

Dr Janet Marks BM, MA, DM, FRCP

Born 23 August 1926, died 20 April 2008

“Real” is overused but is absolutely right for Janet Mary Marks (she only allowed M to expand to “Mary” on formal occasions), a real person with a breadth and depth far beyond the contemporary “what you see is what you get”.

Janet was born in 1926 in Salisbury, went to South Wilts Grammar School and Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford – a contemporary of Maggie Thatcher, whom she disliked long before the rest of us – qualifying in the Middlesex in 1952. After house and registrar jobs, and the Membership passport, she found her home in dermatology, starting in 1960 as Registrar in St George’s. Stephen Gold told me about Janet when I was looking for a Research Assistant for an MRC funded study of the systemic effects of skin disease (on which we later wrote a monograph). Janet got the job and in 1964 moved with me from St John’s to Newcastle, as lecturer/senior registrar, later senior lecturer/consultant.

It was a marvellous time: research in dermatology was opening up and Janet played a great part in it. Her biggest success was the discovery, with Watson and me, that “patients with dermatitis herpetiformis have an enteropathy indistinguishable from coeliac disease” – our take on Watson and Crick’s famous “it has not escaped us that”. Janet’s gold medal skill at jejunal biopsy (the first to be done in Newcastle!), was aimed at *dermatogenic enteropathy*; then, on the train back from London, my hazy drift into mechanisms juxtaposed tropical sprue and dapsons... and suddenly,

and inexplicably I became *obsessed* by the absurd hunch that patients with DH had gluten enteropathy. I phoned Janet from Newcastle station, because hot ideas easily cool; but not with Janet: she grasped it immediately, and by the very next week she’d done enough to prove the hunch was correct! Those happy days before the stupidity of ethics committees!

Janet gained an international reputation, and her considerable contribution was recognised by the Dowling Oration and Parkes-Weber and Archibald Gray Medals. But if research was her highlight, her clinical and teaching work were not far behind; she organised our psoriasis treatment unit and our undergraduate, GP and postgraduate teaching.

So much for the clockwork pieces; but for those who didn’t have the good fortune to know Janet, let me try to introduce the person. She seemed taller than she was because she was slim and held herself straight – as straight as she thought the inner person should always be. She was always smartly and tastefully dressed, with perfect hair – I cannot remember seeing her otherwise – and her index finger carried a gold ring she had designed to carry a staggeringly large white sapphire (she never denied the rumour that it was a gift from an Indian Prince). Her posh voice added to a slightly forbidding appearance, but neither was an affectation: Janet was always genuine, and her warmth soon became apparent, especially to her Geordie patients who enjoyed her southern poshness, and the way she ended an examination with “put



it away” – which, unsurprisingly, became a catch phrase.

Janet had a sparkling humour, sometimes missed because of its splendid dryness. And she was amazingly even-tempered despite episodic ill-health, the exception being her verbal fury with equally idiosyncratic drivers.

Yes, there was much more to Janet than just what you saw, as her large circle of friends would confirm. She was a supreme cook and hostess; and her apartment was always spare and tasteful. She had several boyfriends, but wasn’t game for marriage – her great love was travel, and she claimed to have visited most counties. But she always returned to Newcastle; it was touching to see how this southerner had adopted, and been adopted by the North East; it became her home, and she was as proud of this as the Geordies were of her. Both her southern roots and her northern attachments will miss her.

Sam Shuster

Norfolk