

Tribute to David Gardner-Medwin

Janet Gardner-Medwin 27th June 2014

My father, David, had such a wide range of interests it was difficult to think who might know him and be able to speak today from all perspectives. Indeed, I suspect most people who knew him as a colleague probably considered him an expert in their own field, but had little inkling of the breadth of his interests. That was characteristic of him, never to boast or brag, just to demonstrate excellence in whatever field he was concentrating on at that time- whether that was natural history, or the child in front of him. So in writing this talk today I have had the very great pleasure of talking to many people who worked with him across all his fields of interest, thank you all. I hope to show that he was a man who managed to have many parallel careers in which he was equally eminent.

David Gardner-Medwin was born in November 1936. He was the eldest of 4 sons. His father, Robert Gardner-Medwin, was an architect who met his Canadian wife, Margaret Kilgour, on a boat in the Atlantic. They married in Canada, and settled in London where David was born.

War loomed and Margaret returned to Canada with her young son. She also took with her twin girls who were evacuees to the safety of her sister's care; and Dad's brother, Andrew, was born in Canada. Life in Canada was blissful, wilderness and canoes, the perfect environment in which to awaken an interest in nature. Dad encountered his wider family, it was perhaps the start of his interest in genealogy leading to his meticulous study of our family history, not just names and dates, but researching who people were and what they did - which is what really interested him. The Canadian medical connections became very important to Dad, - his uncle, Jack Kilgour, was a doctor, and his maternal grandmother, Geills McCrae, had two medical brothers, John and Tom, both lucky enough to work with Sir William Osler. John McCrae died working as a doctor in France during the first world war. These two great-great uncles of mine were much talked about at home, and their medical books and papers remained in Dad's care. No coincidence that I bear Janet McCrae's name, the mother of Geills, John and Tom, or that my mother has chosen to use colours from the McCrae tartan that Dad proudly wore, for his flowers today.

Towards the end of the war David's father, Robert, left the army to work on development and planning in Barbados. Tony and Chris were born there. David and Andrew enjoyed freedom amongst the sugar canes and on the beaches. Everyone came to love mangoes, limes, cricket and, so, Tony tells me, calypso. The school atlas was centred on the West Indies, , and David watched his father's role develop working to improve society through architecture and welfare.

Their next home was in Edinburgh. Scotland played an important and much loved role throughout the rest of Dad's life. But first, medicine was to come much too close to home. His brother Chris, just a toddler, developed influenzal meningitis, a serious infection against which children are now largely protected by vaccination. Chris was given Streptomycin, an antibiotic that saved his life, but had the serious side effect of damaging his hearing. For Dad, then just eleven years old, seeing his parents' fears for Chris, and watching his mother's subsequent determination to challenge conventional medical advice -she ensured that Chris learned to speak and lipread well, held properly high expectations for his education, and his future life –this laid important foundations for Dad's later approach to children and disability, and that key paediatric skill, his great respect when listening to mothers.

It was Dad's passion for natural history that Scotland nurtured above all. The seminal moment, as Dad reported it, was on the Isle of Arran when a young man, a complete stranger, asked directions. He was going bird-watching and Dad was allowed to go with him for a truly magical day in the company of a skilled ornithologist. He told my children about being engrossed watching a pied wagtail nest under a bridge that day. Later family holidays in the Cairngorms led to a particularly deep love of that area for all his family. He went to school at Edinburgh Academy where a biology master fostered his passion with hill walking trips throughout Scotland, and bird watching on the Northumbrian Coast. Dad organised a trip of fellow pupils to Tiree in April 1954, aged 18, writing to the "Fair Isle Bird Observatory Trust" for permission to do some research on bird migration. Taking the binoculars that came from his grandfather, which he used for the rest of his life, his meticulous diary starts with a lovely teenage entry of the people and their role on that trip, where Dad describes himself as "Ornithologist, botanist and photographer". He borrowed his father's cine camera and filmed a raven's nest, and his diary records the early spring flowers and their

habitats— he was a naturalist in the round from very early, with a keenness for botany as well as birds. It was no surprise that when he went on to Cambridge, to King's College, it was to read Natural Sciences and that, whilst at Cambridge, his first scientific publication was a study of bird migration across the Pyrenees.

Three key events happened early in his Cambridge days:

Most importantly, he met Alisoun Shire. Dad, of course, chose Scotland to propose, and our parents married six years after they first met in the beautiful setting of the Chapel of King's College where my mother's father was a fellow. Some of the music in today's service is music they chose together for their wedding.

