

# An appreciation of Ronnie Mac Keith (1978)

DMCN   
50<sup>th</sup>  
Anniversary

It is 100 years since Ronnie Mac Keith's birth and 50 years since he started the Journal *Developmental Medicine & Child Neurology* (DMCN; initially called *The Cerebral Palsy Bulletin*), the first number being a reprint of William Little's original article. Scope, then The Spastics Society, had just begun to raise significant sums of money and Ronnie persuaded them not only to put some money into medical research, which they did, funding the research laboratories at Guy's but also, uniquely, to spend some money on educating and informing doctors. This led to financial backing, happily still continuing, to the publishers of DMCN, now the Mac Keith Press.

Initially, it was published under the title Spastics International Medical Publications but this was a clumsy and difficult title because of the unfortunate use of the word 'spastics' and soon after Ronnie's death, who was then senior editor, the Mac Keith Press Board were delighted that his family agreed that the Press would be named after him.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Ronnie was collecting a team around him to develop the Journal and the books, and contacted me because he knew I had literary interests. I didn't really want to edit a medical journal but I was interested in paediatrics so in the end I got involved! I worked very closely with Ronnie, both clinically and at the Mac Keith Press and also with the Medical Education Information Unit of the Spastics Society on the meetings he ran. When he died, I tried to pull together something of Ronnie's nature in this personal memoir below, which supplemented the more formal statements about his life and career which can be found in the relevant number of the Journal.<sup>1</sup> One hopes that Ronnie would be pleased with what we have done and I know that he would be hoping that we would continue for another 50 years developing ideas and approaches which were essentially developed by Ronnie Mac Keith.

#### Reference

1. (1978) *Dev Med Child Neurol* 20: 7–20.

A somewhat sparse figure, hurrying, not quite running, across the plane-treed park at Mr. Guy's hospital. That is how I first see him. He is wearing a slightly crumpled blue suit with a battered carnation in his button-hole and he is off, no doubt, to teach the medical students. It is a job, like every job for Ronnie, that he takes very seriously and as he, running now, bounds up the stairs, eschewing the lift, he is even now varying in his mind the opening remarks he will make to them. He is not an entirely successful undergraduate teacher; the environment is against him since most of his fellow consultants are still stuck in formal hierarchical teaching methods and Ronnie's efforts to get the students to think, argue and discuss, earn him the label of an

eccentric, which he is, I suppose, compared with his conservative colleagues. But when I sit in with him at a tutorial he strikes me at once as a rather sensible, civilized human being who does not bother with the rituals which can go with being a consultant in this medical school.

We are in the Cerebral Palsy Advice Clinic. There is a severely retarded boy of six or seven wandering around the room; he is dressed in the grey flannels, jacket and cap that make up the garb of a boy who is to be educated at the traditional English private preparatory school. It is not where this boy will be educated. As he wanders he urinates. His mother makes feeble efforts to control his ceaseless activity, but mostly she sits weeping, crouching her huge bulk into the too-small chair and turning her face away from us. Her husband, smaller, wears the suit and collar that betoken his religious trade. 'This' he says, indicating his only son, 'is my cross,' and he stretches his arms out in a sweeping melodramatic gesture which I guess he has used in the pulpit. I crouch back too, shrunken and appalled to consider what I would do if I were the consulting doctor. Ronnie is leaning forward, talking, with a hand out, occasionally just touching the parson sitting opposite. Dimly, through my ignorance, I become aware, (and become more aware as I learn more over the years) that I am watching a brilliant display of that peculiar medical art of consultation. Until this day I have not known what it is. Ronnie is in some way absorbing all this distress, sensing the gulf between this man and his wife, aware of all the hopes there have been for this son, and he is gently nudging them towards the reality of the situation, the need for them to accept the proffered place for their son in the local school for severely subnormal children. I sense that he is achieving something. It lasts a long time and suddenly they are gone. So too is Ronnie; he is away to some engagement for which he is probably already half an hour late. But he has quickly thrust the executive action over to the social worker who has been with us throughout. He seems to have left her with rather more than a muddle to sort out and I wonder if I should do something, but I sense suddenly that she is glad to help Ronnie, and she sends me hurrying after him with a smile and a half joke: 'Genius must be served'.

