Prof BP Marmion AO, MA (Cantab), DSc (Lond), MD (Lond), FRCPath (UK), FRACP, FRS (Edinburgh) DUniv(Adel) excelled as a clinical microbiologist, medical researcher and academic, as a mentor to many younger colleagues, and as an outstanding human being. His professional life stretched more than 70 years, from the era when smallpox, typhoid and diphtheria were regularly encountered, through to times of gene therapy and routine molecular diagnostics.

Barrie Patrick Marmion was born in 1920 in Alverstoke near Portsmouth, son of Joseph P and Melita Hannah Marmion. He was educated for a period at a catholic boys boarding school which was a not particularly happy experience, and contributed to his sceptical attitude towards religion in his later years. He began medical school at University College London in 1939, but was then evacuated to the Welsh National School of medicine in Cardiff at the start of the war, and returned to UCH in London for his clinical studies – he stayed in a hostel in Gower St, slept in the squash courts during the air raids, and took a part-time job at Great Ormond Street Hospital after he ran out of money. Because all the staff of the medical school were away at the war, the course was largely self-taught by the students teaching each other – Barrie was proud of this experience and it maybe helped shape his determined self-reliance in later years.

After graduation in 1944, he was accepted by GS Wilson FRS to join the Public Health Laboratory Service (PHLS), which at that time provided an exceptional pathology training programme, and he spent time in Cambridge and at the Virus Reference Laboratory which had just been set up in Colindale. He had a short appointment in Leicester and danced around the clock-tower in Leicester when the end of the war was declared. In 1951-52 with support of a Rockefeller Scholarship, Marmion worked at the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute in Melbourne. He shared a bench with Macfarlane Burnet, worked on respiratory viruses and Murray valley encephalitis. He also spent Christmas in Naracoorte, South Australia, with Diana his future wife, whom he had first met in Portugal in 1947. Back in UK, he joined Michael Stoker’s group in Cambridge in a major investigation of Q fever infection in the UK.

Life in Cambridge was comfortable – Diana had joined him there and they had just married - although they were poor. In 1955 he moved to head the new PHLS virus laboratory in Leeds. This was an exciting time in diagnostic virology and the lab dealt with cases of smallpox and control of paralytic poliomyelitis by mass feeding of Sabin vaccine. Marmion also made the key discovery (concurrently with Hayflick and Chanock in USA) that Eaton’s atypical pneumonia agent is a mycoplasma, and published the first description of Q fever endocarditis.

In 1963 Marmion was appointed Foundation Professor of Microbiology at the new Monash University Medical School in Melbourne. They received help from David White and others at the well-established University of Melbourne. This was a stimulating and enjoyable time – in the first year they lived from crisis to crisis, writing new lectures in the week before they were due, but it was a liberating experience after coming out of the PHLS. He also managed to some research on mycoplasma antigens with Ruth Lemcke and Phil Plackett, and some work on hepatitis A. From this early beginning, Monash Medical School is now one of the premier medical faculties in the country.
Barrie Marmion then accepted an invitation to the Robert Irvine Chair of Bacteriology in Edinburgh, and moved back to UK in 1968 with his wife Diana and daughter Jane. He was expecting this would be an easier job because the staffing was more lavish, and hoped to be free to spend more time with his family in UK. However, shortly after arrival he became heavily engaged in control of a severe high-mortality outbreak of hepatitis B in the Renal Unit. This work led to principles of the control of blood borne viruses that also became valuable lessons for the era of HIV/AIDS. It also opened up discoveries about pathogenesis of hepatitis B with Christopher Burrell and Eric Gowans, and (with Ken Murray, Burrell and Patricia Mackay) the cloning with antigen expression of hepatitis B virus, the first human virus to be cloned.

During this time Marmion also carried out extensive testing of novel infective hypotheses about rheumatoid arthritis with John Mackay and Mary Norval.

Barrie had retained an affection and respect for Australia, and his wife Diana had personal links with Adelaide. In 1979 he accepted appointment as Senior Director of the Division of Medical Virology at the Institute of Medical and Veterinary Science (IMVS), Adelaide. IMVS was an excellent model of a diagnostic/research institution with an independent charter and good links to the Royal Adelaide Hospital. Marmion developed and extended what had already been a good laboratory diagnostic service, and supported by Chris Burrell, Eric Gowans and others built virology research into one of the leading research groups in the country. Jim Bonnin was a supportive Director of the IMVS, but political divisions in South Australia and repeated undermining by the press made life difficult. An invitation to Marmion to succeed Jim Bonnin as Director of the IMVS was not followed through. Despite these trials, the quality of professional diagnostic and research work in medical virology, and in IMVS as a whole, continued to grow and IMVS became viewed as a model for the whole country.

Following his retirement from IMVS, Marmion continued research into Q fever. A major achievement during this time was the introduction into Australia of the successful vaccine against Q fever; Marmion developed production guidelines, validated protocols for its correct and safe use, conducted successful trials of clinical efficacy, and ensured that continued production of vaccine was supported by CSL and the Federal Government through the establishment at CSL in Melbourne of the BP Marmion Q Fever Vaccine Manufacturing Facility. Other notable work in this period included novel studies on sites of persistence of Q fever organisms in the body, and investigation of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome in association with Q fever.

His awards included Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) and Foundation Distinguished Fellow Award (Gold medal) of the Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia, and he was an Honorary Life Member of the American Society for Rickettsiology and of Clare Hall, University of Cambridge.

Barrie Marmion combined a dignified, authoritative presence – at times he could appear forbidding - with extraordinary warmth, thoughtfulness and support and recognition of others. He was devoted to his wife Diana, daughter Jane and her husband Geoffrey, and granddaughters Claire and Sarah, and kept good links with his more distant relatives in UK. He read widely, was an entertaining lunchtime host, enjoying to debate politics, literature, music and world affairs with charm and insight. He maintained very high standards of scholarship, in writing and in scientific work. His medical and diagnostic experience helped to keep him focussed on the benefit of his work to human health. He would always bring some theoretical discussion back to “well, its what happens in the real world that is the only true test”, and his work with Q fever, hepatitis and other infections invariably came back to “what is actually happening in this infection, and what needs to be done? “ He was intensely loyal to his co-workers, one of whom once stated famously “if you can count Barrie Marmion as your friend, you are lucky indeed and your enemies need to watch out”. 

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