Anthony Hugh Cyril Ratliff 18th August 1921 - 21st June 2014

By Christopher Ackroyd & Ian Leslie

Tony, or “Ratty”, as he was known affectionately by friends and colleagues, had a long and productive life dying two months before his 93rd birthday. He was born in Manchester on 18th August 1921 and died in Bristol on 21st June 2014. He was a great innovator, a tireless and enthusiastic worker and his talents were widespread. His orthopaedic knowledge and clinical acumen were legendary and yet he would never flinch from asking a colleague for a second opinion if he was uncertain of a diagnosis or treatment. He was a major influence in helping the orthopaedic department in Bristol to develop from what he described as a “glorified district hospital” to one of the leading orthopaedic centres in the country with a formidable academic reputation. Tony’s passion was teaching and research and his over-riding priority was the importance of educating the next generation of orthopaedic surgeons. He took huge interest in his registrars’ research looking up and providing relevant papers and encouraging their endeavours. He was quick to congratulate a good presentation, offer constructive advice and took transparent pride in high quality work. He and Jean were generous hosts to the registrars who they invited regularly to social, College and Medicolegal Society dinners. A feature of these was ‘Coffee and Kitkats’ at The Avenue to finish the evening.

Although some would find that he did not tolerate fools easily he had a marvellous sense of humour and was exceptionally supportive of the many generations of orthopaedic trainees that passed through the Department. He was also very supportive of his younger orthopaedic colleagues and would always go out of his way to help them advance their careers.

Tony was born of relatively humble origins in Manchester on 18th August 1921 and his early years were blighted by the sadness of the death of his mother Elsie when he was only 10 years old. Tony had a brother Brian, four years his junior. His father, who was a master mariner and served at Gallipoli in World War I was a businessman and retailer and ran leather handbag shops in Manchester. He remarried and had another three children, with whom Tony was close, two sisters, Frances and Nancy and a brother, Michael. In the uncertain years between the World Wars his business thrived and Tony was sent to private school and received a broad classical education. At the start of World War II Tony was in the 6th form at William Hulme Grammar School Manchester a school of which he was proud. He had decided to study medicine and as this was a protected profession for the purposes of conscription, he was admitted to
Manchester University, which was a short walk from his home. So Tony studied through the war, although called on in the later years to help with the D-day casualties. He threw himself into medical studies, won various prizes and qualified with a distinction in surgery in June 1945. He also played lacrosse for Lancashire and captained the university team.

The early years after qualification were spent obtaining a broad experience in general and orthopaedic surgery at the Manchester Royal Infirmary. It was here that in 1946 he worked for Sir Harry Platt and Sir Henry Osmond-Clark who were to play a major influence in his career.

In 1943, Tony met his future wife Jean at the Christian Endeavour holiday home in Plas-y-Nant in North Wales. She was a student at Homerton College, Cambridge and was to become a Physical Education teacher. They married in Leeds in the summer of 1947 and Tony then spent two years in National Service as a captain in the RAMC.

By 1951 he had passed his final FRCS and gained further experience in appointments at the Manchester hospitals. Like many young surgeons Tony fell under the profound influence of a tough, brilliant and charismatic boss in the form of Sir Harry Platt at the Manchester Royal Infirmary. He recalls Sir Harry carrying out a tendon transplant with John Charnley as first assistant and himself as second assistant. Sir Harry stimulated Tony to carry out the first of many clinical reviews for which he has become well known. He did not think that the treatment of mallet finger was satisfactory and Sir Harry replied “Better review the results of 100 cases”. Although he did not achieve 100 cases, he did publish a review of 45 cases in the Manchester Medical School Gazette of 1947.

Tony spent a year at the Robert Jones & Agnes Hunt Orthopaedic Hospital Oswestry in 1953 to enhance his experience of poliomyelitis where he was influenced by the magnetic Sir Reginald Watson-Jones. He then gained senior registrar experience in Edinburgh for two-and-a-half years under the influence of Sir Walter Mercer and I R Stirling. Although he enjoyed Edinburgh greatly he did not wish to remain in Scotland and in 1956 applied successfully for the post of Lecturer in his alma mater, the Manchester Royal Infirmary.

Consultant posts at that time were scarce and in 1959 he was appointed consultant orthopaedic surgeon at Southend, a busy district general hospital in Essex. The two previous surgeons, George Bonney and D K Evans had moved to London teaching hospitals, so a condition was imposed on Tony that he would not move. However, he had been greatly influenced by his academic background in Manchester and when a post was advertised in Bristol, the opportunity to make a contribution to academic orthopaedics and clinical research in a large pleasant city was overwhelming.

