SIR JOHN PARSONS

OBITUARY

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(1868–1957)

The death of Sir John Herbert Parsons, C.B.E., D.Sc., LL.D., F.R.C.S., F.R.S., on October 7, 1957, in his 90th year, at University College Hospital, London, marks the end of an epoch in the story of British ophthalmology. One of the band of great clinical leaders who retained for ophthalmology in this country at the end of the last and the beginning of the present century the proud position in the world it had inherited fifty years previously from Sir William Bowman—Nettleship, Doyne, Gunn, Collins, Fisher, Lawford, Paton, and others—he outstripped them all in intellectual brilliance and force of character. Moreover, unlike them, he grasped the significance of the changes which at that time were apparent in the advance of medicine. Alone among them he realized that advances in ophthalmology did not lie solely in the clinic or in the pathological laboratory, that a new age was emerging wherein clinical pictures were to be interpreted in terms of physiology, physics, and chemistry; and he had the energy and ability to follow out his convictions. Greater as an original scientific thinker and philosopher than as a clinician, he dominated British ophthalmology in the lean and difficult years between the wars, striving to cherish and maintain the spirit of research and succeeding by his personal example, his forceful personality and his transparent integrity. After the war his purpose was achieved when he formally opened the Institute of Ophthalmology in London. And in the long evening of his life the frustrations of physical disabilities, strange to a nature so forceful as his, were softened by the realization that those of a newer generation, whom he had encouraged and nurtured with such paternal care and at the same time without hypocrisy or pretence, were succeeding in establishing his ideals.

Parsons was born in Bristol on September 3, 1868. His education was commenced at the University College, Bristol, aided by his winning successively the Gilchrist, John Stewart, and Sharpey Scholarships and the first entrance scholarship to the Bristol Royal Infirmary; it was completed at St. Bartholomew's Hospital, London. In 1890 he took his B.Sc. degree with honours in physiology, and in 1892 he qualified in medicine. Thereafter he became assistant in the Department of Physiology at University College, and for some years engaged in general practice in the London suburb of Finchley. But, through physiology, his interests concentrated progressively on ophthalmology and he became a clinical assistant at Moorfields Eye Hospital. In 1900 he took his M.B. London and the F.R.C.S. England, and, aided by a British Medical Association Research scholarship, gave up general practice and threw himself into the whole-time pursuit of ophthalmology in its widest aspects with a determination of purpose and brilliance in achievement rarely equalled. Successively clinical assistant, curator and

librarian at Moorfields, he was elected to the surgical staff of that hospital in 1904; he became ophthalmic surgeon to University College Hospital and for a time was ophthalmic surgeon to The Hospital for Sick Children, Great Ormond Street. To the first two of these hospitals he devoted his energies all his working life, retaining a close interest in their affairs after he had retired from their staffs on account of age and had joined their consulting staffs. Along with these duties went the responsibilities of a large consultant private practice.

But it was not in hospital activities nor in practice that Parsons's heart lay; to him practice was not a first love and he was a good but not a brilliant surgeon. He lived for research and the progress of knowledge, at first by contributing lavishly to it himself, later by integrating it philosophically and encouraging its pursuit by others. To such a purpose his unusually wide erudition, the profoundness of his intellect, and his obvious honesty made him eminently suited. To him clinical ophthalmology was insufficient; he must correlate it with all the workings of the visual apparatus—its optics, its physiology, its neurology, and its psychology; he saw the working of the eye in terms of physics and chemistry, of vision in terms of biology. Physiology and optics were his first loves, particularly the control of the intra-ocular pressure; there followed fundamental researches on neurology, particularly the innervation of the pupil; in ophthalmic pathology he became a world authority; and in his later years, through the avenue of colour vision, he devoted most of his energies to the perceptual and psychological aspects of vision and sensory perception in their widest sense.

Out of these activities a vast stream of papers flowed from his pen—he made some 140 contributions to the *Transactions of the Ophthalmological Society of the United Kingdom* alone. In addition there were several books. The first four were relatively small—*Elementary Ophthalmic Optics* (1901), *The Ocular Circulation* (1903), and two translations from German works—Boldt's *Trachoma* (1904) and von Hanke's *Treatment of Diseases of the Eye* (1905). His most popular work, which maintained an immense circulation all through his working life, was his *Diseases of the Eye*, an excellent, comprehensive and uniquely compact manual for students and practitioners which first appeared in 1907 and continually demanded new editions. But his first classical work was his monumental treatise, *The Pathology of the Eye*, which appeared in four volumes (1904–8). As curator at Moorfields he had grounded himself well in pathology, and in this great work ophthalmic pathology was for the first time integrated into a self-contained discipline. The book, for its time, was superb, and through it Parsons established himself in a unique position and became recognized as a world authority. His second classical work appeared in 1915—*An Introduction to the Study of Colour Vision*. Herein he served a great scientific need by presenting in a factual way a vast and difficult subject which hitherto had been obscured by numberless nebulous theories, through the thickets of which he hacked with uncompromising criticism. His later interest in psychology was ushered in by a small book, *Mind and the Nation; a Study in Applied Psychology* (1918). This was followed by the greatest book he ever wrote—*An Introduction to the Theory of Perception* (1927), wherein were expounded his

views on the evolutionary development of the neurology and psychology of perception as applied to all the senses throughout the animal kingdom. It was an immense contribution to science in a field of knowledge muddled by psychological concepts and so wide that its integration could be attempted only by one of outstanding learning and critical capacity. This was followed in his later years by a small monograph—*The Springs of Conduct* (1950)—in which were summarized his neuro-psychological theories with their firm biological basis.

