Short Articles

A VISIT TO SIR CHARLES SHERRINGTON

by

J. Z. YOUNG*

GOING through old papers recently I came upon some notes recording a visit I had paid to Sir Charles Sherrington on 7 August 1945 at the Hope Nursing Home in Cambridge where he then lived.[1] He was eighty-eight and already seriously crippled by arthritis but very alert in mind and ready to talk. Indeed he remained so until his death in 1952.

The day before, I had been in London for an interview with the Electors to the Professorship of Anatomy at University College London. I was the first non-medical man to be appointed to a chair of anatomy in England and the prospect had already excited some comment and criticism. Naturally I was interested to hear Sherrington's reactions. I had known him for some years when he was Professor of Physiology at Oxford and attached to Magdalen College, of which I was a Fellow. I had also worked in the Physiology Department there with members of his group, J. C. Eccles and D. Denny-Brown, who were also attached to Magdalen.

The following is an exact transcript of what I wrote on 8 August 1945. I have thought it best to leave it unchanged, with some explanatory notes.

On Friday night I visited Sherrington in the Hope Nursing Home—run by nuns. He is very tiny and bent with rheumatism. He sat in a chair on a pile of cushions which repeatedly shift from under him and he likes to be helped up while they are adjusted. The first time I was nervous at picking him up under the arms but remembered that it never pays to be hesitant in giving such help. He liked being lifted strongly and said he wished that the nuns did it so. But they were good souls and educated, belonging to some house of Bordeaux, whose principal was expected soon. He complained however of being dressed at 6.30 a.m. and undressed at 9.30 p.m., "It's not what one . . . ", turning to me with that merry twinkle. He is very old and shrunken but can just walk. His skin is loose but clear and he said he had just learned to use a safety razor!

His mind is very nearly what it always was and his memory excellent for recent as well as ancient events though sometimes with a little difficulty over names. "How is

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[1] Russell Brain also recorded accounts of his conversations with Sherrington in 1947, 1949, and 1950. They are published in, 'Conversations with Sherrington. A centenary reminiscence', *Lancet*, 1957, ii: 1109–1110.

our friend [Weldon] the student of Kant? I have just had his little book".[2] "Difficult," I commented. "Yes, that is what Goethe thought of Kant saying that if he had anything to say he would have said it simply." S. is evidently quite fascinated with Goethe and recurred to him often, relating how while his family were discussing religion upstairs he devised a form of sun worship for himself.[3] S. admires Goethe because of his nature worship. It is a respectable way for him [S] to express himself a pagan. He would like to be frank and sensual but cannot quite bring himself to the level of us ordinary men. So he uses Goethe as a go-between — with partial success. "How he admired the profligacy of nature. And why shouldn't nature be prodigal. Oh and how prodigal she is, isn't she, think of the spermatozoa, Young, millions of them". Looking at me with that twinkle again, deliciously innocent and dirty.

The nun came in all cowled in white, talked a little in her Irish brogue and helped again with the cushions. "He likes you to stay till 9.30—do stay until then with him."

And so we talked of nerves and neurologists. He had read my article in *Nature*[4] (brought him by R. A. Fisher[5]) and was intrigued at the idea of the myelin as a droplet, but without much understanding of it. When I said that we had suffered from regarding the nerve fibre as a wire, "Oh no, Young, I never did that. But how marvellously it is adapted to its function".

He spoke very well of A. V. Hill[6] and especially that he had abandoned in print his hypothesis that the contraction of a muscle fibre is due to surface tension.

On my going to University College he would only say "Well I suppose that subject has been neglected for so long that there must be many things to do". But I had the impression that he was disappointed though he wished me very well.

He spoke of the brotherliness of American neurologists and the Harvey Cushing Society and of his deep affection for John and Lucia Fulton.[7] "But he has one fault. Someone comes along who you or I Young would say was not very clever. But not John . . . ." He has always had a way of not finishing his sentences when they are human, especially if they are censorious. It is part of the same unwillingness to descend to the common level, though he understands it well. But he is too charitable to be happy in criticism.

Then by some talk of the giraffe he was reminded of an experiment he had seen at

[2] T. D. Weldon (1896–1958), a philosopher who was a very influential Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford. The little book referred to was *Kant's Critique of pure reason* (1945). Besides this Weldon published a controversial work on modern politics under the title of *States and morals* (1946). During the Second World War he acted as a political adviser to Sir Arthur Harris at Bomber Command.

[3] Sherrington published an essay entitled, *Goethe on nature and on science* (Cambridge, 1942).

[4] J. Z. Young, 'Surface tension and the degeneration of nerve fibres', *Nature, Lond.*, 1944, **154**: 521–522.

[5] Sir R. A. Fisher, F.R.S. (1890–1962), the statistician, formerly Professor of Biometry at University College London. In 1945 he was Professor of Genetics at Cambridge. He was responsible for a considerable part of the development of modern statistics largely set out in his *Statistical methods for research workers* (1929).

[6] A. V. Hill, F.R.S. (1886–), Jodrell Professor of Biophysics at University College London (1923–1925) awarded the Nobel Prize in 1922 for his researches on muscle and nerve. Secretary of the Royal Society 1935–1946.

[7] J. F. Fulton and his wife. He was Professor of Physiology at Yale and a well-known historian of medicine. His best-known works were *Physiology of the nervous system* (London, Oxford University Press, 1938), and *Selected readings in the history of physiology* (Springfield, Illinois, C. C. Thomas, 1930).

Lyons done on a horse—the blood poured from the masseter vein when the nerve was stimulated—and the animal stood still the whole time. "What training!" This was done by Chauveau,[8] a man he said, of unequal worth—"But perhaps the most handsome man I have ever seen. The last time it was outside the Café Royal when he had his coat, as Frenchmen do, over his shoulders like a cloak."

And then of Ramón y Cajal.[9] How he came to dinner but "showed his café habits by reducing his bread to a pile of crumbs and then to end some argument sweeping the whole lot on to the floor. My wife laughed and laughed." Cajal was very unpunctual and difficult to manage and when he was wanted for an honorary degree in Cambridge was found wandering on the [King's] Parade.

Finally he talked a little of proprioceptors and of his own mistake of not being certain if the sensory fibre degenerates when the dorsal roots are cut. But I somehow failed to make him talk much of his own work or show him how much I admired it.

He is going soon to Droitwich for a cure and I urged him to try to stop at Magdalen on his way. He was a little tempted but pointed out the difficulties as he could not either dress or undress himself. "But on the way *back* from the cure it would perhaps be possible."

And so I left this modest little man after sitting by his gas fire with him for an hour and hardly speaking of himself or his works. He hobbled to the top of the stairs with me and would have liked to come down. He left me with greetings to all his friends in Oxford.

[8] J. B. A. Chauveau (1827–1917). Comparative anatomist and physiologist. The experiment referred to would be part of his research on the movement of blood in the arteries or on heart movement. (There is an obituary in the *Lancet*, 1917, i: 121–122.)

[9] S. Ramón y Cajal (1852–1934) the famous Spanish neurohistologist whose histological demonstration of the synapse was complementary to Sherrington's physiological characterization of it. Cajal was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1906. He was given an Honorary D.Sc. from the University of Cambridge in 1894.