In memoriam – Marler Thomas Parker (1912–2006)

M. T. (Tom) Parker, one of the inspirational figures of post-war medical microbiology in addressing our increasing concerns about staphylococcal and other healthcare-associated infections, died on 25 February 2006, aged 94. His work on *Staphylococcus aureus* – initially the type 80/81 epidemic strain that caused severe hospital infections in the 1950s and later the increasing antibiotic resistance amongst hospital isolates leading to the MRSA problems of the 21st century – is as relevant to medical practice today as when he led the Public Health Laboratory Service (PHLS) Cross-Infection Reference Laboratory through the 1960s and 1970s.

Tom was born on 27 October 1912 in North Walsham, Norfolk, and he obtained his senior schooling at Paston Grammar School there (1923–1931). He went on to Downing College, Cambridge, as an exhibitioner, reading Natural Sciences with specialism in Pathology (1931–1934), gaining first-class grades in both parts of the Natural Sciences Tripos. He then completed his medical studies at Charing Cross Hospital, London, qualifying MB, BChir (Cantab.) in 1937, and continuing there as a House Physician. In 1938, he began a Studentship in Pathology at Charing Cross Hospital Medical School and gained the Diploma of Bacteriology (London) with distinction in 1939 from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine under the exacting standards of W. W. C. Topley and G. S. Wilson.

The Second World War interrupted his academic studies. He held strong anti-fascist convictions and he enlisted in the armed forces at the outbreak of war in 1939. Through to 1945, he served in the Royal Army Medical Corps as a specialist pathologist, initially in the UK and then in India and Burma with the rank of Major. He made lasting friendships in India with memorable colleagues including James Rhind, Jerry Morris and Reg Passmore. He had graphic stories of his experiences in Lucknow and Calcutta and in his travels when on leave, with sad accounts of the terrible famine and the diseases that he witnessed at first hand. In Assam, his hospital unit supported Field-Marshal Slim's advance and he was especially proud of his laboratory's record in ensuring prompt diagnosis and effective treatment of the many patients who developed the debilitating infections that went with military operations

in difficult conditions in a tropical climate. His unit was then shipped to Rangoon, arriving on the day after the Japanese retreat, and he was faced with establishing services in a ransacked infirmary that had even lost its water taps.

Early in 1946, on his return to England and to civilian life, he joined the newly established PHLS under the directorship of G. S. (later Sir Graham) Wilson. Tom's first PHLS job was as Director of the Area Public Health Laboratory at Carmarthen, but in 1948 he moved to Manchester as Consultant Microbiologist and Director of the Regional Public Health Laboratory. There, his knowledge and experience were quickly acknowledged and he was recruited to deliver classes in the Manchester University Dip. Bact. course as a specialist teacher. His research at the time started to focus on *S. aureus* as a cause of severe hospital infections and in 1956 his thesis on *S. aureus* earned him a Cambridge Doctorate of Medicine.

In 1961, he was appointed Director of the Cross-Infection Reference Laboratory at the Central Public Health Laboratory, Colindale, London, a post he held with distinction until his retirement in 1978. Dr Parker was pivotal in his role as Director in bringing together the staphylococcus and streptococcus reference laboratories working on the qualitative differences in the pathogenic potential of these organisms. Throughout the 57-year history of the PHLS, this laboratory played a crucial role in investigating and understanding healthcare-associated infections, particularly those caused by *S. aureus* and β -haemolytic streptococci, and helping to devise preventive strategies that remain at the heart of the current Department of Health programme to combat MRSA. Tom had directed the laboratory for over half of its first 30 years. During that time many collaborations were established with colleagues and centres overseas which formed the foundation of the international links that remain to this day; for example, links with the Centers for Disease Control on a very interesting outbreak of pyoderma and nephritis on an American Indian reservation at Red Lake in the 1960s. International collaborations were numerous and quite diverse. In the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, he collaborated with colleagues in Trinidad, where

streptococcal pyoderma was rife and over 1000 cases of nephritis were recorded in the first 2 years of a study funded in part by the Medical Research Council. In collaboration with local colleagues and a team from the University of Chicago, they established that there was a series of island epidemic waves of nephritis each associated with a single group A streptococcal type.

