948. It has been a continuing education for me, learning incessantly from the Master.

PROFESSOR G.A. RANSOME — HIS BEGINNINGS.

Professor Ransome was born in Salop, England, on 6th May, 1910, the son of the Rector of Pulverbatch. He attended school at Dauntsey's and after happy childhood days and still in his youth, he began to show an interest in doctoring. It was not surprising therefore, that in 1933, he obtained a licence to practise medicine from the Royal College of Surgeons and Physicians of London.

From thence onwards his postgraduate experience was gathered in various appointments in hospitals around London, working under men of great medical eminence. Wisely, he sought and obtained valuable experiences in the various branches of Medicine. Thus, he was a house physician to the Skin and Venereal Diseases Department, St. Bartholomew's Hospital; a Medical Registrar in the Children's Department, Charing Cross Hospital and the Chief Assistant to the Royal Westminster

Ophthalmic Hospital. Also, he clerked neurological problems at the National Hospital for Nervous Diseases, Queen Square. In the general medical wards of the Charing Cross Hospital, he learned under Sir Gordon Holmes and Dr. R. A. Hickling. At Queen Square, Dr. W. J. Adie was his teacher. Sir Robert Hutchinson and Dr. J. F. Poynton taught him at Great Ormond Street Hospital and one must not forget the earlier years learning at the side of Lord Horder at St. Bartholomew's Hospital.

With this background, he proceeded to the M.R.C.P. in 1935. He also attended courses at the London School of Tropical Medicine and at the Royal College of Surgeons, passing the Part One Examination of both the D.T.M. & H. and F.R.C.S.

After six years of postgraduate training, he sailed forth from his homeland to reach our shores in 1938, on appointment as Associate Professor of Medicine, King Edward VII College of Medicine, Singapore.

AT TAN TOCK SENG HOSPITAL

In 1938, the Department of Medicine was under the headship of Professor R. B. Hawes, working at Tan Tock Seng Hospital. Professor Hawes himself was an excellent clinician of the old type — he could smell diseases as it were. Together with Professor Hawes, Professor Ransome established a clinical laboratory closely attached to the unit and thus began a new phase. Three of Singapore's outstanding physicians ably took part in these early years in the teaching, namely, Dr. G. Haridas, Dr. C. E. Smith and Dr. E. S. Monteiro. They were then designated as Clinical Tutors. Under this group of teachers, year after year, well-trained doctors graduated with the Diploma of L.M.S. These pre-war graduates were to form the hard core of men and women who diligently looked after and with high professional skills, the sick and the maimed during the trials and tribulations of World War II and its aftermath in the 40's in Singapore and Malaya.

Professor Ransome has always been and is still proud of the L.M.S.

* The first Gordon Arthur Ransome Oration delivered on 5th August 1971 at the Opening Ceremony of the 6th Singapore-Malaysia Congress of Medicine.

THE WAR YEARS (1939 — 1945)

Professor Ransome evacuated from Singapore in 1942 to the frontlines of Burma and India to carry on his work with the strong conviction that his contributions both to Medicine and King and Country would be better served. During these short years, he became deeply involved in military medicine and in this theatre of war, his contributions to medical knowledge are well-known. I shall refer to this later in some detail. In essence, he delved into the problems of water and salt balance as well as pioneering in the management of unconscious patients; dealing with cholera epidemics and establishing the specific methods of treatment for cerebral malaria. These contributions saved many lives and have been referred to or quoted both in literature as well as in textbooks of Medicine and Surgery. In recognition for these advances in Medicine, he was elected a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians in 1947.

Nor was this all. In valour, he was not lacking also and twice mentioned in dispatches. From a Major of the 14th Army, he was promoted rapidly and was a Lieutenant Colonel when the war drew to a close.

THE POST-WAR YEARS

With the peace, Professor Ransome returned to Singapore in 1946 as Acting Head of the Department of Medicine, which was shifted from Tan Tock Seng Hospital to the General Hospital. This change required considerable care and with skilful nurturing, the Department was put on its feet. En January, 1948, he was appointed Professor of Medicine, King Edward VII College of Medicine, Singapore. It is worthy of record here that in the same year, Dr. E. S. Monteiro was appointed Acting Associate Professor. With further development and increase in the intake of medical students in 1949, a new department (now Medical Unit II, O.R.G.H.) was formed and Dr. Monteiro was appointed the Founder-Professor of Clinical Medicine. It is relevant to further record, for future historians, that this year, with the retirement of Professor Ransome, the hitherto two separate departments have now been grouped together under a Chairman, with Professor Khoo Oon Teik as the first.

