

# Rolfe Birch

18th February 1944 - 22nd May 2023

Obituary by Michael Stewart

**P**rofessor Rolfe Birch was one of the most remarkable surgeons and clinical scientists of his generation, who determined the modern principles of surgical treatment of Brachial Plexus and complex peripheral nerve injury, and by whose outstanding leadership in a unique specialty established two world-class Peripheral Nerve Injury Units – one Civilian and one Military.

'RB' was born in London, and educated at Cambridge University and St George's Hospital. He developed an interest in nerves at Cambridge studying for the Natural Sciences Tripos. In 1979, he was appointed Consultant in Neurological Orthopaedics to St Mary's Hospital, Paddington and to the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital, Stanmore.

At St Mary's, he joined George Bonney, a pioneer of Surgery of the Brachial Plexus. In 1991, the Unit at St Mary's was transferred to Stanmore where RB established an outstanding multidisciplinary team in research, based on clinical and investigative assessment of Brachial Plexus Injury. He advocated among other things a new policy of urgent surgical exploration in blunt trauma, where clinical evidence pointed to major disruption of the plexus and he established that surgical reinnervation of the limb relieved pain. His relationship with his patients demonstrated the depth of his dedication and his capability to inspire confidence. He said of them, "One of the great joys is to work with these young men and women. Many of them live on the edge, they are risk takers, they take chances, which is perhaps one reason I get on with them so well."

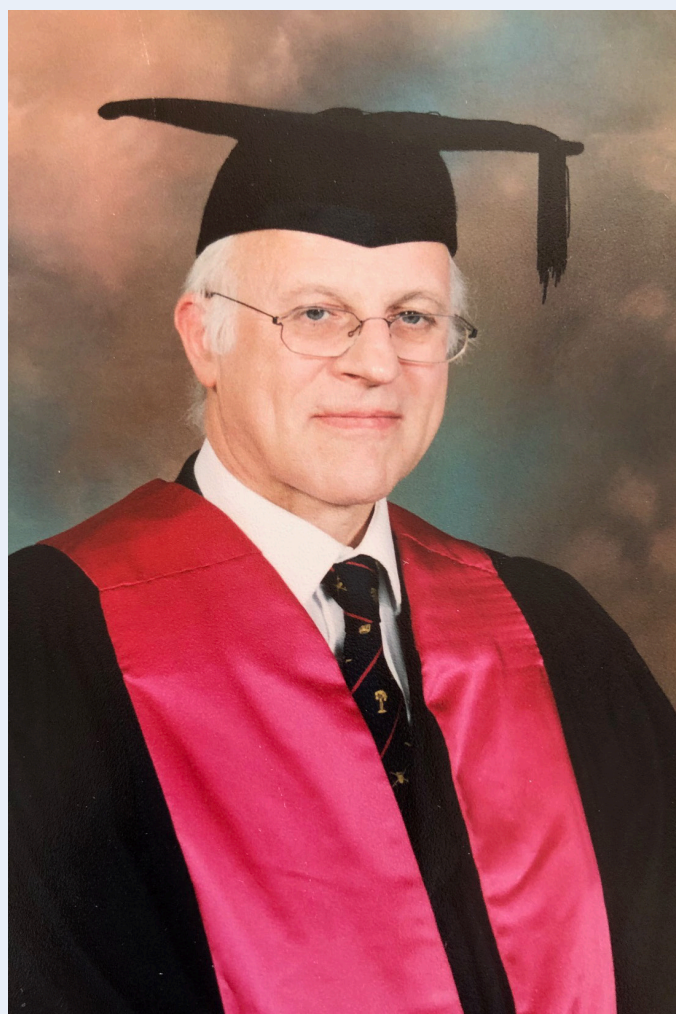
He believed in unflinching commitment to the patient's well-being, and duty to teach and train young surgeons. He expected the best from you – not by way of imposition, but rather an invitation to strive to do whatever you were doing, as well as you could. As the expert in his field, he was asked to teach up and down the country. His presence, analytical style, and a vocabulary richly laced with reference to the Classics dazzled his audiences. He established many regional units nationwide and visited regularly. Ever supportive, never critical and always ready to share the burden in those cases, which did not proceed as intended, he became friend, mentor and an inspiration to a generation of young surgeons.

For over 30 years, he served with distinction as Honorary Consultant Advisor to all three of the Defence Medical Services (DMS). In 2003, he was

appointed Consultant in Charge, War Nerve Injuries Clinic, DMS Rehabilitation Unit, Headley Court where, again, he established a world-class team. This collaboration represented a high point in British Surgery and Science and from it flowed the current concepts of management of War Nerve Injuries. Rod Dunn, Consultant Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeon, recalls, "Because of the extraordinary advances made by the DMS over the period, patients were surviving dreadful injuries

that would have been fatal even in the recent past. His empathy, affinity, and respect for these young service men and women conveyed an inestimable sense of being valued and cared for." As it was at Stanmore, he was revered by his patients, and colleagues alike.

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RB's research and published work altered the attitude of clinicians worldwide; his contributions were recognised in this country and overseas with many Honorary clinical appointments. He delivered several prestigious eponymous lectures, including the Robert Jones Lecture, 'The Transition Zone' in 2000, and the James IV Lecture, 'Power and Pain' in 2009. In 2011, he completed his magnum opus, 'Surgical Disorders of the Peripheral Nerves'.

In his leisure time, he climbed, and fell ran. In his retirement, he enjoyed reading and writing, sea swimming and creating

a fragment of English woodland in his garden at Stanmore. He bore his illness with stoical dignity. He died on 22 May 2023.

He is survived by his dear partner Margaret Taggart with whom he worked at St Mary's in her capacity as Sister in Charge of the Orthopaedic Department, and at Stanmore, where she was Coordinator of the Peripheral Nerve Injury Unit. He was divorced, and leaves a son and daughter from that marriage.

Surgeon, scientist, leader, teacher, author, mentor. It is given to few in medicine to be more than one of these. Rolfe Birch was an exception. His range was truly remarkable and in every one of his vocations, he excelled. ■