Tony was appointed Consultant Orthopaedic and Trauma Surgeon at the Bristol Royal Infirmary in 1963 and, shortly afterwards, by a stroke of luck, Arthur Eyre-Brook, the Senior Surgeon announced that the BOA annual meeting would be held in Bristol. As the new boy on the block and the youngest consultant Tony was made Scientific Secretary and so began a long association with the British Orthopaedic Association, post-graduate activity and clinical research. The BOA met three times in Bristol in the next seven years, the third being in 1972 when Eyre-Brook was the President.

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Tony was a prolific writer and organiser. He had over 37 orthopaedic publications on a wide variety of clinical subjects especially paediatrics, hand surgery and rheumatoid disease. His classic papers on Perthes’ disease and fractures of the femoral neck in children were regarded as important reviews and in 1960 he was elected Hunterian Professor for his work. In the same year he was awarded the ABC Fellowship to North America and Tony and the three other Fellows travelled out on the Queen Mary. He also published on bone tumours, the vascular and neurological complications of total hip replacement and gave the Robert Jones Lecture in 1981, highlighting the achievements of the Bristol Surgeon Hey Groves. Tony co-authored several books on “Hip Disorders in Children”, “Selected references on Orthopaedic Trauma”, “Selected references on Elective Orthopaedics” and also found time to obtain a ChM.
He acted as expert to the Medical Protection Society often presenting cases to the Friday afternoon meetings to gain consensus as to whether cases could be defended. He was alert to the difficulty when notes were inadequate and sought to avoid this in his own practice with voluminous consultation notes prefixed by the statement ‘I know this patient well’.

Tony made significant contributions to Bristol orthopaedics and in the late 1960s was largely responsible for planning the new Accident and Emergency department which opened in 1972. He was surgeon-in-charge for a further two years when he was succeeded by Paul Stableforth. He ran a combined Rheumatology/Orthopaedic clinic up to his retirement. The Bristol Bone Tumour Registry had been started in 1946 and Tony played an active part in its development especially as Chairman between 1982 and 1991. Education of the next generation was one of his passions and he started a three day postgraduate course in orthopaedics in 1965. This gained a popular national reputation as “The Winford Course” which he continued to organise for another 15 years.

Academic orthopaedics was developing in the United Kingdom but Bristol did not have a Professor of Orthopaedics. In 1980 a fund raising committee was formed to inaugurate a Bristol Professorial Chair in Orthopaedics and Tony was closely involved with this development.

He maintained a close relationship with the British Orthopaedic Association and became the Editorial Secretary in 1978 to 1979, a Member of Council and then President in 1984.

In 1983 Tony was elected to the Council of the Royal College of Surgeons of England having been Orthopaedic and Surgical Advisor for the South West Region from 1974. He served on several College committees and with his usual energy and enthusiasm made many contributions to the work of the College. Through his extensive travel representing the College and BOA he was able to secure a steady flow of Australian registrars who came to Bristol for further training. At the Combined Meeting of the Orthopaedic Associations in Sydney in 2004, Tony, at the age of 81, organised with his usual enthusiasm, a reunion of all Australasian Registrars who had worked in Bristol. When attending orthopaedic meetings anywhere in the world you were very likely to come across him striding briskly across the foyer to attend the next session.

In later years, though he retired from the Bristol Royal Infirmary in 1986 aged 65, he continued to represent the Royal College of Surgeons and British Orthopaedic Association for nearly 20 years. He also continued his medico-legal practice and advisory work until 2008.

Although devoted his life to medicine and orthopaedics, after retirement he joined the local Rotary (having joined first in Southend) and gained great joy and satisfaction from a wide range of new friends. He was a great walker, enjoyed long country walks, read widely and was interested in history.

Tony was a passionate family man and he and Jean travelled widely on his many official duties in addition to many family holidays. He has two sons, David who is a vascular surgeon in Northampton and John, a barrister in Brussels. He was devoted to his five grandchildren, Isabelle, Matthew, Alison, Scott and Guillaume. Sadly, Jean died in 2003 and Tony coped with this loss with his typical stoicism and resilience.

Tony was always a tower of strength and energy and an example to all who knew him. He was a charming and open-hearted man with a huge sense of fun and a penchant for “shaggy dog stories”. He got on well with all his fellow men and will be sadly missed by his many friends and family. His last few years were spent in the St Monica Trust Retirement Home and he died peacefully in the Bristol Royal Infirmary of a myocardial infarction and pneumonia on 21st June 2014.