HIS CLINICAL TEACHINGS

Foremost, Professor Ransome taught by example. Himself a well-trained clinician,

he has handed down to hundreds of doctors, clinical methods which were learnt from his teachers and also those innovated by his own increasing experiences.

In taking a meaningful medical history, he has on many occasions, and still does so now, sit by the bedside, eliciting point by point the story of the patient's illness, with students watching on. From the history and adopting Lord Horder's methods, a list of possible diagnoses to account for the presenting symptoms, is then compiled.

In front of the students, Professor Ransome will then examine the patient meticulously. A very careful inspection from head to foot is followed by an examination in minutia of the different systems.

He has a fine art of percussion of the chest and together with auscultation, the signs elicited are put together and the X-ray appearances predicted. This has often been confirmed when X-ray films of the chest became available. His capability in the examination of heart has also been well recognised.

Per abdomen, he is supreme in palpation and many an enlarged viscus would be felt where others found difficulty. This skill is only possible with subtle variations to classical palpation. The finer points of the art have been acquired by those who have been fortunate enough to watch closely his method of examination.

It is in the examination of the central nervous system that he excels. Having learnt from Master Neurologists, he has, from constant practice, developed this acumen to a very high proficiency. Small wonder therefore that a number of his students have followed in his footsteps and today are neurologists in their own right. He has been able to revive some of the older and forgotten signs of neurological disease but which are still of practical and diagnostic importance. Further, in a contribution to the British Medical Journal, 1958, he published the method of elicitation and the significance of "The Great Toe Jerk". This attention to a digit bears testimony to his constant and assiduous search for signs whenever he examines the human body.

From the signs culled, and with the results of some laboratory tests, he has nearly in every instance been able to arrive at a definitive diagnosis. A firm diagnosis by this method and not by intuition, is always teachable. He converted many a

doctor from practising intuitive diagnosis into exercising a perceptive scientific method.

HIS CONTRIBUTIONS TO MEDICAL LITERATURE

Up to date, Professor Ransome has contributed 22 papers, published locally and in journals abroad, some with himself as the main author and some in conjunction with other members of his department. A few papers are still in preparation and will no doubt be published in the near future.

The titles of these papers are to be found in the appendix to this Oration. I shall only highlight some of the contributions.

One of his earlier and most significant publication is to be found in the first volume of the Proceedings of the Alumni Association, King Edward VII College of Medicine, 1948 with Dr. B. R. Sreenivasan as its first Editor. The paper is entitled "Notes on the Management of cases of Cerebral Malaria". Therein is described a number of important measures to be taken and when adopted, has lowered the mortality rate in a previously fatal disease.

In 1944, in the British Medical Journal and in conjunction with Drs. Gupta and Patterson, the use of the transnasal intragastric Ryle's tube in tropical practice was described. This again has turned out to be a life saving measure in the management of unconscious patients.

It is not altogether unexpected that the majority of his publications dealt with neurology since this was Professor Ransome's first love in clinical practice. His early observations on lead poisoning (*J. Mal. Br. B.M.A.*, 1940, 4, 164), a note on the treatment of arsenical encephalopathy (*Brit. M.J.* 1945, 1, 659), the description of a rare form of tuberculous meningitis (*Brit. M.J.*, 1947, 1, 413), the cerebellar syndrome in malaria (*Deut. Med. Rund/Woch.*, 1949, 3, 21) and the exotic Ballerina's Back Syndrome (*Proc. Alum. Assn.*, 1952, 5, 175) make very interesting reading and worthy of note.

During the last two years he revived two lesser known neurological conditions by describing Singapore patients suffering from the Restless legs (Ekbom) Syndrome (*Sing. Med. J.*, 1969, 10, 131) and Collier's Syndrome (Orbital periostitis), (*Med. J. Aust.*, 1970, 1, 277).

In two reviews for the Academy of Medicine, Singapore, he discussed the sub-

jects of Coronary Thrombosis in 1959 and the Dyspepsias and Diarrhoeas in 1960.

A further impact has been achieved also, by the publication of approximately 150 papers from different members of his department since 1948, primarily the result of his influence and stimulation.

