

Obituary Notice

RALPH ST JOHN-BROOKS, 1884-1968

The death on 27 April 1968 of Ralph Terence St John-Brooks took from us a most friendly and likeable man, and recalled to many the exceptional services he had rendered to the development of microbiology, in particular in the foundation and early evolution of the Society for General Microbiology.

Ralph T. St John-Brooks was born on 27 October 1884, the third and youngest son of Professor Henry St John-Brooks, University Anatomist in the University of Dublin. On leaving Erasmus Smith's School, Dublin, Ralph St John-Brooks went to Trinity College, Dublin, where he graduated with first-class honours in Natural Science in 1904. He won the Haughton Medal and Prize in Medicine and Surgery in 1909 and the qualifications of M.B., B.Ch. and B.A.O., in 1910 D.P.H. and in 1911 D.T.M. & H. (Cantab.). On appointment as British Medical Association Research Scholar he spent two years in the West Indies (1911-13) as special sanitary investigator for the Government of the Windward and Leeward Islands. In 1914 he was appointed Secretary of the Commission for Plague Investigation in India and worked at the Lister Institute of Preventive Medicine until he resigned to join the Royal Army Medical Corps in 1915. He was Specialist in Bacteriology, with rank of Captain, at the County of London War Hospital, Epsom, from 1915 to 1919, and at the Royal Army Medical College, Millbank, 1919-20. In 1920 he was invited by Sir Charles Martin, F.R.S., to become Curator of the National Collection of Type Cultures at the Lister Institute. The Collection was formed mainly from strains collected by members of the Institute's staff, and many came from the Diagnostic Laboratory of the Institute under John Ledingham, the Chief Bacteriologist. The Collection was sponsored jointly by the Lister Institute (which supplied laboratory space and media) and the Medical Research Committee (later Council) which paid salaries. St John-Brooks remained in this post until his retirement in 1946.

Many of the older generation of microbiologists will remember the early days of the National Collection of Type Cultures in the Lister Institute in Chelsea Bridge Road, where St John-Brooks and his chief assistant Miss Mabel Rhodes (who was with him from the beginning until he retired) built up this collection from very small beginnings. The Lister Institute already had a collection of 100-200 cultures and St John-Brooks added to these by collecting cultures from personal acquaintances whom he visited in his off-duty hours while still in the Royal Army Medical Corps. At first only bacteria were collected; later some fungi were added, though the Collection was at first restricted to organisms of medical interest. Eventually the range of organisms was expanded to include bacteria, yeasts and fungi of medical, veterinary and economic importance. The Collection was evidently not run as an economically self-supporting venture, for initially a charge of only one shilling per culture was made; this was later increased to one shilling and six pence to cover the cost of postage!

During his Curatorship of the National Collection St John-Brooks made his major contribution to science. He was largely responsible, with R. E. Buchanan and

R. S. Breed, for developing the International Code of Bacteriological Nomenclature (eventually approved in 1947 at Copenhagen) and he was certainly responsible for the name of his beloved Collection appearing as a footnote to the Code, as one of the two official Collections.