Recognition for this scientific output, vast in scope and profound in content, was ample. We have already noted his student scholarships and B.M.A. research scholarship on the financial aid from which his early progress was dependent. In 1904 he received the Middlemore Prize; and again in 1914. In 1907 he received the Nettleship Gold Medal for his pathological researches. In 1919 he received the Doyne Medal at Oxford; in 1925 he delivered the Bowman Lecture on the "Foundation of Vision"; in 1929 he was invited to assist in the opening of the Wilmer Institute of the Johns Hopkins University; in 1936, going to America again as the guest of the American Academy of Ophthalmology and Otolaryngology, he was presented with the Lucien Howe Medal of the American Ophthalmological Society. He received the honorary degree of D.Sc. from Bristol University, that of LL.D. from Edinburgh; and his scientific achievements were crowned by his election as a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1921.

In addition to these scientific pursuits, Parsons spent much energy in public activities. He joined the Ophthalmological Society of the United Kingdom in 1900 and remained one of its greatest supporters until age and deafness precluded his active participation in its work; in 1925 he was its president. Successively secretary and vice-president of the Section of Ophthalmology of the B.M.A., he was president in 1923, and again in its centenary year, 1932. He performed the responsible task of being chairman of the Editorial Committee of this Journal for 22 years, from its foundation in 1917 to 1948. He was the only ophthalmologist to become president of the Royal Society of Medicine (1936–8). He was one of the founder-members of the British Council of Ophthalmologists, remained as its moving spirit, and was largely responsible for its dissolution and the creation in its place of the Faculty of Ophthalmologists. Moreover, in the field of international ophthalmology, he played a prominent part and was one of the small band of men who succeeded at Scheveningen, in 1927, in re-establishing the continuity of International Congresses of Ophthalmology which had lapsed since the outbreak of the first World War.

In addition he was constantly and intensely active in numerous committees of national importance. He was a member of the Glass-workers' Cataract Committee set up by the Royal Society (1906), of the Departmental Committee on Sight Tests set up by the Board of Trade (1910), of the Home Office Committee on Factory Lighting (1913), of the Committee on Eyestrain in Cinemas of the Illuminating Engineering Society (1919), of the Committee on the Causes and Prevention of Blindness set up by the Ministry of Health (1920), and on the B.M.A. Special Committees on Tests for Motor Drivers (1929–31) and on Miners' Nystagmus (1935–6; 1938–40). On all

of these subjects he spoke with authority. In the first World War, with the rank of Colonel, he was appointed Ophthalmic Consultant to the home forces. In 1919 he joined the Advisory Medical Council of the Air Ministry; in 1922 of the Admiralty. Just before the second World War he became civil consultant to the Royal Air Force, and shortly thereafter joined the Flying Personnel Committee which concerned itself with all matters affecting the safety and efficiency of the R.A.F. For these public works as well as for his scientific eminence he was created C.B.E. in 1919 and knighted in 1922.

Of the greatest importance to ophthalmology, however, was his participation in the work of the Medical Research Council on which he served from 1928 to 1932. A close friend of its first Secretary, Sir Walter Fletcher, and for long the chairman of its Committee on Vision, he bent all his powerful influence to stress the scientific and national importance of research in visual problems; and he succeeded. It was due to his efforts and his encouragement that a nucleus of research was kept alive in this country in the years between the wars, for it was he who was responsible for the provision of opportunities and funds for original work for such men and women as Lythgoe, Craig, Katharine Tansley, Ida Mann, Dorothy Campbell, and myself, when these would otherwise have been completely lacking.

This was indeed a full life and a magnificent record. How about Parsons, the man? Perhaps I am the wrong person to write about this; because I loved him—even for his apparent harshness, his ruggedness and cynicism, as well as for his kindness, his fatherliness, and his unfailing loyalty. To him I owe everything; he taught me ophthalmology and made possible anything I may have done professionally. He was indeed a great man, massive in physique and mind, inexhaustible in his capacity for work, and rock-like in his intellectual honesty. To me this last was his most striking characteristic; pretence, compromises, or placation had no place in his make-up. A shrewd judge of human character, he was no respecter of persons, and he said what he thought without hesitation—often with a wit so mordant as to be devastating. Yet this exterior clothed a nature that was essentially modest and shy; and because he lived largely alone, he appreciated friendliness which was sometimes lacking to him because by nature he tended to stand aloof and detached. Rarely has so great an intellectual ability, a profundity of philosophical thought, and a force of character been combined with a disposition so loyal and fundamentally affectionate.

It is good that all these qualities were recognized in his lifetime by his colleagues. His happiest day, he said, was on the occasion of his 80th birthday, in 1948, when he was presented with his portrait by his colleagues as represented by the Ophthalmological Society and the Faculty of Ophthalmologists—a portrait which now hangs in the Institute of Ophthalmology. He was immensely proud, too, of the special number of this Journal which was published at the same time in his honour. We need have no regrets at his death, for his life was long, splendid, and full; in his later years he saw the realization of most of the things he cherished and for which he fought. Therein he was, I think, content. It is not always so. And the end was peaceful and to him not unwelcome.

STEWART DUKE-ELDER