

Obituary

Rainsford Mowlem, MB, FRCS

This fine man died on 5 February 1986 at his home in Mijas, Andalusia, in his mid-eighties.

It was in 1939 that the writer first met him, when he demonstrated the result of an ulnar nerve palsy; I had just qualified and little knew that this man was to shape my whole future.

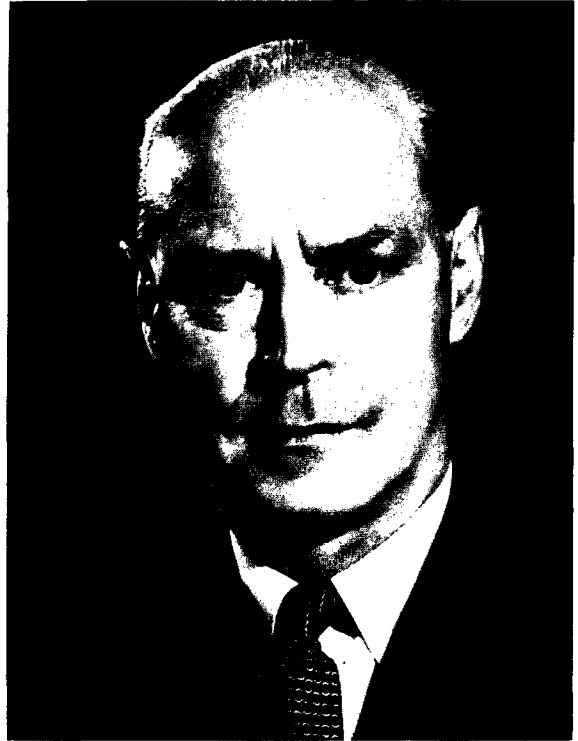
He was a descendant of Durandas, one of William the Conqueror's men, who, in return for keeping the King's Tower at Corfe in good order, was given by his boss $2\frac{1}{2}$ hides of land on the Isle of Purbeck in Dorset. These lands were called "de Moulhm" and henceforth all descendants took that name which subsequently became "Mowlem". Rainsford inherited a large part of these lands from his great-uncle, John Mowlem, the founder of the famous building and contracting firm.

Rainsford arrived in England from New Zealand in 1926 and after a short time in general practice, south of London, he obtained the Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons. He became RSO at Queen Mary's Hospital, Stratford.

During a royal visit by the patron, he was able to show the Prince of Wales where he could have a quick cigarette and joined him there, while Queen Mary was investigating, in her inquisitive way, all closed cupboards and other places where untidy items were hidden!

He subsequently became RSO at the Hammer-smith Hospital where he came under the immense influence of Harold Gillies, a visiting plastic surgeon. He became the fourth and junior partner of that powerful pre-war partnership of Gillies, Kilner, McIndoe and Mowlem, ably supported by their secretary and business manager Bob Seymour, a residual forehead rhinoplasty by Gillies, of the 1914-1918 war. This partnership lasted until the outbreak of the last war, and the partners, after its dissolution, remained the closest of friends. Rainsford was the last surviving member until he died.

Rainsford always knew exactly where he was going. He drove his Bentley and Aston Martin rapidly, but in a controlled way. He operated rapidly, but with absolute control of all his incisions and manipulations. He made his plans and



kept to them. He was the fastest surgeon I have known, and like many good and fast surgeons, his infection rate was very low. Unlike some geniuses, however, he did not have some cases showing superb results, and others showing catastrophic results. In other words he was paramountly a safe surgeon.

He was deeply involved in the early bone-grafting with iliac chips, after suitable cover had been achieved, both for mandibular reconstruction, and for non-union of the fractured tibia, where he demonstrated weight bearing three weeks after bone grafting. He was awarded an Hunterian Professorship for this original work.

In association with his dental colleagues he worked out the procedure of pin-fixation for fractured jaws.

During the 1939-1945 war, under his supervision, his Unit at Hill End Hospital took a prominent part in the trial of penicillin. The powder would be delivered from Oxford in small quantities, which was then used as a wound dressing. The residue in the bottle was then washed out and the liquid given to patients with tonsillitis to drink, with beneficial results.