Sometimes he is irritable; on his desk the boxes with his test equipment are not arranged the way he likes them. He wants the toys to be available at the right time for his testing and his disorder is distracting him from the family in front of him, who are puzzled by his anger. He was up until four in the morning writing his book with John Apley (*The Child and his Symptoms*) and he is battling with hospital administrators and colleagues over the handicapped children's unit which he is setting up. So he is rude to a faithful nurse. The next day he is all contrition,

there are flowers for her and anxious enquiries to see that he hadn't actually upset the patients. He says to me, 'I wake up every morning and think, who do I have to apologize to for yesterday?'

He is in Wales to visit a special school. He arrives late at the small hotel and the management try to refuse him food. He lectures them on the duties of innkeepers and establishes his traveller's right to be fed. Some bread and cheese appear. Once that is settled, he begins to tell the assembled group what is to be achieved by this visit, why they are there, what he wants them to do. The next day he is all over the school; from maths teaching to ophthalmological services, everything is observed. 'You don't have a visiting ophthalmologist?' 'One could easily come from...' I'm not sure that the administrators who are there like all this. Their faces are gloomy ('Dr Mac Keith is always spending money'), but the headmistress does; she senses that Ronnie wants to do things for 'her' children. She hasn't noticed how much he's been telling her about her job between times, but I have a feeling she won't forget the visit.

Quite often he prefers to be oblique and doesn't like to tell people things himself; he organizes all these meetings but often he doesn't even give a paper and he will never make an administrative announcement. He is just a member of the group. Only once when I am present does he play a major part in a discussion. And that is when someone is angry, very angry; his work has been ignored, despised. Ronnie intervenes rapidly to repeat the accusation, so that all the anger is directed at him; it's funny, I realize that Ronnie is not at all angry himself, although there is a certain amount of shouting both ways going on. It is a storm, it blows out and the meeting goes on in high fettle, everybody is happy again. They are sipping the good wine at supper and enjoying recalling the argument.

The film crew, a distinguished clinician and I all arrive at his home for dinner. He has omitted to mention it to Elizabeth, but all is amicably settled. His family go out to dinner and we eat the family meal. Ronnie opens the door for you with a 'Come in, come in' and likes to quote part of a ribald ditty, 'and in did come the strangest thing.' One accepts the curious role thus assigned one, and steps in. The house always seems placid and relaxed, despite all the people coming and going. Ronnie and Elizabeth's four children weave in and out; the house is bursting at the seams with books, journals, musical instruments, but somewhere there is space to sit down with Ronnie to discuss the matter we are meeting over. For some years, Monday is the day to discuss journal policy, but by midnight we are talking about poetry. Ronnie is telling me something about Johnson and showing me the photos of the death mask he's established, but when I leave a good hour later he is back to work: 'I'll just finish these galleys before I go to bed.'

Ronnie is developing his journal. It must be international, so we are off over the Atlantic to negotiate with the Americans, landing in Dallas the night President Kennedy is shot. We arrive at the hotel for our meeting, to find our American colleagues struggling with the bewilderment of the assassination. I am jet-lagged and bewildered; perhaps we should postpone our discussion. Ronnie moves us all speedily to the committee room and for three or four hours he has us thrashing out our arrangement to work together. He cheekily states that we have a lot to offer them and they really have nothing to offer us. I am taken aback by this effrontery, but it seems to work out O.K., and Ronnie has another group of international friends.

