

Kenneth Boyd Fraser

Kenny Fraser was a noted virologist who had a distinguished military record during the Second World War. He graduated in medicine from Aberdeen University in 1940 and joined the RAMC in 1941. He was posted to the Chin Hills in Burma where British and Indian troops together with forces from the local Highlanders, were holding outposts near Japanese emplacements. In 1943, he was awarded the MC for gallantry in the rescue under heavy fire of an injured sepoy whom he carried to safety – and to recovery – over exceedingly difficult terrain for a mile and a half. In retirement, he published privately, a memoir of his time there entitled, rather intriguingly, “Don’t believe a Word of it!”. Despite the apparent frivolity of the title, this is a factual and fascinating account of an area of the world and its village peoples which few can now have the opportunity to see. The book is dedicated to the Chin Highlanders with whom he served.

After return to civilian life, he joined the Department of Bacteriology in Aberdeen University as Junior Lecturer and, in 1950, was awarded the MD with honours for work on the antibodies produced in infectious mononucleosis. With the help of a Nuffield Grant, he then spent two years from 1951-2 with Sir MacFarlane Burnet in the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute in Australia studying recombination in influenza virus: this resulted in brilliant series of experiments which enabled Sir Mac to predict the segmented nature of influenza virus genome. Later he demonstrated phenotypic mixing between the antigens of different strains of influenza virus – an early example in a mammalian virus.

Against Sir Mac’s advice, he returned to academic life in his old department in Aberdeen where he showed that the neurotropism of the NWS strain of influenza virus was due to its localization in the Purkinje cells of the mouse cerebellum. In 1959, he moved to the University of Glasgow as Senior Lecturer in the Institute of Virology and it was here that he first developed his interest in immunology and, in particular, the technique of immunofluorescence. He was awarded the degree of DSc in 1960 for his work on virus genetics in the University of Aberdeen.

In 1966 he was appointed to the Chair of Microbiology at the Queen’s University of Belfast. His contribution to the Department in Belfast encompassed research, his interest in the development of immunology, and a major contribution to teaching in the Faculties of Medicine and Science. His research into the immunology of persistent virus infections was initially based on his expertise in immunofluorescence and centred on the measles virus, for which, in 1974, the Medical Research Council awarded a five-year Project Grant to study the relationship between multiple sclerosis and the immunology of the measles virus. This was only possible with the full involvement of clinicians and reflected the high degree of mutual respect in which Kenny and his clinical collaborators held each other. His belief in the value of clinical science was seen in the number of junior medical staff from different disciplines who held research fellowships in his department and were subsequently awarded MD degrees.

He was very aware of the need to incorporate the new science of Immunology into both the scientific and clinical fields so that the Department was later renamed Microbiology and Immunobiology. By the mid 1970s immunology was accepted as a discipline in its own right by the NHS in Northern Ireland, in large part due to his foresight and encouragement. In teaching he expanded an existing honours course in Microbiology for science students from which several graduates later became members of the academic and research staff of the department. He was particularly enthusiastic about the benefits of intercalated BSc courses for medical students and made a major personal contribution to this course in his own department despite a heavy commitment to the teaching of medical and dental students.

Kenny did not enjoy administration yet approached it with the same rigour and honesty that he brought to his scientific work, sometimes to the chagrin of professional managers. During his time in Belfast the “troubles” were at their worst, but under Kenny’s leadership and ably supported by his Chief Technician Mr Jimmy McAlister, staff members at all levels and from diverse backgrounds worked harmoniously together. Unlike his staff, Kenny was very happy to work through the Christmas break: he was unavailable at Hogmanay.

In 1948, Kenny married Leslie Fraser, herself a doctor. They had a happy home life and were the most hospitable of hosts. Kenny was a delightful companion with a dry, typically Scottish sense of humour enhanced by his enjoyment of malt whisky of which he was a connoisseur. In 1982 he and Leslie retired to a cottage in Altnaha near Tomintoul in the Highlands where, predeceased by her, he died on 17 July 2001.

Morag C Timbury, Thomas A McNeill and Margaret Haire.

Kenneth Boyd Fraser MC, MB ChB, MD, DSc: born 10 March 1917; elected FRSE 6 March 1961; died 17 July 2001.