Dr Risien Russell: the silver dragon and beyond

Dr John Henderson, emeritus physician at The Ottawa Hospital, tells the story of how a unique curio – an engrailed silver dragon – holds much personal interest as well as evolving the career of a Caribbean-born physician who achieved great distinction in the UK as a consultant in neurology, and as a professor at the University of London.

The notion that some small knowledge of medical history could be of decisive personal importance might seem far-fetched, but a series of events beginning in Canada more than 50 years ago has proved instructive. Further, the case history reflects the remembrance of a distinguished physician, whose commemoration has been enhanced by present-day events far beyond the knowing of his contemporaries.

The story began in 1964 when, as a medical fellow at the Royal Victoria Hospital, Montreal, I was invited one autumnal evening to a party in an elegant apartment on Sherbrooke Street. My hostess was a Mrs Betty Clemence Gilchrist, and among the various objets d’art, my eye was caught by a fine silver-mounted horn dragon, about a handspan in height. The charming Mrs Gilchrist explained that she was then a serene and bright grande dame in her eighties, living in Hyde Park Square, and we were pleased to introduce her to two of her great-grandchildren. On each of two of her great-grandchildren. On each

As a former GP, Dr Iona Heath has recently written in the British Medical Journal of clinical consultation: ‘Each patient has unique values, aspirations, and context … [t]he patient must see and hear each patient in the fulness of his or her humanity’.

The silver dragon, which is in front of me as I write, serves not only as a cherished family memento, but as a reminder of a late 19th-century consultation at which it seems such exacting standards were fully met by an outstandingly caring and knowledgeable physician, with a happy outcome for all concerned.

One of four sons of a Scottish sugar planter in Demerara, British Guiana (now Guyana), Risien Russell was sent to Scotland as a teenager to continue his education, and he later entered medical school at Edinburgh in 1882, graduating MB CM in 1886. His postgraduate career was stellar and included further study in the UK and continental Europe. He was awarded a gold medal for his postgraduate MD thesis in 1993, qualified as a member of the Royal College of Physicians of London in 1891 and was elected to the fellowship in 1897. He later became a full physician and professor of medicine based at University College Hospital where he was also professor of medical jurisprudence. From house physician to a senior consultant, he was on the staff of the National Hospital, Queen Square, for over 30 years. In the December 2017 issue of Commentary, Adrian Thomas and Andrew

Dr Risien Russell (Windrush Foundation)

Hilsen have commented, from the Osler Club of London, on the transience of most medical reputations. An elegiac strain also concludes the summation of Risien Russell’s career by Macdonald Critchley, writing in 1980 and mournfully expressing his view that the truly charismatic Dr Russell – in his time: ‘one of the most important and colourful figures within the medical profession of Great Britain’ – had been forgotten.

Since that time, historical perspectives and racist attitudes have been undergoing remarkable change. In the early 21st century, nearly 80 years after he died, Risien Russell is being celebrated in today’s pluralistic and post-Windrush society, as a pioneer migrant doctor of Scottish and African heritage who made outstanding contributions to the health and wellbeing of people in Britain, and he is acclaimed both as an exemplar and an icon by those of Caribbean origin.

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References
9. www.windrushfoundation.com