

Personalities

Professor John Widdicombe

A scientific appreciation

There is a fine and large statue by Jacob Epstein at the Trade Union Congress Building, Great Russell Street, just next to the University Senate House in London, where a strong and tragic man is holding an evidently suffering, dead or dying woman in his arms. It is a Memorial to the 1939–1945 World War, and indeed to all wars, to remind us of their brutality and the death and suffering they cause. John Widdicombe knows it well because for over 25 years he was frequently passing by it on his way to meetings at the University Senate House. It is a reminder to politicians and to others always to help the weaker ones in their activities. Undoubtedly, this quality belongs among the greatest values a human can have. John believes in these values, and welcomes these qualities in many of his friends and colleagues.

John comes from an old English family, which is celebrated, in the old folk song of “Widdicombe Fair”. This sad story describes a party travelling to the Fair and, on their travels, at least seven men and a horse die, and the only survivor may (or may not) be a dog. This may take us back to the horrors of death and suffering! John’s family comes from Widdicombe-in-the-Moor, a small and a very beautiful village in the west of England (Devonshire), which his ancestor left in about 1820 to follow a career in London. In John’s blood vessels circulates a mixture of English, Welsh and Scottish blood, from which resulted his excellent property and character result, and he has improved it even more by marrying an Irish bride; later this legacy has been spread to USA where two of his sons and his grandson live.

His education took place at ancient seats of learning. He attended St. Alban’s School near London (founded in the 9th century, and said to be the oldest still-existing school in England) where, in his early and religious days, he sang in the choir in the romanesque Cathedral of St. Albans (founded in about 1077 AD), partially built of Roman bricks from the local ruins of Verulamium (founded in about 55 BC); however some of his happiest memories relate to his slipping out of school in order visit the oldest hostelry in England – the Fighting Cocks built in the 13th century and still selling good beer.

In 1943 he was due to join the Navy to help the war effort, but instead of this, he received a Scholarship to study medicine at New College in Oxford (a young establishment, founded as early as in 1378), and then in 1946 moved on to St. Bartholomew’s Hospital Medical College in London (founded in 1098) where his clinical studies were to take place.



Fig. 1. Two young men, John Widdicombe on the left, with the senior author of this appreciation

You may ask how it is possible that this youth so steeped in ancient history could have become a modern scientist. Ask him and he will tell you that he has chosen his friends and colleagues wisely!

He has received many scientific degrees: B.A., B.M., B.Ch., D.Phil., D.M. and M.A., all from Oxford. You may ask why he has taken an M.A. especially when he says he is a master of no arts. Because in those happy days you could send a cheque worth of £ 7.00 to Oxford University and in this way to “buy” the M.A. degree. Why he has taken a D.M. when he had already been a B.M.? This is his ex-tutor’s widow said she wanted to give John his tutor’s D.M. robes. “But I haven’t got a D.M.”. “Take the degree and you can have the robes, glorious to wear and worth hundreds of pounds”. So he took the degree and his family played dressed in the robes at Christmas. He was awarded F.R.C.P. in London in 1976 and M.D. (Hons.) in Helsinki University in 2000.

As to his career, he started working in 1949 as a House Physician in St. Bartholomew’s Hospital in London. In the first three months he broke the law because Oxford was slow in authorizing his degree (everyone at Oxford went on holiday for sixteen weeks in the summer), but he was signing prescriptions and treating patients while still not being on the Medical Register (too late then to be struck off the Register, he hoped). In 1950–1955 he continued as an M.R.C. Scholar in the Nuffield Institute for Medical Research in Oxford and as a Junior Research Fellow of Queen’s College in Oxford, studying respiratory and cardiovas-

cular physiology of fetal and neonatal lambs in addition to pulmonary and tracheobronchial afferent nerves responsible for cough and other respiratory reflexes. This period taught him the importance of two wonderful mentors: Ronald Christie at St. Bartholomew's, and Geoffrey Dawes at Oxford, and made him determined to try to follow their examples.

