In Memoriam: Peter Kynaston Thomas, MD (1926-2008)

Peter Kynaston Thomas, or P. K. as affectionately known by his colleagues, died on January 26, 2008, at the age of 81 years. He was a dominant figure in the field of peripheral neuropathy, with a career that spanned more than 5 decades and saw the introduction of electrophysiology, electron microscopy, immunology, and molecular biology, all of which he incorporated in his research into peripheral nerve diseases. He was equally at ease in the boardroom or editorial office, presiding over a meeting, or giving an afterdinner speech as he was at the bedside or laboratory. He served as president of the Association of British Neurologists and the European Neurological Society and was editor of Brain, the Journal of Neurology, and the Journal of Anatomy. His many honors included being named Commander of the British Empire and Fellow of University College in London.

P. K. did most of his work at the University of London and Royal Free Hospital School of Medicine and Institute of Neurology at Queen Square, where he was professor and consultant in neurology. He published more than 300 original articles on just about every aspect of peripheral neuropathy, in addition to numerous chapters and several books, of which he was an editor. It’s not commonly known, however, that he also worked on this side of the Atlantic at the Montreal Neurological Institute of McGill University, where from 1961 to 1962 he served as assistant professor of Neurology in charge of the Electromyography Department, before returning to Queen Square as senior lecturer.

P. K. was most passionate about research. He was a ubiquitous presence at meetings, where he was often seen with a manuscript under his arm, moving quickly between posters, and engaged in discussion with the presenters and other participants. His was an era where funding for medical research was directed mostly at disease mechanisms, before it became largely consumed by clinical trials, with multiple groups working on just about every aspect of neuropathy. He moved easily between the different factions, more curious and open-minded, with little tolerance for pretension, and always encouraging of young investigators. He traveled so often and widely that he once remarked that he no longer had a circadian rhythm.

P. K.’s second marriage was to Anita Harding, MD, who was best known for her discovery of mitochondrial mutations and trinucleotide repeats in human disease. They were considered a power couple, often traveling and lecturing together, and as well-known for their enthusiasm and enjoyment of entertaining as for their contributions to their respective fields. Together with Gerard Said, MD, they founded the European Neurological Society, which sought to democratize European neurology along the lines of the American Academy of Neurology by emphasizing the individual rather than national associations. Anita Harding died of cancer in 1995 at the age of 42 years, just before taking over as chair of the Institute of Neurology at Queen Square. On learning of her condition, she is said to have remarked, “At least I won’t have to buy Windows 95.”

P. K. is survived by his third wife, Sam Ponsford; his brother, Martyn Thomas; and by his 2 sons, Adrian and Nicholas, from his first marriage to Mary Thomas, who died in 1978. His death followed a debilitating stroke, thus ending his suffering. His presence will continue to be missed by the peripheral neuropathy community and by all who knew him.

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