Secondly, for his 20th birthday his grandmother gave him a first edition of Bewick's British Birds. Thus began his life-long interest in a wood engraver whom he particularly admired for his accurate and natural depictions of wildlife. He recognised a fellow bird watcher— Bewick's drawings demonstrate he really knew the birds in their natural habitat, and did not rely on the stuffed specimens often used at that time. Neither he nor his grandmother could have anticipated that Dad would live most of his life a few miles from Bewick's childhood home, developing a deep interest in Bewick; and that those volumes would be the perfect start to Dad's passion for old books.

Thirdly there was medicine. Dad's English grandfather was a GP and anaesthetist who died before Dad was born. Dad knew the photograph of him as a medical student outside the Gibbs Building at Barts. Soon after arriving at Cambridge Dad decided to study medicine rather than natural sciences. He went on to Barts, like his grandfather, and even engineered that I was born in the Gibbs building outside which that photograph had been taken.

After house jobs and a pathology post, a choice influenced by his knowledge of Osler's teaching, Dad settled on neurology, where he could use his outstanding clinical and diagnostic skills to the full. He was determined to train under Henry Millar and John Walton, in Newcastle. So sure was he about the post that immediately he learned of his success at interview he apparently popped his head back around the door, asked for a recommendation for a local solicitor, promptly travelled west from the centre of the city, found a house here in Heddon-on-the-Wall with wonderful views across the Tyne Valley, in

complete contrast to central London, and bought it. Luckily Mum approved when he got back to London with the news. Indeed this was a very happy move for my mother, and Robert was born soon after the move, the true Geordie in our family. After his peripatetic childhood, Dad would say he didn't know where he came from but that he belonged in Northumberland. My mother too loves the village and her wealth of friends here, who have been so supportive in recent weeks.

And so my parents' love of Newcastle and Northumberland started, and their enjoyment of music in the King's Hall and with the Avison Society and most recently at The Sage. By joining the Lit and Phil, Dad rapidly became part of Newcastle cultural circles. From the start he had two parallel careers, medicine and natural history, and in both he shared a passion for old books. He was always home particularly late on a Tuesday evening right through our childhood, for he had started bookbinding, restoring old books with great respect for their provenance. One of his bookbinding friends, Tim Gradon, has made a Book of Remembrance, which you will find in the Swan Inn after this service. He became known to the local and national antiquarian booksellers. His library started to grow more rapidly, along with the depth of his interests. He enjoyed the work of John Ray and Gilbert White, and helped to set up the Friends of William Turner, the naturalist, in Morpeth. His real expertise centred on his knowledge of the history of the people, those naturalists, early physicians and anatomists. He was an excellent historian and his meticulous and accurately referenced research has come up time and again in discussions. In medicine, of many books I could mention, for me it was particularly the obstetric drawings of William Hunter and his mentor William Smellie that stand out. He bought battered copies of their great obstetric books and restored these with great skill. He became involved in the Natural History Society of Northumbria, based in the Hancock Museum, where he was, in the 80s, Chairman of the Society's Library Committee, working to make the library more accessible, and building it up and then, later, taking on the challenging task of Chair of Council. He became President of the Friends of the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, Robinson Library. He became very well known in Newcastle.

Dad came as a Medical Research Council research fellow working on early genetic associations of Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy. The need for a specialist clinician in paediatric neurology became apparent. Dad was interested, and focused his attention on

developing the skills for that post. Like his father he took a Harkness fellowship, and we all went off to Boston. This was a very important time for us all as a family. We renewed our friendship with old American friends, the Shankland family. Robert and I, aged 4 and 6, developed Bostonian accents, and best of all we got to know our father much better - we travelled all around the States, visited cousins in Canada -all in a Ford Estate Car for long trips, the longest was for three months, always camping and having many adventures, from the everglades to the sequoias of California -Robert's particular favourite- a source of many wonderful memories!

Dad was appointed as consultant in paediatric neurology in 1972. He made a huge impact in many ways. Firstly in the development of a multidisciplinary team, particularly for the care of boys with Duchenne's muscular dystrophy. Survival and quality of life were dependent on meticulous care, at home, in school right through to the intensive care unit. He built a skilled multidisciplinary team - whom he admired greatly. The addition of more doctors to the team actually came very late, and I'm afraid Dad slightly boasted that they replaced him with four consultants when he retired. His multidisciplinary team approach and meticulous care led to the improved quality of life and life expectancy which he felt was his greatest achievement. The average age of death from Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy in the northeast rose to 30 years, compared to just 19 elsewhere.