Tom Parker's unassuming personality, his integrity, his wide range of expertise and his friendly and helpful manner endeared him to all of his colleagues and his many friends. It was inevitable that his help and influence would be widely sought within the discipline of medical microbiology, particularly with reference to staphylococci, streptococci and aspects of bacterial cross-infection, and he gave his time unstintingly to students, trainees and senior colleagues alike. He served on a host of international committees and subcommittees, and his contributions to WHO Working Groups, and his Short-Term WHO Consultantships in the Sudan, India and Burma (1974, 1976, 1980), all testify to the high regard in which he was held abroad. He had numerous collaborators across the world. His daughter Judith recalls a stream of visitors to the family home at Radlett in the 1960s; these included Lewis Wannamaker of Minnesota, Theo Poon-King of Trinidad, and Hugh Dillon of Birmingham, AL, USA, but there were many many more. He was a Founder Fellow of the Royal College of Pathologists (FRCPath 1964), was appointed a Corresponding Member of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Hygiene und Mikrobiologie (1978), and was President of the Hospital Infection Society from 1984 to 1988. In 1983, he was awarded Honorary Membership of the Pathological Society of Great Britain and Ireland in particular recognition of his contribution to the Society's journals for almost 30 years. In turn, Tom's care for members of his staff is epitomized by his support for Winston Maxted, a colleague in his laboratory at Colindale, who was awarded an Honorary Doctorate from Leiden in recognition of his work on streptococci.

The day-to-day responsibilities of a hospital laboratory in relation to public health were exemplified by Tom's work in Carmarthen and Manchester and are reflected in the requirement from the current Chief Medical Officer (England) that all microbiology laboratories should fulfil their public health responsibilities. In addition to aspects of hospital cross-infection that constantly required attention, there were (and still are) innumerable urgent requests to identify the agents of infectious diseases and to check their antibiotic sensitivities or otherwise to guide treatment options. Food-borne intoxications and infections demand prompt attention, as many victims are often affected. Other causes of diarrhoeal disease pose diagnostic problems and require immediate laboratory investigation. And the extending list of pathogens associated with sexually transmitted diseases, respiratory illness, throat and ear infections, meningitis, septicaemia and wound infections, and urinary-tract infections seems to be endless. Tom

carried all of these responsibilities with exemplary calmness and real ability.

One of Tom's greatest legacies to medical microbiology was his remarkable service as an editor of (and a significant contributor to) our journals and to Topley and Wilson's authoritative text on the '*Principles of Bacteriology and Immunity*', which latterly became '*Microbiology and Microbial Infections*'. He worked tirelessly and with daunting commitment in these roles. For the 8th edition of the textbook in 1990, for which he and Leslie Collier were the two General Editors, he personally checked each of more than 2600 pages of text produced by 125 authors from around the world. He worked on five editions of this book (our 'professional bible' over the years) from 1964 to 1998. Those of us who knew Tom's standards in relation to his editorial work, with the *Journal of Pathology and Bacteriology* and subsequently (for nearly 20 years) with the *Journal of Medical Microbiology*, found him a demanding and impressive colleague. We admired him hugely and it was quite impossible to thank him as he waved away our expressions of gratitude with a rare smile and a slight flourish of his pipe. He was instrumental in setting the standard for scientific rigour and accuracy of expression in the journal. He expected those standards of his colleagues, but was also prepared to spend endless time guiding would-be editors as well as helping innumerable authors (especially those for whom English was not their native language) to re-work their submitted articles into worthy scientific presentations. He created the rehabilitation part of his role as rejection and rehabilitation editor of the *Journal of Medical Microbiology* as an important teaching commitment and many authors benefited from 'distance learning tutorials' over the re-working of their papers. His was a hard act to follow.

Tom and his wife Beryl were married in October 1938, just about a year before war service intervened. Their son David was born in 1940 and their daughter Judith in 1950. Tom's wider interests were reading, gardening, classical music and opera. He was, however, a dedicated family man and always found time, between all of the other activities that made so many demands on him, for hill-walking with the family, for beach days with sandcastles and fossil-hunting, and for picking blackberries or visiting stately homes.

After moving to Beckenham in 1987, he started on yet another garden and took up serious studies of Italian and Philosophy at Birkbeck College, only withdrawing from Philosophy classes when, in his late eighties, he felt that his essays were no longer up to standard. Beryl died in 1996 and, latterly, Tom moved to Sunrise at Froggnal House, Sidcup, where he made new friendships and found an alpine garden needing his attention. He had an extended illness with surgery in December 2004, but he returned to independent living in Sunrise with his beloved books, his paintings, his music and his view of the garden that he had made. He died peacefully in Queen Mary's Hospital, Sidcup. At the funeral, his son, Professor David Parker, talked warmly of his father

as a marvellous inspiration and mentor. This is abundantly true for everyone who met Tom or who worked with such a remarkable man.

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