Clinical investigation and clinical research were

encouraged in his Unit, and he was always analytical and critical.

He suffered fools badly, was outspoken in his criticism of "the wrong way", and thus obviously made some enemies.

I would have thought that one of his more interesting patients was Winston Churchill. The Premier had risen to speak at some dinner and had put his cigar down on the ashtray. Unfortunately the ashtray was, in fact, his open box of matches and he suffered a nasty burn to his hand. Rainsford was called for, and at a subsequent dressing of the old man's hand at Chequers, at 9 o'clock on Christmas morning, Rainsford found him sitting up in bed with a brandy and cigar. After the dressing, Rainsford was regaled with the Battle of Omdurman for about half-an-hour, the brandy glass was the enemy, the ashtray the main English troops and the matchbox was Churchill's cavalry, in which he was an Ensign. After that battle Churchill had had a fair slice of his upper arm skin taken with a razor by the Medical Officer, with no anaesthesia, and this homograft was slapped on to the wound of a cavalryman. He always had a badly scarred donor area.

As Advisor in Plastic Surgery to the Ministry of Health, Rainsford had numerous prolonged meetings in which he diligently argued our cause, and we owe him a great deal for his efforts.

He loved his garden, and his dogs—all Alsations—and he had these from the early fifties until he died. He was a great reader, not so much of fiction, but various journals, not all medical by any means. The National Geographical Magazine was one of his favourites. He had a formidable memory of facts and figures and quantities, from the number of bricks needed to build a certain wall, to the number of Roentgens in a radiological overdose. He played no sports, but had been a keen sailor in New Zealand. He loved to listen to his collection of classical music but did not play any instrument. He was a regular visitor to the ballet. He ate and drank sparingly, but was most appreciative of good food and wine, and was an excellent host.

When I first knew him he was a very heavy smoker in the outpatient clinics, and between each operation. But on one of his trips to Spain he must have contracted encephalitis, for he returned with a high fever and very severe headaches. He lost all sense of smell and taste for some weeks, and that was the end of his smoking!

The 1959 International Congress of Plastic Surgery, held in London, was a personal triumph for

him, for he was the President. He personally selected the expert secretary and all other helpers, but there was always his guiding hand behind them. This was a great scientific and social success with superb historical amenities, which other countries have subsequently followed.

He retired completely at sixty. At his last operation the instruments were all grabbed by the onlookers as souvenirs—(rather like the stumps being taken at the end of a Test Match!). He bought "La Morena", in Mijas, Andalusia. This was ten acres of terraced land with a continuous supply of water. He sold his house in Great Missenden and moved to his new house, built out of marble, polished and unpolished, obtained from a nearby quarry, whence previous workers had exported marble to Rome at the time of the Caesars. Even his road was made of marble chippings. The house was constructed in terraces down the hillside, with his land below.

He and Margaret, his beloved wife, moved in with five servants, three for inside work, a gardener, Jesus, and Mercedes the gardener's wife. They loved Spain and the Spanish people, and both he and Margaret took the greatest interest in, and provided financial help for, the families of his servants. He provided a house for Jesus and Mercedes, and they had two children there. It was a really happy life. He did no medical work, but kept up to date with the journals. His initial impatience with the Spanish way of life mellowed over the years, and both he and Margaret became fluent in the language. On occasions they would return to England on business trips, but they could not wait to return to their "Morena". He lost Margaret a few years ago and he never really was the same man again.

He loved having friends to visit him, and we spent a week at his home eighteen months ago. That was the last time I saw him, although he was a most regular correspondent, using his typewriter as his hand was so shaky. He was badly affected by lateral column degeneration, but he drove his car well and his mind was as sharp as always.

He was a most exacting and loyal man, and a great friend. A superb teacher and example; and a man to whom the writer owes his entire professional existence.

He is survived by two daughters, two grandchildren and countless people who benefited from his passing their way.

Our world is the loser for his demise.

R. L. J. Dawson