Secondly Dad was a natural teacher and mentor, following Osler's principles, always stressing the importance of getting the foundations of diagnosis and clinical care right, and his maxim "give the child space" to emphasise the importance of gait assessment for muscular dystrophy is still used as a key principle in training today. The many kind comments from those people he taught say this better than I can. "It is thanks to David that I am a paediatric neurologist at all - he opened the door for me to join the specialty as well as giving me the best training anyone could dream of. I still feel the strength of his example - fantastic with children who all immediately related warmly to him. My memories of him squatting smiling at the end of a corridor with arms outstretched so a young child would run to him which they did with total enthusiasm - so knowledgeable, hard working and conscientious, such a lovely mischievous sense of humour, and always very kind, a real teacher in every sense." "He was of course one of the founder fathers of our speciality."

“He had great humanity and was patient, compassionate and gracious with his patients and their parents.”

That makes it sound as if he was uninterested in medical progress and research- nothing could be further from the truth. He was always modest about his own contribution, and excited by improved knowledge because of what this could ultimately mean for the patients. Dad expressed slight frustration when he retired that he missed seeing the beginning of major benefits from medical therapeutics for these children. His retirement party was hosted by the boys and their families at Pendower Special School and featured a wheelchair hockey game where the medical team was roundly beaten by the boys. He continued to the end to hear of his boys, always sending his best wishes to the patients who remembered him very fondly.

He was immensely proud of the people who carried on after him and of the breadth and depth of the burgeoning research, particularly the work of those people he knew and taught early in their careers, scientists and doctors alike.

Retirement allowed him to indulge his other passions. He thrived in his second career as a gentleman scientist and philanthropist over the last 17 years, from which he had a great deal of joy. How do I summarise this second career? People have spoken of his beautiful talks and the high quality of his research and writing for the Natural History Society over many years. In his time as their Chair of Council he took his role representing the views of the Society on the preservation of natural environments, extremely seriously and worked tirelessly to achieve his goals. Influencing the 1997 Otterburn Public Enquiry towards a positive environmental outcome was one of his finest hours.

He was sought out to give his expert opinion about rare books, he identified important books that should be acquired, and helped to build up a number of different libraries and archives in the region.

And what of Thomas Bewick? Dad was part of the Bewick Birthplace Trust in the successful campaign for the preservation of Cherryburn and promoting the work of Bewick. From this "The Bewick Society" was born in 1989, and in 2003 Dad was heavily involved in the 250th anniversary celebrations of Bewick's birth skillfully and knowledgeably editing a collection of

essays, adding one of his own, as well as involvement in many of the events for the occasion. Most recently he completed a detailed study of Bewick's ancestors, much praised for the quality and detail of his research, and he has written many articles for the Society. That summary really doesn't do justice to his knowledge and love of the artist over the years, or the deep friendships with other like minded colleagues which grew from it. He was thrilled to play a part in returning some original Bewick woodblocks to Northumberland very recently, including the little bittern and tawny owl printed from those blocks we have used today.

The one concern Dad expressed as he retired was that he would miss the children. Never patronised, always listened to and valued, he enjoyed their company immensely. June Holmes, a much valued friend and colleague at the Natural History Society, told me a lovely anecdote. David was "Chuffed as nuts" when whilst walking through the Hancock museum a wee boy said to him "Which one of the Hancock brothers are you?" His own grandchildren have been an immense source of joy and pride to him, and you may imagine how thrilled he was to know that his eldest granddaughter wishes to be a librarian.

In a moment we will hear the sound of Whimbrels, a specific request of his. He heard these in Finland. Whimbrels are relatives of the curlew, and like the curlew they have a beautifully eerie song. They can be heard in Scotland and Northumberland, but in Scanadinavia they are numerous, standing a few feet apart on the tundra, their sound filling the air. Dad has said where he wishes to be, back in Scotland, in the Cairngorms which he first knew as a boy. We will take him there walking up through the Caledonian forest with its red squirrels, pine martins and capercallie, up to the open hills with short eared owls and ptarmigan, to the tops with the golden eagle and peregrine falcon. It will be the perfect place for him to be, and for us to remember him.