

Darrell Wilkinson

MD FRCP FRSM

1919 – 2009

Darrell Wilkinson, who died on 16th August 2009, was a leading figure in World Dermatology for over 50 years. A consultant dermatologist from 1949 in Buckinghamshire, in 1968 he co-edited with Arthur Rook and John Ebling the first edition of the “Textbook of Dermatology”. He was instrumental in founding the International Foundation for Dermatology in 1987 which, through the centre in Moshi, Tanzania has done much to provide dermatology training for many African countries.

Born on 7th August 1919 in Gillingham Kent, Darrell acquired from his Mother and his House Master at Epsom College a lifelong love of Poetry, Music and Greek and Roman History. This led to initial studies in Classics before obtaining a Scholarship to study Medicine at St Thomas’ Hospital.

After qualifying, he joined the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve and saw active service in Special Operations during the Second World War. He was parachuted behind enemy lines. There he spent the war on horseback in Greece, in a Schooner in the Aegean, and in Cairo and Turkey. He set up medical camps and helped partisans and the local population.

In his Prosser White oration in 1984, Darrell described life in dermatology as a voyage. He used the metaphors of the search by Jason’s Argonauts for the Golden Fleece and also Ulysses Odyssey to describe the journey to discover self and home.

His dermatology voyage began with a small group of London Dermatologists in 1947, including Geoffrey Dowling, Hugh Wallace and Arthur Rook, who started a journal club, which became in 1956 the Dowling Club. Geoffrey Dowling took Darrell out to his Saturday morning clinic in Amersham leading to his Consultant appointment in 1949. He beached his boat on his “island” with a population of 270 000 where he set up a diagnostic index from which flowed a series of publications. His fascination with local craftsmanship led to factory visits and the creation of an Industrial Dermatitis Clinic.

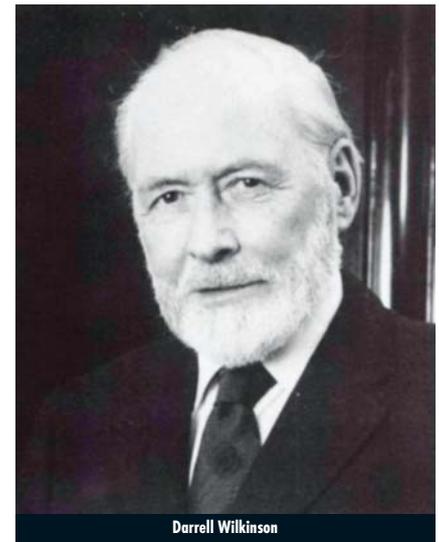
Darrell’s voyage resulted in new areas charted on maps. He

described with Sneddon Subcorneal Pustular Dermatitis and with Church Necrolytic Migratory Erythema with the glucagonoma syndrome. In his Prosser Oration he described these discoveries with great humility as entities that had been glimpsed, seen through a dark glass or only partly charted before. He was an early enthusiast for the role of the dermatology nurse; his 1958 “The Nursing and Management of Skin Diseases” ran to four editions.

Arthur Rook approached his friend, Darrell, with the request to co-edit the Textbook of Dermatology. Darrell took on this huge task with great enthusiasm, redecorating his office and later garage with huge numbers of scribbled notes and articles. John Ebling joined the team and the two volume first edition was a great success from first publication in 1968. Darrell also edited three later editions until 1986.

His interest in Contact Dermatitis led to an invitation to join the International Contact Dermatitis Research Group which greatly clarified and classified contact and environmental dermatoses. Darrell became well known internationally through this and also through a series of trainees from abroad who worked with him in Bucks. In 1977 he was invited to join the International Committee of Dermatology as the UK representative.

As member of the International Committee, Darrell changed the focus of this group to the developing world. He conceived the International Foundation for Dermatology. To gain support, he used characteristic flare and imagination. A team of enthusiastic colleagues contributed a fighting fund. The International Committee was invited to a dilapidated Elizabethan Country House Hotel. Here a cheque to start the Foundation was presented after a vigorous “Dad’s Army” performance by the Banbury St John’s Ambulance Cadet Band. The IFD was formalised at the 1987 World Congress of Dermatology in Berlin. Its work in Africa through the training centre in Moshi, Tanzania is now recognised to have changed dermatology care for much of Africa.



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Darrell was President of St Johns Dermatology Society 1966-7, President of the Section of Dermatology at the RSM 1981, President of the BAD in 1983 receiving the BAD’s highest award, the Sir Archibald Gray medal in 1986. He became Fellow of the RSM in 1996 and at the 1997 World Congress of Dermatology in Sydney received the International League of Dermatological Societies Highest Award, the Bronze medal. He was an honorary member of at least 15 national dermatology associations. In 2000 he encouraged the foundation of the BAD historical collection. The Darrell Wilkinson Prize is awarded each year to the best historical poster at the BAD meeting.

Darrell was accompanied and supported on his voyage by his wife Jo who survives him with his children John, David and Julia. His friends and family remember his wonderful parties, homemade fireworks, his nettle soup, jams and chutneys, his discussions of classical civilisation, history and philosophy, playing cello or piano, and a wonderful, generous hospitality always able to accommodate an extra six for supper or on one occasion a whole bus full of visiting Bulgarians!

Darrell Wilkinson was one of the great dermatologists of our time.

Nick Levell

Assistant Honorary Secretary

Acknowledgements:

This article was drawn from an Obituary, available at Willan House for BAD members to read, written by John Wilkinson and Terence Ryan, the 1984 Prosser White Oration, and Walter Shelley’s *Classics in Dermatology* (second edition).