

# Obituary

## Mary Barber

*Professor Mary Barber was a member of the Editorial Board of this Journal from 1955 until her death, and brought to the task the same wholehearted gifts as Professor Pollock describes below.*



The news of Mary Barber's appallingly sudden and premature death must have left most of those who knew her well feeling almost desperately incredulous.

Nearly anything that can be put into words in such a situation (which, for humanity as a whole, may be commonplace enough) is liable to sound trite. But that someone like her, so full of vitality, should suddenly disappear from the world that she so obviously enjoyed living in and doing things for, still remains outrageous—one almost feels it is preposterous—however often it may have happened before.

Mary's life had many different sides to it and she appeared to keep them rather separate. Those who had contact with her professionally probably knew little about her political and religious activities. And even many of us who shared her political, as well as her scientific interests, had little acquaintance with her work as an active Christian socialist in Dalston. Yet there was certainly nothing ethically or logically inconsistent about her beliefs and actions. Indeed many would agree that her Christianity would follow

logically from her Socialist convictions. And quite a number would see her rational scientific approach to the practical problems of human suffering caused by infectious diseases as a logical basis for her progressive social ethics.

Her career began as a pathologist at the Royal Free Hospital in 1936 and she remained in the field of clinical bacteriology all her life, although the subject she made particularly her own, and in which she achieved an international reputation, was that of penicillin resistance in the staphylococcus. But this apparently rather narrow field had many wider implications and she is well known for her knowledge and practical achievements in control of cross infection in hospitals and for her pioneer work in the 'restricted antibiotics' trials at Hammersmith. It was in fact at the Postgraduate Medical School there that her most valuable work was done; indeed, apart from the 10 years from 1948 to 1958 at St. Thomas's Hospital, she was at Hammersmith from 1940 until her death. Clearly at Hammersmith she found the atmosphere and conditions best suited to her needs.

Different people would no doubt have different ideas about her outstanding scientific qualities. For those of us in the domain of academic bacteriology, who knew and worked with her over a period of many years, this was unquestionably her ability to grasp the importance of applying basic biochemical and genetical principles and knowledge to the practice of medical bacteriology. Not only this, but she would work with equal vigour and effectiveness in the other direction. With Mary around, it just was not possible for microbial geneticists or molecular bacteriologists to remain in their holes or stuck up in their ivory towers. Their problems became alive in a fresh and urgent sense. She never pretended to be a biochemist or geneticist herself: but she certainly was not frightened of either biochemistry or genetics and she had a great sense of how to mobilize them—often through the work of her colleagues, collaborators, and assistants—for her own purposes. If only there were more such personalities in clinical pathology!

Indeed, one of the last professional meetings I attended in London, with her in the chair, was a small discussion group early this year at Hammer-

smith. It was organized to strengthen collaboration between workers (clinical and academic) on the specific problem of the development of staphylococcal resistance to the new penicillins and cephalosporins. Considering the mixture of hospital bacteriologists and 'rarified' biochemists present, it was an exceptionally useful and interesting meeting. And there was no doubt as to who was mainly responsible, nor of the fact that Mary had a far better grasp of the situation, in all its aspects, than anyone else present.

We at Mill Hill depended upon her to ease our contact, not only with hospital and clinical laboratories, but also with pharmaceutical firms and their research organizations (particularly for supplies of new antibiotics in their pre-release periods). She detested unnecessary secrecy and scientific 'reticence' as much as she disliked red-tape which she took a positive joy in cutting through at any reasonable opportunity. Her approach to other people, *especially* to the high and mighty, was fearless and forthright. She always came quickly to the point, and, without any feminine wiles—but with charm and persistence—she seemed nearly always to get her way. (Perhaps that had something to do with her excellence as a lecturer.) In fact, for reasons which have never been completely clear to me, she was

practically irresistible. This perhaps was a later development, however, after she had really found herself and success had given her ease in self-confidence. When I first met her, shortly after the war, she appeared rather formidable: shy, clipped in conversation, and almost too sure of herself. But this was either a superficial impression or a plain illusion—at least so far as her real character was concerned. She did, indeed, take life seriously; but never grimly, certainly never during the last fifteen years, when I got to know her well. Indeed, she was a gay character: gay, but firm, and full of what sometimes amounted to an almost mischievous sense of humour. In some ways, perhaps, she matured rather late. Certainly, she died at the height of her powers, with her reputation and influence steadily increasing.

Her departure may seem, at the moment, cruel and frightening. Certainly, as a friend and a personality, she is irreplaceable. But she is not, nor should she be, irreplaceable as a scientist. The small school of medical bacteriologists she built up during the last few years at Hammersmith is something which can last. And it really is up to those of us who believe Mary Barber achieved something rare, if not unique, to ensure that the ideas and principles she worked for, survive and flourish after her death.

M. R. POLLOCK

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