IN MEMORIAM

ROBERT INKERMAN HARRIS
1889-1966

Robert I. Harris died on June 28 of this year at Banff, Canada. He died as he had lived and as I believe he wished to die, a great active protagonist in orthopaedic surgery. Seventy-six years old, he was attending the annual meeting of the Canadian Orthopaedic Association.

An unusual honour was reserved for him there, the thought of which he had cherished for many weeks. He was to be made a brother of the Sarcee Indian tribe of Alberta. Dignity and dedication marked the ceremony. Feathered braves with their chief gathered on the open rolling foothills of the Rockies under the blue of heaven solemnly to confer upon Dr Harris the tribal name of "Father of the Straight Child." Accepting the honour, he spoke his last words in public, volunteering to assist his new family with their problems.

Young Bob Harris was born and raised in Toronto. His early years reflect the society of a struggling country. Apprenticed at thirteen to a printing firm he developed tuberculosis, regained his health as a Wyoming ranch hand, returned to work in a piano factory, lost a job on strike and rejoined his family in Northern Ontario, finding employment with the Canadian Pacific Railroad. Twenty years of age brought a decision that has touched us all—school was resumed. Highly successful, he entered Medicine at the University of Toronto in 1910.

Robert Harris, student in medicine, knew well how to make each hour the tutor of the next. First in his class, wearing the key of the honoured medical fraternity—Alpha Omega Alpha—he graduated in 1915. He had happily established the fundamentals of his life. He was a promising young doctor and during student days he had met and wooed the girl who was to become his wife.

Captain R. I. Harris, R.A.M.C., Military Cross and Bar, Mentioned in Dispatches, was invalided home with wounds in December 1917. He was married within a few days of his return.

Professor Clarence Starr, the founder of the present Toronto School of Surgery, saw in young Harris a brilliant, dedicated, industrious and inquisitive surgeon. The young man found himself a member of the surgical staff of the Hospital for Sick Children and of the Christie Street Hospital for returned soldiers. Perhaps because of his personal encounter with the disease he was placed in charge of tubercular veterans. They were cared for on the "roof ward," for "Captain Bob" was a believer in heliotherapy. His interest in tuberculosis never lapsed. An adviser to the National Sanatorium Association, he established a unit for the surgical treatment of the disease in civilians and remained an active consultant to the clinic until he died. Twenty-five of his 100 publications dealt with tuberculosis.

Continued association with the Veterans' hospitals as orthopaedic consultant until long after the second war led him to an interest in end-bearing amputations. One of Syme's disciples, he spoke and wrote frequently about the proper application of this procedure.

The Hospital for Sick Children claimed the first ten years of his academic career. At first blood dyscrasias, burns and renal surgery caught his attention, but he gradually veered to the care of the crippled child. There, in association with a fellow surgeon, was written the monograph The Effect of Lumbar Sympathectomy upon the Growth of Limbs Paralysed by Anterior Poliomyelitis.

In 1930, at the request of the recently appointed Professor of Surgery, W. E. Gallie, he transferred to the staff of the Toronto General Hospital. His attention was given more and more to orthopaedic surgery. He investigated and wrote about chronic osteomyelitis, bone
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tumours, fat embolism and methods of internal fixation for fractures. Reward came when he was appointed chief of the newly created Division of Orthopaedic Surgery in 1940.

Once again a war separated him from one of his true loves. Colonel Harris enlisted in the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps and served with distinction at home and overseas as a surgical consultant to the armed forces. During this period the Army foot survey was completed and from this grew his knowledge of peroneal spastic flat foot.

Professor Harris was a great and devoted teacher. He possessed an avid and abiding interest in those associations dedicated to continuing medical education. He worked prodigiously for their councils and editorial boards. The Canadian Medical Association and the Academy of Medicine in Toronto will be forever indebted to him. Charter Fellow and Founder of the Royal College of Surgeons of Canada, he was honoured by being appointed the first Gallie Lecturer to address the College. He was a Charter Member and Founder of the Canadian Orthopaedic Association. After his Presidency, he retained an active post on the executive until he died. Membership of the American Surgical Association and the American Orthopaedic Association did much to stimulate his efforts for Canadian surgeons. He was the President of the American Orthopaedic Association on the occasion of the first combined meeting of the orthopaedic surgeons of the English-speaking world. Under his aegis the Exchange Travelling Fellowship programme was born, supported jointly by the American, British and Canadian Orthopaedic Associations.

Honours were becoming to this distinguished surgeon and his world bestowed them. Named as Hunterian Lecturer to the Royal College of Surgeons of England, he was later appointed by the same College as a Sims Commonwealth Professor of Surgery, the first Canadian to occupy this Chair. Honorary Fellowships were granted to him by the Royal College of Surgeons of England, the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh and the Royal Australasian College. The printer’s apprentice had certainly left his mark.

Honours not withstanding, Professor Harris was a true creature of the hospital wards. He delighted in their atmosphere, their activity and their purpose, and in return the population of the wards loved and respected him. Few patients ever deserted R. I., for he possessed a sympathetic understanding of the personal problems inflicted by their illness, as well as a knowledge of their disease. He showed a gentlemanly appreciation for the nurses and orderlies who cared for the patients. But he was at his best at rounds, battling with logic and experience for his point of view. He never abandoned rounds when he retired from the teaching staff of the University. He will be remembered by us as a residents’ resident.

