John Smith Percy (1938–2001)

Earlier this year at a Faculty Council meeting, I gave a memorial tribute for Dr. John Smith Percy, my colleague and friend, who died on November 14th, 2001, at the age of 63. He lost his battle against metastatic carcinoma of the prostate. That tribute is being kept in the minutes of the meeting in perpetuity, in memory of John Percy’s contribution to the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Alberta.

The following article is based on that tribute, as well as my further reflections on John and his life.

John Smith Percy was born on August 8th, 1938 in the north of England. The north can be highly industrial in some places, but in others is wild and windswept—particularly where the coast meets the North Sea. As a young man, John enjoyed walking on the rugged hills of the South Shields area, and I think that countryside suited his personality. He grew up in Newcastle, where he undertook his schooling and university training, and was always proud and passionate about his north-of-England heritage.

John’s mother, Elsie Percy, was an interesting character herself, and once confided in me with some pride that John had been a ‘naughty’ boy in his youth. Certainly, he displayed a roguish spirit throughout his life. John gave new meaning to the term ‘social drinker.’ He also loved debate, and would be uncompromising in his support of what he believed to be right. Everything got his ire up. Especially if you were from Toronto(!)

John liked to butt heads on the playing field too—quite literally. He was an uncompromising rugby player and played for years with the Edmonton Druids, a rough-and-ready group if ever there was one. John’s position was “hooker”—one of three guys in the front row of the scrum, whose job is to bang heads with three guys on the opposing team.

But John wasn’t just a head-banger. He liked the intellectual battlefield, too, and loved to play chess. He was fascinated by war-time history, and, in his later years, was never happier than when walking around the great battlefields of central Europe. John was extremely well-read in a wide variety of areas, including the classics.

Throughout his life, John was one of those people who always has a project to work on. He made nice furniture, and even his own boat! I never saw the boat finished, mind you, but he was talented with his hands and always making things.

U OF A’S FIRST ACADEMIC RHEUMATOLOGIST

John initially came to North America to practice in Denver, Colorado. However, his younger brother, a lawyer, had been recruited to the Law Faculty at the University of Alberta. Through connections there, John was later recruited himself by Walter MacKenzie, one of the University’s most revered deans of medicine.

In 1968, John became the first academic rheumatologist appointed to the University of Alberta.

I didn’t know John when I arrived at the University of Alberta in 1975, but he had already recruited my friend and colleague from back home in England: Tony Russell. Together, we Brits became like the Three Musketeers.

John was quite interested in autoantibodies—anti-nuclear antibodies. This is now a huge science, of course, but it was a new field in the early 70s. John and Tony had a colony of mice they were using for research, and one of my first memories of John is when he turned up in the doorway of my office with a cage of mice for me to “take home to the kids.”

A colony of mink, which make autoantibodies in profusion, were also kept by Tony and John for their research. I never found out what happened to the mink, though…particularly their pelts.

Here in Canada, John developed a passion for flying that never left him. John, Tony and I would fly to peripheral clinics together, with John at the steering wheel. When we did an Outreach Clinic—in a small, rural county a couple of hours to the north, for example—he would be both physician and pilot.

Professionally, John made considerable contributions to the Department and Faculty of Medicine and to the field of rheumatology, particularly within Canada. He was the founding director of the Rheumatic Disease Unit in Edmonton and much of the success of the Unit can be directly ascribed to John. There was nothing here when he arrived, and John rapidly established training programs at the undergraduate, postgraduate and subspecialty training level. At the same time, he was actively involved in research.

John was the director of the Rheumatic Disease Unit for a number of years, during which time it grew in such stature, that on a man-for-man basis it was, and still remains, one of the leading Rheumatic Disease Units in North America.

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