Not in the least is also his initiation and inspiration towards studies which have led to four doctorates of medicine, in the subjects of eosinophilic lung, aetiopathogenesis of non-specific lung abscess, the haemodynamics of atrial septal defect and the syndrome of opium lung.

HIS ASSOCIATION WITH PROFESSIONAL BODIES

In the pre-war years recruitment in the Medical Service and employment ran in two separate channels with marked disparity of conditions between the local and expatriate doctor. When a unified medical service was sought for, Professor Ransome gave considerable assistance by his unequivocal support for complete parity in the conditions of the service without discrimination. Thus the work of the Alumni Association in this respect was strengthened.

He is also a very interested member of the Singapore Medical Association and last year was made an honorary life member. For a few years he was elected President of the Society of Neurology and Psychological Medicine, of the Association.

With considerable foresight and with keen interest on postgraduate medical education Professor Ransome inaugurated a meeting of medical specialists in his own home in July 1957, with a view to the formation of an academic body. After the constitution was passed 34 members consisting of physicians, surgeons and others practising in the specialities together formed the Academy of Physicians and Surgeons which was the preceding body to the present Academy of Medicine, Singapore. Appropriately, Professor Ransome was the first Master of the Academy. The Academy right from the outset promoted postgraduate education through refresher courses, symposia, teach-in seminars, clinico-pathological meetings and actively participating in the formal lectures in the courses of advanced medicine, paediatrics, surgery, gynaecology and obstetrics. Four members of the Academy, since 1969, sit on the Postgraduate Medical Board. This board through its School of Postgraduate Medical Studies of

the University of Singapore, last year conducted the first examination, leading to the Master of Medicine, the first local higher professional degree.

He holds also the distinction of having been a past member of the Singapore Medical Council and is also an ex-President of the Association of Physicians, Malaya.

HONOURS

His devotion to students of medicine and to patients asides, Professor Ransome has also distinguished himself in public duties. His contribution to society at large and to communities beyond our own shores has earned him recognition by way of honours bestowed on him. Thus he is a Commander of the British Empire (C.B.E.) since 1962; was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal (P.J.G.) in Singapore's National Day Awards in 1967 and bestowed the Datoship of the Sultan of Kelantan (D.J.M.K.) in 1969. In the same year the University of Singapore conferred on him the Honorary Doctorate of Medicine.

IN PERSON

In person, Professor Ransome is kind, soft spoken and essentially human. He is generous and his memory becomes conveniently poor when remembering is unessential. He has the supreme serenity to accept the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that can and wisdom to know the difference.

He taught those around him not only medicine. During bedside teaching and at chance meetings he has always thought fit, now and then, to wax philosophical. In some of Life's difficult situations he has a firm belief in the ultimate pattern to be determined by destiny rather than a dependence on so-called human wisdom. Further, he often decries worry which is the incumbent destroyer of clear thinking. He is indefatigable when aid is sought for by a fellow colleague. A cry for help is always answered with alacrity and he is always available at all times of the day and night for consultation in homes or in hospitals.

He is always ready to render a helping hand when a fellow doctor himself is in trouble. In this regard he has an ever constant ear which in itself is therapy. Time appears to him to be of no consequence when it comes to giving it to someone else. The distressed talks on and he listens. A

few careful chosen words of advice now and then provides the panacea.

Up to a few years ago he hunts keenly and have been seen riding on the pillion of a friend's motor cycle, in jungle green with a gun slung across the shoulder. Plovers, snipes, pigeons are favourite targets and occasionally the wild boar. Fishing in the off-shores is another sport he pursues and many a picture in the family album testifies to his skill in this respect.

In reading, history fascinates him, especially facts relating to great men, the wars and medicine. He has taught many the value of the medical writings of the past. He regularly scours the medical library for old books about to be discarded inadvertently. He has also been known to have unwittingly annexed a few volumes which are invaluable in his own eyes.

CONCLUSION

Professor Ransome can be regarded as the founder of modern medicine in this area namely, Singapore and the territories of Malaysia. What has been achieved in his long 33 years here has not been without some personal sacrifice but the reward may well be the realisation that he has created a generation of hundreds of well trained doctors. We are immensely grateful. These doctors in turn are passing on teachings to yet many others. The cumulative effect in terms of service to the sick and the benefits derived therefrom bear testimony to his wisdom and his skill.

