

Obituary

Alexander Brownlee (1903-1999)

Whenever we think of Alex Brownlee, we are reminded of the well-known greetings card that has a cartoon of a cockerel with a hair comb on its head rather than a biological comb. The exhortation inside the card reads 'Dare to be different'! Throughout his long and productive life, Alex Brownlee, a man we regard with affection and admiration, dared to be different.

At his death in June Alex was aged 96 and the longest serving member of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (75 years). He came from a farming family in West Lothian (Scotland), and had a long and remarkable career, taking his B.Sc. in Pathology and then graduating MRCVS at the Royal (Dick) Veterinary College in Edinburgh in 1924. After a brief spell in practice in London, Alex realised that he was unlikely to be successful in veterinary practice (his own words). Those were the days when most veterinary work was on horses, which for examination and treatment were brought to the ground using a casting rope and lots of force. Alex's small size would not have been an advantage. So he entered the world of research, first at the Moredun Research Institute in Edinburgh where he worked from 1927 on sheep diseases like louping ill, tickborne fever and scrapie, and on equine grass sickness. Then in 1942 he moved to the ARC Institute of Animal Diseases at Compton in Berkshire as a Principal Scientific Officer and remained there until his retirement in 1966. He continued his disease studies but the small group he led also became a pioneer in the scientific investigation of the behaviour and ecology of farm animals with a view to prevention of disease. They focussed particularly on grazing and play behaviour and Alex began to gain his reputation for eccentricity because on occasion his group was apparently doing very little other than sitting quietly watching animals! A man before his time, indeed.

In 1966, Alex was one of the 37 founding members of the Society for Veterinary Ethology (later the International Society for Applied Ethology). He held the post of Honorary Librarian from its establishment in 1967 until 1983. He took a very active role in the Society's affairs, was a regular contributor to the Newsletter, gave papers at Meetings into the 1980s and attended Meetings into the 1990s. In 1988 Alex was made a Life Member of the Society and his scientific contribution to animal behaviour and welfare was also recognised with an award from the Animal Welfare Foundation of Canada.

Longer-established members of this Society will have fond memories of Alex at meetings, sitting in the front row, occasionally fiddling with his deaf aid, and always coming up with original questions and viewpoints. Those who do not remember Alex personally, will almost certainly connect his name with theories on the function of play behaviour in young animals since he was one of the first to publish on this topic (Brownlee, 1954). Needless to say, by the time these ideas became widely accepted in

the 1970s and 1980s, Alex himself had moved on to other ideas.

What members of this Society may not realise is that Alex was extremely well read and had wide-ranging interests apart from applied ethology. He admitted to being intrigued throughout his life by three questions: (i) Is there a connection between Grass Sickness in horses and the destruction of predatory animals by man? (Brownlee, 1939); (ii) Did Robert Burton (1577-1640) contribute to the so-called Works of Shakespeare? (Brownlee, 1960); and (iii) Can evolution be accounted for in terms of Biological Complementariness? (Brownlee, 1981). Alex Brownlee really did dare to be different - how many of us would be prepared to stand up in public and claim Darwin was wrong?

It was always a pleasure to converse with Alex. His powers of observation combined with his very active mind made for delightful discussions. We both have fond memories of meeting him at the Roslin Institute, where the SVE Library was housed latterly. Even well into his 70s, he would think nothing of walking to Roslin on a footpath over the Pentland Hills from his house in Juniper Green (a distance of 18 km each way) in order to deposit some article in the Library. Something on the journey would always have triggered his mind. He might have picked up a botanical specimen that supported his ideas on complementariness, or seen some sheep behaving in an odd way, or observed a rowan tree growing in an unusual habitat. Then somehow Immanuel Kant would be introduced to the conversation - one had to be on one's toes to keep up with Alex. He remained physically active almost to the end - the last time either of us saw him, about a year ago, he was walking home briskly from the shops, his 'messages' in his little wicker basket.

In the Preface to his book on complementariness, Alex expressed his indebtedness to his predecessors by quoting from Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* about a dwarf standing on the shoulders of a giant being able to see further than the giant himself. Alex was small in stature but he was a giant in every other way. We could do no better than stand on his shoulders from where we would see a very long way indeed. Let's remember Alex Brownlee and dare to be different!

References

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