

R Jean Banister (1917-2013)



Nearly 30 years ago, in 1984, (Rachel) Jean Banister retired from her Tutorial Fellowship at Somerville College, Oxford, to enthusiastic plaudits from four decades of students she had inspired and from many colleagues around the world who held her in high esteem. She was the great example of the art of mentoring students through the dialectic approach of the tutorial. She was also a tireless protagonist of women's education, having been one of the first to represent the former women's colleges on the main university Committees. She served twice as Vice-Principal of Somerville. The sheer number and range of students she cared for, both academically and personally, was immense. She gave each individual attention and so commanded affection from all of them ("She really has valued us individually", "She became a personal friend" are typical of the messages sent from all over the world on her 90th birthday).

Generations of medical and science students will recall that she was one of the last to give live demonstrations of physiology during lectures, often in a double act with another lecturer timing the lecture topics to coincide with what Jean was ready to demonstrate experimentally. There was much good-hearted humour in these 'performances', with Jean flatly contradicting the lecturer if she thought he had got the timing or effect wrong. The 'mistakes' were not exactly deliberate, but they were used to great effect. Students would remember that part of the lecture-demonstration long after forgetting the rest. Sadly, those days of 'hands-on' demonstration of physiology and medical science have long gone.

She directed an active laboratory where a succession of graduate students learnt the excitement of research. She focussed on the vascular system in the lungs. A small but very successful group of students completed their doctorates under her supervision. She also lectured abroad, notably in Japan at Fukushima Medical College, where one of her graduate students is now a professor of pharmacology. It was characteristic of her enthusiasm that on retirement she went straight off to

lecture in Saudi Arabia to inspire women medical students in a part of the world where the education of women in medicine needed such support.

The former Principal of Somerville, Daphne Park, summed up Jean at her retirement ceremony: "She has absolute integrity and she is a perfectionist; she is also an optimist" That was certainly true: small in figure, but large, generous and enthusiastic in mind. She herself wrote of her retirement:

"It has been a most rewarding experience to be a Fellow of this College for more than thirty years.

I observe with great admiration its ability to adapt to ever-changing circumstances, to uphold the highest traditions of University education and the search for knowledge.

I have great confidence in Somerville's future." There was a great celebration in Somerville on the occasion of her ninetieth birthday. Jean herself had not changed – busying about like a bee all the time, almost as though she was still the Vice-Principal. The messages sent by those who could not be there say everything about the way she inspired: "Little did Jean know it but until she'd given me the confidence to stand my ground, I'd never have had the courage to do more than meekly accept what had been arranged." "Jean taught us the framework for evidence based practice more than 20 years before the term "evidence based medicine" was first used." "[she gave us] a curiosity about what was happening in the wider world, and above all in giving us the confidence in our own abilities and the confidence that we could cope with whatever life threw at us." These are the plaudits that ring so true about a great tutor.

In Oxford, she would be seen cycling on her rounds of activity. She also loved sports cars, particularly the succession of Porsches that she would use to whisk herself up to Scotland, or even to race them at Donington Park. In retirement she moved to her house 'Druimluachrach', Ardgour near Fort William, to enjoy her love of Scotland and her garden.

Jean was born in Alverstoke, Hampshire on 10 March 1917 and studied at Queen Anne's in Caversham, Berkshire. She excelled in sports and music, and she first went to the Royal Academy of Music where she achieved a silver medal in the flute. It may have been the chance events of World War II that led her to switch to medical science. She joined the Polish School of Medicine when it moved to Edinburgh following the German invasion of Poland in September 1939. She achieved an honours degree in physiology in Edinburgh in 1948. However her love of music never dimmed: she was also Tutor for the students of Fine Arts and Music. The performer, and the love of performance, was always there. A characteristic reply to a student or colleague would be 'have fun'. She herself was great fun. The somewhat pensive nature of the photograph of her could rapidly change into a broad animated smile as she proceeded to explain something new, something surprising. Novelty, the joy of academic life, is what she lived for.

Jean died peacefully at Druimluachrach on 15th February 2013, aged 95.

Denis Noble

(This article is an extended version of the obituary DN wrote for The Times, 14 March 2013. An edited version will appear in *Physiology News* No.91 (Summer 2013). The photo, taken by Deborah Elliott, is reproduced by courtesy of Somerville College, Oxford)