He retires from the University comforted by the fact that he leaves a well established and forward looking department of medicine providing highly skilled services and also with some modern equipment made available for research. He leaves a body of keen and trained personnel, his former students. We acclaim him.

He retires with the edifice of the Mistri Wing for Paediatrics, an emblem of his generosity for it was built with the financial resources of one of his grateful patients after his prompting.

He retires with very real prospect that the department of neurology and neurosurgery will be formed in the very near future, the sequel of his enthusiasm for this speciality.

He retires with the knowledge that the Academy of Medicine is now well established, the result of his foresight and energy. We look forward to his continuing close

association with the Academy and we salute our Master. We wish him a happy and healthy retirement.

APPENDIX TO THE ORATION

Published works of Professor G. A. Ransome

1. Some clinical observations on Lead Poisoning. Journal of the Malayan Branch, B.M.A., 1940, 4, 164.
2. Posterior displacement of the Nucleus Pulposus with Pressure on the Cauda Equina. Journal of the Malayan Branch, B.M.A., 1940, 4, 172. (In conjunction with E.C. Mekie).
3. A varix of the Spinal Cord. Case Report with a diagnostic radiological appearance and description of tumour. B.J. Surg., 1941-42, 29, 300. (In conjunction with E.C. Mekie).
4. Transnasal intragastric Ryle's tube in tropical practice: life-saving measure. Brit. M.J., 1944, 2, 594. (In conjunction with L.M. Gupta and J.S.C. Patterson).
5. Arsenical encephalopathy: note on condition stressing value of postural treatment, with case records. Brit. M.J. 1945, 1, 659. (In conjunction with J.C.S. Patterson and L.M. Gupta).
6. Conus medullaris syndrome in spinal contusion. Brit. M.J. 1946, 2, 87. (In conjunction with van Someren, R.K.A. and Stokes, J.F.).
7. Rare form of tuberculous meningitis. Brit. M.J., 1947, 1, 413. (In conjunction with E.S. Monteiro).
8. Notes on the management of Cases of Cerebral Malaria. Proceedings of the Alumni Association, King Edward VII, College of Medicine, 1948, 1, 23).
9. Kleinhirn-Syndrome beim Malaria tropica — the association of the cerebellar syndrome with subtertian malaria. Deutsche Medizinische Rundschau/Wochenschrift niet arhythmischer Akademie, 1949, 3, 21.
10. Nasopharyngeal tumours: place of leucotomy in terminal stages of disease. Brit. J. Surg., 1950, 37, 344. (In conjunction with E.C. Mekie).
11. Extra-dural cyst ganglion neuroma. Edinburgh M.J. 1950, 57, 515. (In conjunction with E.C. Mekie).
12. Haemochromatosis: Report of a case with necropsy findings. Proceedings of the Alumni Association, King Edward VII College of Medicine, Singapore, 1951, 4, 255.
13. Une Syndrome Des Ballerines Aciennes or Ballerinas Back. Proceedings of the Alumni Association, King Edward VII College of Medicine, 1952, 5, 175.
14. Clinical Diagnosis of Pulmonary Tuberculosis. Transactions of the First Pan-Malayan Tuberculosis Conference Nov. 1-4, 1956, held under the auspices of the Singapore Anti-Tuberculosis Association. Page 130.
15. The Great Toe Jerk, B.M.J., 1958, 2, 548.
16. Coronary Thrombosis: A review. Academy of Medicine, Singapore, 1960, 2, 24.
17. The Dyspepsias and Diarrhoeas. Academy of Medicine, Singapore, 1960, 2, 24.
18. Haemoglobin H Disease with Occlusion of Right Anterior Cerebral Artery, Xanthochromia and Pleocytosis of C.S.F. B.M.J. 1965, 1:1650. (In conjunction with Dr. J.L. Da Costa).
19. Acute glomerulonephritis with unusual manifestations. Far East Medical Journal. 1968, 4, 82. (In conjunction with Dr. T.C. Tan and Dr. Tan Kheng Khoo).
20. Restless legs (Ekbom) Syndrome. Singapore Medical Journal, 10, 131, 1969. (In conjunction with Dr. Cheah Jin Seng).
21. Diagnostic difficulties in four cases of massive bleeding per rectum. Singapore Medical Journal, 11, 96, 1970. (In conjunction with Dr. B.Y. Tan and Dr. Cheah, J.S.).
22. Collier's Syndrome (Orbital periostitis). Medical J. Australia, 1, 277, 1970.