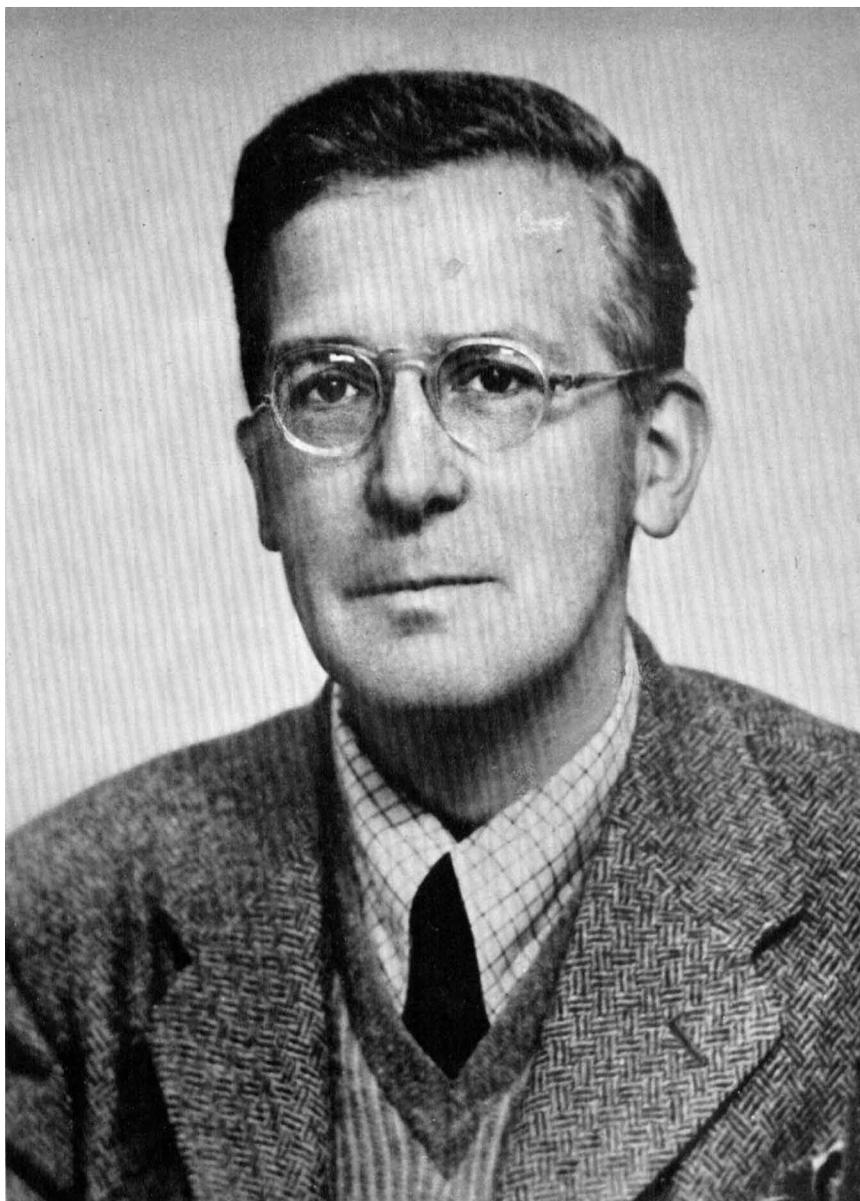
In 1934, on a visit to London, A. Sordelli showed a method he had developed for preserving cultures in a vacuum over phosphorus pentoxide; the principle had been used before, but the simplicity of Sordelli's method appealed to St John-Brooks who, from that time onward, started to dry two ampoules of each culture in his Collection. This was a long task but his foresight was rewarded when the Collection was hastily moved, lock, stock and barrel, to the Lister Institute's farm laboratories at Elstree in September 1939. Miss Rhodes used to describe the scene of packing cases of cultures, and boxes of files dumped in one room, and in the middle of it all St John-Brooks, supported by his pedigree chow-chow Rex (from whom many cultures were 'isolated by the Curator himself') surveying the scene with equanimity and even pleasure. Although many of the Collection's tube cultures became contaminated, the Sordelli-dried tubes saved most of them for posterity and they survived the war and another removal of the Collection.

In 1923 St John-Brooks was seriously ill with tularaemia which he and some of his colleagues contracted as a laboratory infection. This infection may have contributed to his break-down with pulmonary tuberculosis in 1925. He spent two years (1925-27) in the Schatzalp Sanatorium in Davos, Switzerland. After his return to work another relapse necessitated a further period at Davos, from 1932 to 1934. Although the disease was arrested he never made a complete recovery. It says much for his courage and his devotion to his subject that he continued for nearly twenty more years to play an active and inspiring part in national and international committees concerned with the development of microbiology.

At the First International Congress for Microbiology in 1930 St John-Brooks was appointed Secretary to represent medical bacteriology on the new Nomenclature Committee. For the Second International Congress, which was held in London in 1936, he undertook the exacting duties of General Secretary and spent many months of hard work in making arrangements for what proved to be a most successful week of paper-reading conferences, international committee meetings, and social occasions. In 1939 he was President of Section I of the Third International Congress in New York. He was Secretary-General of the International Association of Microbiologists from 1936 to 1953 and even after his retirement as Curator of the National Collection of Type Cultures in 1946 he continued to be active in this aspect of his work, first from Lausanne and then from Washington, D.C., where he worked from the office of the American Type Culture Collection.

In 1950 St John-Brooks returned to his native Dublin, where he lived for the remainder of his life and where, in 1952, an honorary Sc.D. of Trinity College, Dublin, was conferred upon him.

About his private life it may be said that in 1912 he married Julia Margaret Gordon; they had two sons and a daughter. St John-Brooks had very wide interests, from natural history to languages; his quiet humour was a great joy to his friends and family. Though always busy professionally he was devoted to his family; in his later years he was openly proud of being the youngest grandfather at the Lister Institute. Keenly observant, sympathetic and unassuming, he combined



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wide experience with the human qualities so necessary for welding unobtrusively the outspoken comments of academic individualists into the harmonious agreement of committees. So much for the outline of the life of Ralph St John-Brooks. But, as foreshadowed in the first paragraph of this notice, St John-Brooks played a crucial part in the foundation of the Society for General Microbiology. Some of this wider history will be recorded below.

With L. A. Allen, St John-Brooks became the first joint Honorary Secretary of the Society, but on medical advice, St John-Brooks relinquished these duties at the Annual General Meeting in 1946. St John-Brooks served as a member of the Committee of the Society until he retired in October 1946. In recognition of his valuable services he was nominated by the Committee for election as the Society's first Honorary Member. As a further token of esteem his fellow members of present and past committees of the Society presented him with a silver salver engraved with all their signatures.

L. A. ALLEN