A young surgeon was identifying himself as being associated with Dr Harris. “Ah yes,” was the reply, “I know him well. He is the man who walks ahead.”

F. P. D.

Sir Reginald Watson-Jones writes:

R. I. Harris will be remembered not only as a pioneer of orthopaedic surgery in Canada, a protagonist who established orthopaedics in that country as a distinct art and science in its own right. He will be remembered not only as a brilliant surgeon, teacher and organiser; not only as the first and only Canadian ever to receive the honour of election as President of the American Orthopaedic Association. He will be remembered particularly as a champion of the younger generation. There could be no better example of his dedication to this cause than the part he played in the foundation of Exchange Travelling Fellowships in orthopaedic surgery between America and Canada on the one hand and Britain, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa on the other. It was largely through his enthusiasm that many difficulties were overcome and that this project was eventually brought to fruition with the first visit of thirteen British Fellows to North America in 1948. Now that this two-way exchange is well established its benefits must be apparent to all. The gain is not only to those who in alternate years are fortunate enough to be elected to such Fellowships, but also to the far larger number of men.
and women who are privileged to be their hosts; for these Fellows are ambassadors who have much to give as well as to receive, and their visits invariably act as a powerful stimulus to thought and discussion. But this was not the only intercontinental activity to which R. I. Harris lent his enthusiastic and powerful support. He was equally active in the negotiations at the “House-in-the-Wood” that led in 1948 to the evolution of the Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery into two independent but complementary volumes, American and British—a happy collaboration that must be unique in the field of technical journalism. He saw this as an important and valuable development not to Britain and America alone but also to Canada, which he liked to regard as a link between the two more populous countries. Many generations of orthopaedic surgeons throughout the world will benefit from the farsightedness of this great man.


Mr James Ellis writes:

During the past eighteen years fifty young orthopaedic surgeons have crossed the Atlantic from each side and this remarkable traffic in learning and goodwill started and continues as a result of the inspiration of a few men. Dr R. I. Harris was the most active of these in the American continent, and at the time of the first visit of the Nuffield Travelling Scholars in 1948 was President of the American Orthopaedic Association. His interest in the young surgeon and his anxiety to tighten the bonds between America, Canada and Great Britain was epitomised in his championship of this idea, and no member of the A.B.C. Club can ever forget what we owe him.

Mr Hugh Barry writes:

In 1955 R. I. Harris, accompanied by his charming wife, came to Australia as Arthur Sims Commonwealth Travelling Professor. He was the first Canadian orthopaedic surgeon to make an official visit to our country. He will long be remembered. Not only did he influence our attitude to orthopaedic surgery in many ways, but he showed an unusual interest in our history, our people and our way of life.

The years have passed by and it seemed as if he was indestructible—as surely his impact on surgery will be. Those of us, however, who were privileged to witness the gathering of
the braves at Circle 5 on June 5 had some foreboding. He wore his head-dress with pride, but faltered slightly during the ensuing ceremonial dance. When the Indian chiefs received him into their ranks as "Father of the Straight Child" one felt they had added to their history not only a Canadian and an American and a Britisher, but an immortal who belonged to us all.

**LANSELL BONNIN**

1918–1966

Lansell Bonnin, near the zenith of a brilliant career in orthopaedic surgery, died suddenly in Adelaide on February 24, 1966, at the age of forty-seven years.

A worthy member of a distinguished South Australian family, he was educated at St Peter’s College and later graduated in medicine from the University of Adelaide in 1941.

After serving in the Army Medical Corps in the Pacific Area he went to England and, after acquiring the M.Ch.(Orth.) degree in Liverpool and the F.R.C.S. in London, he was appointed registrar to the Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt Orthopaedic Hospital at Oswestry for a period of two years. On returning to Adelaide he served as senior registrar and surgical superintendent at the Royal Adelaide Hospital and was finally appointed honorary orthopaedic surgeon to the Adelaide Children’s Hospital. Despite the demands of a rapidly growing private practice he threw himself into the task of establishing a properly staffed orthopaedic department. This he achieved in a remarkably short time, and, gathering around him a number of keen young men, he soon established a standard of teaching and of the care of patients that has never been bettered in this country. In a gentle, good humoured, uncompromising manner he inflected his own high standards on his junior colleagues, always passing on to them as soon as possible any new skill or knowledge that he had acquired. His capacity for work, his impartiality and wisdom were soon recognised and he became chairman of the Medical Staff and finally a member of the Board of Management.

Besides his clinical and administrative work at the Adelaide Children’s Hospital his time was further occupied by a formidable number of other appointments. Through service with the Crippled Children’s Association of South Australia as Councillor and Medical Adviser he further showed his concern for the handicapped children of his community and the institutions that care for them.

With his colleagues he was popular and respected for his ability, wide interests and his devotion to his wife and three young children. He was never happier than when sailing and fishing with his family from their holiday house across the Gulf of St Vincent; he had learned water-craft as a boy and later had rowed for his school and university.

Orthopaedic surgeons in many countries will mourn the passing of Lansell Bonnin. South Australia has lost a great leader in the profession. Our sympathy goes out to his widow, Prudence, and her young family in their sudden loss.

P. W.