IN MEMORIAM

STERLING BUNNELL
1882-1957

Dr Sterling Bunnell died on August 20, 1957, at his home in San Francisco.

Medicine has lost one of her most distinguished sons and many of us have lost a beloved friend. For Bunnell there were no national boundaries, and his friends and pupils—indeed all his pupils were his friends—came from all corners of the earth. We in the British Commonwealth mourn and salute him no less than do his fellow countrymen. Bunnell became a legend in his own day and this he achieved without consciously seeking fame. It came by virtue of his personal qualities, unhindered by association with a famous clinic or teaching school; during the greater part of his life Bunnell was not on the staff of a teaching hospital. What were the special gifts which led him to the high places of achievement and won for him the respect and affection of so many?

I believe that integrity, boundless enthusiasm and a deep humanity were his outstanding qualities. From his early days Bunnell was enthralled by the evolution of life, and his knowledge of biology was widely acclaimed. The introductory chapter of his book was written from his own knowledge of comparative anatomy. His many original contributions to the operative treatment of hand disabilities arose from his knowledge of the basic principles of the anatomy and function of the hand. It was this rather than his technical brilliance—although this he possessed in no small measure—that brought such rewarding results. He built upon rock and he could always give a clear and reasoned explanation for his opinions, revealing a depth of knowledge and wisdom that was at times humbling to his questioner.

Bunnell’s enthusiasm was matched by his powers of endurance. His appointment during the war as consultant in hand surgery to the Surgeon General, United States Army, came when he was sixty years of age. He was responsible for the establishment of nine centres for hand surgery in Army hospitals, in which some 20,000 patients underwent reconstruction of the hand. For three years he was engaged in this exacting work. Patrick Clarkson has told me how he has seen Bunnell arrive at one of these centres, spend a full afternoon examining patients, sometimes devoting forty minutes to one difficult case, followed by an evening of seminars. Next morning there would be one or more complex repair operations before he left by plane at lunch time for his next assignment.

Immediately before beginning his Army work Bunnell, after much persuasion by Surgeon General Kirk, Messrs J. B. Lippincott and Mrs Bunnell, took a few months away from his practice to prepare his work for publication. As General Kirk said: “You will not always be with us and my young men must possess your knowledge.”

Surgery of the Hand was an immediate and outstanding success, and established for all time this new and major school of surgery. The first edition, published in 1944, contained 734 pages; the third and last edition appeared in 1956 and had grown to 1,079 pages. New sections on ischaemic contracture in the hand and on the treatment of the rheumatic hand revealed Bunnell’s active and searching mind even after he had passed his seventieth year. This book has probably had more influence and done more good than any other single work on surgery in the last fifty years.

Bunnell’s love of the wild led him into many adventures. His film of the brown bears of Alaska, taken upon Admiralty Island, is a record not only of the bears but of Bunnell’s complete fearlessness. He has told me how he and his son would photograph the bears—often with their cubs—at close range and the bears would turn about and peer for the source of the camera noise. When I asked if he carried a gun he replied: “No, I was photographing,
not shooting, bears! ” The story is told that when invited to lecture in Brazil in 1953 he accepted on condition that he might be given the opportunity to hunt the jaguar in the Matto Grosso. Visitors to his gracious home at 2000 Broadway will recollect the two alligators which roamed free in the garden.

Bunnell will be remembered by the many whom he met during his visits to Great Britain in 1946 and 1952. In 1946 he lectured at Guy’s Hospital Medical School and at the Royal Society of Medicine. On both occasions the audience was so vast that there was no standing room. At Guy’s the students performed prodigious feats of balancing in their efforts to find a single foothold, and at the Royal Society of Medicine the lecture was interrupted while the assembled company moved into a larger hall. Bunnell was deeply touched by these demonstrations. In 1952 Bunnell took part in the Joint Meeting of the Orthopaedic Associations of the English-Speaking World held in London and gave a notable address upon his work on ischaemic contracture of the hand. He had a deep affection for Great Britain, and his subsequent letters revealed how much these visits and the friendships he had made meant to him.

Bunnell was a man as complete in his affections as in his talents. “ Fine art,” said Ruskin, “ is that in which the hand, the head and the heart of man go together.” It was this rare integrity of person and profession, of skill and sympathy which enables us honestly to describe this distinguished American as a great man. 

R. G. P.