In 1953 the war eventually caught up with him, 8 years' later he was called to join the air force for 2 years, one of the last medical conscripts. But these were casual days and as a "Squadron Leader" he continued his work on respiratory physiology and pathology and wore his uniform only twice in the two years. (His superior officer, a Brigadier complained: "Widdicombe, it is not appropriate to wear uniform in the laboratory"). In 1955–1961 he worked as a Lecturer and Senior Lecturer of St. Bartholomew's Hospital Medical College in London on lung mechanics and lung reflexes. He was a Visiting Scientist at the Cardiovascular Research Institute in San Francisco in 1960–1961, where he worked on nervous control of bronchomotor tone. His mentor was Julius Comroe. John told him "I would like to work on bronchial muscle, but you are a Cardiovascular Research Institute". Comroe replied "I don't mind what you work on, as long as it's not cornea or cartilage". Yet another wonderful mentor.

In 1961–1972 he was a University Lecturer of Physiology and Fellow of New College in Oxford, where he studied lung mechanics and reflexes and the control of breathing. In 1972–1992 he moved to the Department of Physiology, St. George's Hospital Medical School, in London, where he studied airway mucosal physiology, airway vasculature, nasal physiology and pulmonary reflexes, as the first Professor and Chairman of the Department of Physiology. He has established a flourishing department with many overseas visitors. He retired in 1992, becoming Emeritus Professor of Physiology at London University and Visiting Honorary Scientist at St. Thomas' Hospital Medical School and at Guy's Hospital Medical School, both in London. He now works almost entirely from home and, although the workload continues high, he says his productivity is declining. His wife and colleagues disagree.

During his whole life he was attending to respirologic problems that were somewhat neglected in medicine. He concentrated above all on respiratory, cardiovascular reflexes and their afferent nerves, but also studied lung mechanics, bronchomuscular physiology and pathology, airway mucosal physiology and its connection with airway vasculature, as well as nasal physiology. He has published at least 178 research papers (including papers on the effects of wearing a strait-jacket and on the pyrophysiology

of dragons), and at least 261 reviews and chapters. He has published an important and well-known monograph on Respiratory Physiology, been editor of many multi-author books and symposium proceedings, and made an uncounted number of abstracts of talks and lectures.

We (members of Slovak School of Experimental Respirology) are glad that we have had the possibility to take part in John Widdicombe's rich and important research. He has frequently visited the Slovak Republic (part of the former Czecho-Slovak Republic), especially to meet and work with colleagues in Martin and Kosice. His first visit was in 1966, and he says he wishes he could have come earlier and more frequently. A number of Slovakian scientists have worked in his laboratories in Oxford and London, and this collaboration has led to 15 common papers being published. But what is more important, there have been stimulating discussions and planned research both in Britain and in Slovakia, as well as at many international meetings that we have jointly attended. The last one was in Copenhagen in September 2005, and the next two will be in Bologna in February and in London in June 2006. He together and we believe strongly that this collaboration and communication have been extremely valuable (and pleasant!). Maybe some of us are getting old, but this does not negate the importance of such activities.

John has won many academic prizes, medals, and honorary society memberships. He is especially proud of the Silver Medal of the Purkynye Society of Bohemoslavica (1975), Honorary Membership and Medal of the Slovakian Medical Society (1976), the Babák Medal of Slovakia (1978), Honorary Membership of the Purkynye Society of Bohemoslovakia (1987), the Gold Medal of the University of Comenius, Slovakia (1996), and the Medal of Charles University, Prague (1998). He says that his pride is not just in the awards themselves, but in the friendship and collaboration that had led up to them and continued after them.

John has held innumerable academic, administrative, organizational, international and editorial positions, especially at the Universities of Oxford and London. He refuses to have these listed! "They are not the most important things in my life; friendship, collaboration, endeavour and pushing back the frontiers of knowledge are". We have been collaborating with him and his Departments for almost 50 years, which means most of his active life. He was born on 26th December 1925, which means he will soon be living to see his 80th anniversary.

Dear John Widdicombe, we wish you good health, success and a lot of pleasure in your beautiful life. Happy birthday to you, dear John!

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