

Professor John Herbert Subak-Sharpe CBE, FRSE
14 February 1924 - 8 July 2020



After Annexation of Austria by Germany in 1938 John was one of thousands of children from Jewish families who were relocated to the UK as part of the Kindertransport rescue effort. On 10 January 1939, at the age of 14, after saying a tearful farewell to his parents and grandmother, he travelled from Vienna by train with his younger brother Gerald. He arrived in Britain 2 days later and after a short time with his sponsor and a spell in a school in Ealing, he elected to work as a farmer's boy in Nottinghamshire. There, he was not well treated and after a variety of moves, including different farms and a dairy farm where he was given the responsibility of stock manager, he joined the army in June 1944. In October that year he volunteered for the 3rd Para Regiment, changing his name to Sharpe (as did his brother) so that in the event of capture, he could not be linked back to his parents for fear of reprisals.

He was eventually transferred to Egypt with both interpreter and intelligence duties in a Prisoner of War camp. His great regret was that many of the people he identified as war criminals were never tried for their crimes.

After demobilisation he reunited with his brother and became a UK citizen in 1947. Both decided they wanted to study at University but now aged 23 and 22, and with very little formal education, they gained some initial qualifications that allowed them to attend Aston Technical College. There, they did sufficiently well to gain entry to University. John went to Birmingham studying Genetics and Gerald to University College London studying Electrical Engineering. They both graduated with first class honours, John obtaining the earliest first in Genetics in the UK. John then began his PhD in Birmingham and whilst still a post-graduate student became an assistant lecturer at Glasgow University in Guido Pontecorvo's Genetics Department. It was during his time in Birmingham that he met his wife Barbara. Their first encounter in Birmingham University Library was perhaps not the best start. He turned round to address this pretty redhead sitting behind him, chatting to her friend, with the words, "For goodness sake, shut up". Clearly, she must have decided that John was a challenge. They married in 1953, at the end of his first year as a PhD student, and remained a devoted couple for 65 years until her death in December 2018.

After the award of his PhD at Birmingham, John developed his career with posts at the Animal Virus Research Institute in Pirbright and the California Institute of Technology. He then joined the MRC Experimental Virus Research Unit (under Michael Stoker) in Glasgow in 1961. From there he went back to the USA to the National Institute of Health in Washington in 1967 on a visiting professorship. In 1968, he was offered and accepted the Chair of Virology at Glasgow University and Honorary Directorship of the MRC Virology Unit (renamed from the MRC Experimental Virus Research Unit). He held both positions for 26 years until he retired in 1994, heading the Institute of Virology which encompassed virologists from the University, the MRC Virology Unit and a NHS Diagnostic Laboratory.

I first met John in 1971 at the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory on Long Island in New York. It was the first International Herpesvirus Meeting and I had travelled from Pennsylvania for an interview for a research position in the MRC Virology Unit. John always wanted to fit as much as possible into each day: my interview was held after swimming out to a diving platform off the beach at the laboratory. This format was unlike any other interview: each hanging with one elbow on the platform, it struck me that the Unit could be a really interesting place in which to work. I joined in 1972 and both he and the Unit lived up to my expectations.

I admired the way in which he built the Institute while resisting any attempts to cut its budget. He brought in new technologies that permitted projects for whole genome DNA sequencing of viruses such as large herpesviruses, thereby enabling studies on their evolutionary relationships. These sequencing efforts were the bedrock for mapping the functions of viral genes and understanding their mechanism of action. Over the following decades, these techniques have seen exponential

development and are now central to such current problems as elucidating the person-to-person spread of Covid-19 as well as diagnostics. John also gave free rein to developing proteomics (the study of protein structure and function) and the generation of monoclonal antibodies, promoting links with the pharmaceutical industry to exploit the findings. He encouraged a new approach to microscopy involving mathematical analysis of multiple electron microscopic images giving rise to insightful high resolution 3-dimensional images of herpesviruses that have now become commonplace for other viruses.

John's encouragement and loyalty to staff were hallmarks of his personal qualities as a leader. His drive to promote scientific excellence, irrespective of gender, led to almost equal numbers of females and males holding senior positions in the Institute. He also facilitated the training of 125 PhD students most of whom remained in virology throughout their working lives and found employment in 25 countries. Many of his past staff and students achieved leading positions in both industry and academia. Possibly as a consequence of his own experiences, he also nurtured under-graduate and post-graduate studies by technical support staff, which offered unforeseen opportunities to many.

By the time he retired, the Institute of Virology had doubled in size to become the largest grouping of virologists in Europe. As a consequence, Glasgow University became synonymous with virus research. This has continued to the present day through the creation of the MRC-University of Glasgow Centre for Virus Research, which is housed on the Gartnavel Campus of the University, and combines the strengths of the former MRC Virology Unit with the Institute of Comparative Medicine from the School of Veterinary Medicine.

Undoubtedly, John had a major impact on virology worldwide. He was co-author on about 150 scientific publications. His academic and research contributions were rightly recognised in numerous ways. In 1970, he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. He also became a Trustee of the Genetical Society in the UK and an elected Member of the European Molecular Biology Organisation. In 1991, he was honoured with the CBE by the Queen and awarded the CIBA Medical of the Biochemical Society. One 'honour' that gave him a special pleasure was a gold whistle presented to him by the International Herpesvirus community who inaugurated an annual lecture in recognition of his contribution to herpesvirology and the many workshops that he organised. By tradition, blowing the whistle signals the end to each symposium and is then passed to the organiser of the next conference.

John was very much a family man, no doubt arising from his war-torn childhood experiences, which undoubtedly caused him great personal sadness. After the war he learned that in 1942 his Jewish parents were transported to Riga and murdered by the Nazis. His experiences translated in part to the importance that he attached to families including my own. When my late wife Moira became ill with cancer he made available to us their cottage on the Isle of Lismore.

John had a great love of mountain climbing, usually with his brother and cousin, in the Alps and the Pyrenees, and in Scotland. His love of bridge, for which he was the University team captain at Birmingham, supplemented the family income with winnings when living in Pirbright and filled much of his time after retirement together with sea fishing for which he had great boyish enthusiasm but not much skill.

In the last years of his life John, and subsequently Barbara, retired to a care home. They were well looked after and remained free of Covid-19. Fittingly, they are buried together on the Isle of Lismore, a place of treasured memories for them and the family. They are survived by three children; Robert, Anne and Ian who are all in health care, (two consultants and a health visitor), and six grandchildren. He and Barbara were always very proud of them all.

Howard Marsden, FRSE

Former Principal Scientist, MRC Virology Unit
with assistance from

Professor John McLaughlan

MRC-University of Glasgow Centre for Virus Research

**Professor John Herbert Subak-Sharpe CBE, FRSE. Born 14 February 1924 in Austria.
Elected FRSE 1970. Died 8 July 2020.**