OBITUARY

JOHN ALFRED RYLE

By the death of Professor J. A. Ryle on February 27, 1950, this JOURNAL has endured a very grievous loss. His was the first chair of Social Medicine to be instituted in Great Britain and it was he who was mainly responsible for the development of this subject in its early and formative stages and for its acceptance within the profession as an academic discipline in its own right.

The professional development of Ryle made it inevitable that he should turn in late middle age to the field of social medicine. He qualified in London in 1913, served with the R.A.M.C. in France and Belgium during 1914-18, and returned to Guy's Hospital thereafter to become assistant physician, and demonstrator in morbid anatomy and medical pathology. Soon he became outstanding as a consultant in the field of clinical medicine, outstanding also as a teacher. His success was such that he was forced to flee from it, and in 1935 at the age of 46 he accepted the Regius Chair of Physic at Cambridge. In the following year *The Natural History of Disease* appeared.

In Cambridge he attempted to bring into being a centre of research and teaching. During these years, Ryle the rationalist was turning more and more to the left politically and was becoming pacifist in outlook. These years were the least productive of his career in respect of publications but during them he himself was changing greatly. He stood unsuccessfully for Parliament in 1940, and shortly afterwards, deciding that resistance to Fascism was more important under the circumstances than strict pacifism, he left Cambridge, went back to Guy's, and served under the E.M.S. He devoted much of his time and energy to the promotion of the affairs of the Anglo-Soviet Medical Committee.

During these dark days Ryle's thoughts turned to the problems of fear and pain, of life and of death. In 1941 there appeared his *Fears May be Liars* in which his faith as a rationalist is expressed. In these essays he lays much emphasis on the scientist's duty to the community and argues that instruction in the art of living healthily must become a more important aspect of medicine than that of discovering new treatments for diseases that are preventable.

In 1943 he was invited to the newly created Nuffield Chair of Social Medicine at Oxford and entered upon a period that brought to him the greatest happiness. He was satisfied that he had at last found the destination which he had so long been seeking. An attack of coronary thrombosis in 1942 had given him warning that his life expectancy was diminished. He reacted by flinging all the qualities he had into the task of preparing the way for the gospel of social medicine. The

quality of his joy and the intensity of his satisfaction are revealed in his *Changing Disciplines* published in 1948. In spite of ill health he travelled widely, to India, America, South Africa, there by his influence and teaching gaining acceptance of his views. To the Institute of Social Medicine in Oxford came visitors from all parts of the world, for his fame was now at its peak.

In the summer of 1949 he had a severe attack of coronary thrombosis from which he never recovered. At this time to meet him was indeed a remarkable experience. His tranquillity and his courage were most impressive, and, chained by his disability, he turned again to the writing of poetry.

John Ryle was a man of rare quality, easily attracting the loyalty of youth and creating round himself an atmosphere heavily tinged with the promise of intellectual adventure. Short as his time at Oxford was, it was long enough for Ryle to impress upon the Institute that he had created the stamp of his own humanism, idealism, and scientific attitude. His services to social medicine were immense and he lived long enough to see chairs bearing a title similar to his own in many parts of Great Britain. In this way his influence became widely dispersed and greatly extended. He was fortunate among men in that not only did he himself achieve great happiness in his work, but also and especially because he, a very outstanding figure in the whole field of medicine, turned in the full maturity of his days to social medicine, creating for others great opportunities to achieve the same happiness in the advancement of knowledge and in the application of knowledge to the tasks of human and social amelioration.

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