



Obituary

ROWDON MARRIAN FRY

1896-1980

By the sudden and unexpected death of Dr Fry on 4 June 1980 the world that knew him has suffered a severe blow. There cannot have been one among his numerous acquaintances who did not regret his loss. His warm friendliness, infectious humour and invariable goodwill had endeared him to all; and his passing leaves a vacuum that can never be filled.

Fry was born on 8 July 1896, the only son of the architect Joseph Henry Fry. He was educated at Merchant Taylors' School. At the outbreak of the First World War he joined the Middlesex Regiment and served in it for two years. While waiting for a transfer to what was then the Royal Flying Corps, he was wounded in 1916 on the first day of the Battle of the Somme. A year in hospital left him with a healed but slightly shortened right arm, which unfitted him for further combatant duties. He was demobilized in 1918. Instead of following his father's profession, which he had originally intended to do, he decided to study medicine. He entered St Mary's Hospital Medical School and qualified M.R.C.S., L.R.C.P. in 1922. At the invitation of Professor Kettle he joined the pathology department and worked on salivary gland tumours. In 1924 he switched over to bacteriology, and was made a so-called Research Scholar in Sir Almroth Wright's department. There, he found himself among a group of devoted bacteriologists including Colebrook, Fleming, Hare and Freeman, and learned the techniques of fashioning capillary pipettes, making slide-cell cultures, titrating sera for opsonins, preparing vaccines, and so forth.

In 1929 Colebrook left St Mary's to take up the directorship of the Bernhard Baron Laboratories at Queen Charlotte's Hospital, which were opened on 1 January 1931. Hare and Fry joined him as his assistants. The work was strenuous. The infectious disease unit, of which Colebrook was in clinical charge, consisted of 30 beds. In the laboratory the chief study was of streptococcal infection and the prevention of infection in the labour wards of the Maternity Hospital. The treatment of puerperal fever was a thankless task. Little could be done for the patients except good nursing and support of their morale. For many years Colebrook had experimented with arsenic compounds, but these proved useless in treatment of the disease. Then in 1935 came sulphonamido-crysoidin (Prontosil). The unit carried out intensive work on this substance and, to their surprise and satisfaction, found it to be effective. Sulphanilamide followed, and the death rate from infection with *Streptococcus pyogenes* in the isolation unit fell from between 25 and 30 per cent to 4 per cent. No such triumph had been witnessed before. It showed for the first time that bacterial infection was susceptible to chemotherapy; and it proved to be the forerunner of a series of advances, hitherto undreamed of, in the treatment of human disease.

When the Second World War came in 1939 the unit at Queen Charlotte's Hospital was broken up. Colebrook went into the Army as a colonel on the staff, and Fry joined the Emergency Public Health Laboratory Service, which had been created and organized by Professor Topley with the help of Sir Wilson Jameson and Dr (later Sir) Landsborough Thomson. After three months at Gloucester Fry was appointed director of the laboratory at Carmarthen, where he remained for five and a half years. With Dr Joan Boissard he provided a service to the surrounding hospitals and general practitioners such as had never been known before.

In 1946 he was transferred to Cambridge to take charge of the Regional Public Health Laboratory. Both he and Joan Boissard, who had accompanied him, were appointed to the staff of the university. As a teacher Fry proved an immediate success, captivating the students. In his public health work he was equally successful. His manifest interest in research inspired the assistants he gathered around him; and his tact, wisdom and friendliness were rewarded by the loyalty and devotion of the whole staff. In fact, under his direction, the Cambridge laboratory became one of the best-ordered and happiest in the country. The investigation of streptococcal infections remained one of his chief subjects of study; but in collaboration with Dr (later Professor) Ronald Greaves he became interested in the drying and preservation of bacterial cultures.

His relations with the university were cordial, and his popularity was marked by his election to the membership of Trinity Hall, an honour that gave him great satisfaction. With Professor Dean's approval the laboratory had been housed in the department of pathology during the war but, with the increased activity that followed Fry's arrival, it was decided that a new building was needed. In designing this Fry played a large part. His mathematical sense and desire for accuracy led to the installation of a master clock in the entrance hall such as no other laboratory in the Service possessed.

Fry retired from his official post in 1963 and took over the editorship of the *Journal of Hygiene*. This he treated as a full-time occupation. He took great pains, not only in the choice of papers for acceptance, but also in improving their phraseology. Without any secretarial help, he managed to do everything himself. By the time of his death he had raised the *Journal* to a high standard of excellence.

Outside his work Fry's interests included astronomy, music, gardening, fishing, bee-keeping, walking, and reading aloud. In 1913, while still at school, he joined the British Astronomical Association. He edited their journal from 1937 to 1945. In 1931 he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society, and from 1939 to 1941 served on their Council. He had a reflector telescope at the bottom of his garden through which privileged persons were allowed to peer. His interest in astronomy was infectious. Dr Ronald Hare, for example, recalls how, in 1927, his enthusiasm was such as to induce a number of colleagues at St Mary's to join him on a night train journey to Southport to view the solar eclipse. Bee-keeping he had to give up at Cambridge when he became sensitized to stings; but gardening was a perpetual delight to him. He loved walking, particularly in the Lake District, and with his family he spent every summer holiday staying with friends in Patterdale. At Carmarthen he enjoyed fishing in the River Cothi; and when I paid my

annual visit to the laboratory he used to regale me with a delicious supper of freshly caught salmon trout. He was a keen motorist and thought nothing of driving up to London from Cambridge in the evening to go to a concert, a meeting of the Medical Research Club, or the monthly dinner of astronomers at the Athenaeum.

Fry disliked his Christian names and, as his surname could not be shortened, he never acquired a nickname, continuing to be known by friends and colleagues alike as plain 'Fry'. He had an attractive personality, modest, kind, helpful, generous, tolerant, friendly and invariably good-tempered. Though occasionally outspoken, he never showed bitterness or malice. He was always jovial in an entertaining but restrained way; and wherever he went, people were attracted towards him, so that small unofficial clubs sprang up. From his youth he championed the rights of women and, while at St Mary's, was in close touch with the newly admitted female medical students, such as Ida Mann and Joan Ross. Perhaps the charm he exercised cannot be described in words better than those of Dr Joan Boissard: 'Working or playing, he was fun to be with.'

In 1922 Fry married Elsie Grace Dancey, who had been at Girton with Dorothy Russell. They had a very happy family life, enriched by three talented daughters.

G.S.W.