SIR JOHN HERBERT PARSONS
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In this tribute to Sir John Parsons for his 80th birthday the contributors are all, with one exception, ophthalmologists or his former pupils. The exception is the writer of this introduction, who has never had the privilege of his teaching and knows next to nothing of clinical ophthalmology. Yet a physiologist may claim the right to join with pathologists and clinicians in any volume covering the whole field of Sir John's activities. His scientific studies of the problems of vision have meant so much to us and to psychologists, too, that we must not be denied the pleasure of wishing him well.
It has never been easy to combine the busy life of a consulting physician or surgeon with research into the basic problems of natural science, though fortunately exceptional people have managed to do it in the past and are doing it even now. But it must be still more difficult to remain both the recognised authority on the science and the recognised leader in the practice of a branch of medicine, to remain our foremost authority on the physiology of vision as well as the dominant figure in the British School of Ophthalmology, and in this School not only the teacher but the organiser of teaching and research, the adviser of governments, and the expert whose opinion is indispensable in all the varied problems where human vision is concerned. This is the position which Sir John Parsons has held for many years. Physiologists may grudge some of the time he has had to spend in the wards and committee rooms, and clinicians may have wished for even more of his help, but neither can deny his outstanding position in the science and practice of ophthalmology.

His early training certainly qualified him for the work he has done. The influence of Lloyd Morgan at Bristol and of Schafer at University College might have kept him to the narrower path of academic psychology or physiology. Though his wide interests and general kindliness must be innate, the years spent in general practice were surely not wasted: we can still go to him with our troubles and feel the better for his advice. And when he finally turned to ophthalmic surgery what better surroundings could he have found than those at Moorfields and at University College Hospital?

I have no right to speak of the influence which he has had in these two centres of scientific medicine, but I can speak of the influence of his writings on all physiologists who have studied the sense organs. His book on colour vision was first published in 1915 and has remained our surest guide through the intricacies of a fascinating subject. The great originator of it all, Sir Isaac Newton, did not like hypotheses and Thomas Young's three colour
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Theory ran very close to the facts which he discovered, but from the time of Goethe to the present day the subject has been beset with speculation and the proportion of new theories to new facts has been dangerously high. Sir John's book was a masterly analysis of the facts and an unbiased examination of the theories, both rare delights. Much of the material was assembled for the first time and given orderly presentation and meaning. His book soon became the classical work of reference on colour vision and its redressing of the balance between fact and theory gave a new impetus to the subject. The impetus has remained and much of the present day interest in colour vision can be traced to this source.

Having reviewed the physiology of vision Sir John showed his wide knowledge of the border lands of neurology and psychology in his "Introduction to the Theory of Perception." In this, too, he brought together a wealth of information and showed its relevance to the general problem. But though these two books are the concrete expression of his work in the field of academic science they are by no means his sole contribution to it. He has achieved as much or more by his personal influence, by his constant and powerful advocacy of research on visual physiology, and by his kindly support of the young research worker. His colleagues in the Royal Society and on the Medical Research Council know him as a wise and honest councillor with the initiative needed for the planning of new developments and the experience needed for carrying them through. His pupils and friends everywhere know him as one who inspires their warm affection as well as their admiration for what he has done. We offer him our most cordial greetings and our sincere congratulations on his birthday.
SIR JOHN HERBERT PARSONS: An Appreciation

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