

Sir Gordon Arthur Ransome—Teacher, Colleague and Friend

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There are so many facets of Sir Gordon Ransome's life that I can touch on. Perhaps the prologue and the epilogue that I **gave** in the Ransome Oration "The Making of a Doctor" on August 23, 1976, are relevant still (Annals of Academy of Medicine, 5, page 95-96, 109-110, 1976):

"Gordon Arthur Ransome practised medicine for 42 years. Apart from the four years in the Burma campaign during the war, he spent the best part in Singapore, teaching, exhorting and inspiring two generations of doctors.

In the late 1930's, I was among the eager-eyed disciples who each morning at 7.30 a.m. met the young handsome professor always immaculately attired in a blue pin-striped double-breasted coat with a fresh white carnation on the lapel at Ward 7 or 8 in Tan Tock Seng Hospital. Rumours had it that Professor Brunel Hawes had combed the teaching hospitals of London to find a successor and finally had chosen the most promising and brilliant registrar he could find. For many of us this personal teaching was a new refreshing experience and we spent many happy hours under the tin roof of the wards, forgot time and lunch when Prof Ransome would enthuse us with seemingly clinical magic but in fact he was titillating our dormant clinical senses. Not infrequently he had to call for extra lunches usually served to the free patients but they were for the famished students who had missed their lunch. Neurology came alive in Ward 7. After World War II, I became his first assistant and discovered that he was a demanding taskmaster where the patients' welfare was concerned. But he was always engrossed in discussing new physical signs such as the great toe jerk and over the 35 years I have known him he has never lost his enthusiasm for teaching or learning clinical medicine. Perhaps a personal anecdote can better illustrate the kind of teacher he was. Not long after the war when I was yet undecided on neurology as my special subject in the membership examination, I wrote an anxious letter to him asking his advice whether it was the right thing to do since no one from Singapore had as yet attempted it. Back came his reply that he was confident I could do it. You must remember that at that time post-graduate courses in Singapore were non-existent, the only course in neurology I had was the pre-war undergraduade stint in Tan Tock Seng Hospital and what I learnt as his assistant. It was the confidence of a great teacher that overcame my uncertainty and doubts. It is therefore with some nostalgia and that I salute a teacher, colleague and dear friend who had been medicine's Mister Chips in Singapore and Malaysia for more than a third of a century".

"Conscientious and devoted care is not exciting as the glamour of sophisticated machine medicine. The care of spectacular medicine squeezes out the more mundane aspects of personal medicine and is itself overtaken by the line of lucrative practice. The students who sees the hard slog of the hospital medical officer or the general practitioner in the poorer housing estate and compares this with the glamour of get-rich-quick types of practice makes his mind up in no time that he will take the easy road to money and luxury living. With such disturbing trends, some observers feel that the profession is losing its soul. I am not so pessimistic.

So long as there are examples set by doctors themselves such as we see in the life of Gordon Arthur Ransome, there will be a measure of idealism of giving the highest priority to the greatest need; there is hope for the profession which itself is a source of hope, to others for was it not Samuel Taylor Coleridge who wrote, “He is the best physician who is the most ingenious inspirer of hope.”

The greatness of a clinical teacher of medicine is measured not by the membership of learned societies nor by the impact on society for Gordon wrote comparatively little and devoted most of his time to the practice of medicine. Sir Gordon’s greatness is in his ability to enthuse, to inspire the Art of Medicine. And he showed by example, by his humility, by his word of a gentleman that the physician has to live not so much by a code of ethics but by a higher code. Undoubtedly his earlier Christian upbringing in a Rectory had a deep influence in his life. But to several generations of students, Sir Gordon left an indelible mark compounded of a blend of kindness, curiosity, honesty, excellence and for want of a better word, humanity. Sir Gordon has left his footprints on the shores of Singapore medicine for others to see and follow on.