Ronnie is dining. It is always a faintly alarming process. Head waiters spend a long time finding out that they have met their match. The man at Caesar's Palace, Las Vegas, is defeated by a combination of Ronnie's adroit use of his deafness, the assumption that the waiter can't understand English, and Ronnie's vastly superior culinary knowledge. While the man at what calls itself 'the best restaurant in the Mid-West' has an even worse shock when he attempts to throw out a late-arrived guest of Ronnie's because he is not wearing a jacket. Ronnie leaps up and puts his own jacket over his friend's shoulders. The waiter, who has already lost out over the missing potatoes (had they really run out?) and the absence of fresh apples ('The best restaurants always have fresh fruit') submits resignedly and comes to hang a rather greasy waiter's jacket around Ronnie's shoulders.

At other people's meetings he is often in there fighting from the start, and if things are not run the way he wants them, pity the poor organizers. He has been held up getting to Prague and I think that perhaps he'll excuse himself from taking the chair for the whole long morning session. 'There are too many papers,' he says, 'we won't get through them all.' The harassed organizers moan, 'We must, we must,' but we don't, of course, Ronnie sees to that. An unfortunate Polish lady is giving a paper on behaviour disturbance in cerebral-palsied children. I know we are in for trouble when, among a vast list of symptoms, I see enuresis featured. 'I shall take the Chairman's privilege' Ronnie says as she sits down, and then explains to her at considerable length why a handicapped child who wets the bed must not be regarded as a disturbed child. And we are not out of the woods yet, because further down the list he has spotted masturbation appearing as a symptom of behaviour disturbance. I reach for my headphones and turn on the Polish translator, because Ronnie's comments are not going to be reportable in English.

When he is on his feet himself it's always a bit risky. Will it come off? Because the performance is never polished and smoothly pre-planned it depends on the moment, and the prepared ideas may suddenly get muddled, but they may also suddenly take wing, or an interjection may suddenly occur to him or a flash of humour may bring a symposium to life. 'Should one cry with one's patients?' he asks. The large audience is all listening, and I realize that no-one else would have put that question to them. He looks at them for a moment, and then: 'Well, it's difficult for me, my glasses steam up when I cry and I can't see.'

We are flying home from all these journeys, back to England, the base of all these excursions, where the familiar countryside across which we have walked searching for some ancient earthworks, the cities with their intimate histories, their ancient buildings, around which Ronnie has hurried, studying them all the time, are welcoming him home. We are to meet up on the plane in San Francisco but my connection is late and I shall miss the plane. Ronnie is sitting serene and relaxed in the gangway leading to the aircraft, smoking a large cigar, correcting the eternal galleys. The airline officials are clustering round him but he reads on, ignoring them, until I appear, when he gets up leisurely, discards his cigar and helps me to board the plane: 'I knew you had to catch the plane', as I murmur my thanks.

We are nearly at the end. He is in the office writing an editorial. I am rushing in (and this is how I last see him), he is rising from his chair (is he shorter than he was? Certainly a more relaxed jacket than that blue suit) and smiling. 'I'm a bit fraught,' I say, and he knows exactly what weight to give to that

remark. I've over-committed my day, as he has so often done in the past, and we can't sit down, fetch a drink and chat as we so often have done at the end of the day. I can't stay long, but there is time for him to be as welcoming as ever, 'Come in, come in.' and for a word about his last meeting, 'Prevention of Cerebral Palsy.' Prevention always come first, he has often told me. The meeting has gone well. I'm actually there to have a word about what was to be his next meeting, which I have organized. It is about the wine, which he, of course, has organized. It is very important to him, not so much that he likes to drink good wines but that you must drink the good wines. How often has he ordered a bottle, taken a glass for himself, sipped it and pushed the remainder across to me, nodding and saying 'You'll like it.'

So now to the plan for those three nights in November. An Italian wine the first night – he hopes it will be all right – and a white wine the second, which he seems uncertain of, but the last night there's to be the claret and he is sure of that. 'It will be excellent,' he says, and raises an imaginary glass to me. *Salve*.

*Martin Bax DM*

*Senior Editor of the Mac Keith Press, 1978–2003*

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Bax MCO. (1978) Ronald Charles Mac Keith. A personal memoir. *Dev Med Child Neurol* **20**: 3–7.

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