

## **Online archive 16**

### **Martin Roth (1917–2006)**

*Martin Roth, the first President of the College, was one of the most eminent psychiatrists of the second half of the Twentieth Century. His role as first President of the College has been covered in Chapter 7. This online archive covers the rest of his work. He was a neuropsychiatrist, who was elected F.R.S. for his pioneering research into the mental illnesses of old age. He had been Professor of Psychiatry at Newcastle before he later held the inaugural Chair at Cambridge. He was one of the three authors of the major textbook of psychiatry in his professional lifetime. At a time of intense turmoil in Psychiatry he led the new body from being an Association with problems into a College which rapidly moved ahead of the older medical Colleges. The innovations in his time included: a significant role within the College for junior doctors still in training; inspection of training schemes; the introduction of flexible and part-time training; a principled stand against the misuse of psychiatry to detain and mistreat dissenters; and the acquisition of new headquarters in a practical, but elegant, Georgian building in Belgrave Square.*

Martin Roth was born of Jewish parentage in Budapest on 6 November 1917 but moved with his family to London when aged eight. A further gift was as a musician and until the age of 16 it was uncertain whether his future career would be in music or science. While a medical student he augmented his funds as a professional pianist and he continued to play for his own pleasure until the middle of his ninth decade. Following schooling at the Davenant Foundation School in London he studied medicine at London University at St. Mary's Hospital Medical School where he was much influenced by Professor Sir George Pickering, qualifying in 1942. He became a Member of the Royal College of Physicians in 1944 and took his M.D. the following year. In the same year (1945) he married Constance Heller and they had three daughters, one a psychiatrist. He spent two years in St. Mary's and its Park Prewitt Military base hospital as a clinician and postgraduate student where he worked with J.P.M. Laurent (a neurologist interested in the neurology of the mind). This influenced

his decision to train as a neuropsychiatrist in both neurology and psychiatry. He started neurological training as Registrar and Senior Registrar at the Maida Vale Hospital (a branch of the National Hospital for Nervous Diseases, Queen Square). He worked with Wilfred Harris (who had been house physician to Hughlings Jackson, a 19th century physician regarded with veneration by neurologists). He found himself studying trigeminal ganglia, cutting brain sections and forwarding his knowledge of neuropathology. He also worked with Sir Russell Brain (later Lord Brain) who was a pre-eminent neurologist. Roth's first two papers, published in *Brain* (in 1948 and 1949) were neurological and included a critical review of the literature of the problems of 'intermediate forms' between two degenerative disorders of the central nervous system. The second was of disorders of the body image caused by lesions of the right parietal lobe.

Following this thorough grounding in neurology he moved for further training in psychiatry to the Maudsley Hospital working with the doctors Eliot Slater, Erik Guttman and Clifford Scott, a psychoanalyst. Slater taught him how to carry out a full (German) phenomenological examination. This was a demanding exercise requiring much time to make a thorough examination of a patient's inner life and behaviour before making a critical evaluation of their problems. He studied the work of Karl Jasper, Kraepelin, Freud and Kurt Schneider introducing himself to the best of German psychiatry and phenomenology.

Martin Roth moved to the Crichton Royal Hospital in Dumfries (a mental hospital) in 1946. He had not done any further research while at the Maudsley as he was both

heavily involved in clinical duties and was also writing up his previous work (at the Maida Vale). His first two papers dealing with that work were not published until after he left the Maudsley. It was a surprise that he left when he did as Sir Aubrey Lewis, who was the Medical Director, would have been expected to promote a candidate of his calibre to a teaching post at the Institute. He remained at the Crichton Royal for two and a half years working with William Meyer Gross, one of the most distinguished German psychiatrists to flee to Britain before the War. He was invited to join Meyer Gross and Eliot Slater to produce *Clinical Psychiatry* (published in 1954) which was to become the leading textbook in the English language for the next 25 years. The third revised edition appeared in 1977. The authors took from 1949 to 1954 to complete this groundbreaking textbook. While at the Crichton Royal Hospital he continued his researches into the biology and phenomenology of various physical treatments such as ECT (electroconvulsive therapy) and deep insulin. He concluded that the good results with the latter depended on the enthusiasm of all concerned and the rehabilitation programmes that accompanied the treatment. In 1950 he became Director of Clinical Research at Graylingwell Hospital, Chichester converted into a Medical Research Council Unit in 1956 following assessment of research there. This included a dozen papers by himself and his colleagues on the differing dementias of old age. In 1954 he was a visiting Assistant Professor at McGill University, Montreal.

He then moved as Professor and Head of the Department of Psychological Medicine at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne (previously University of Durham). He was at Newcastle from 1956–1977 and was Honorary Director of the Medical Research Council Research Group (1962–1972). While at Newcastle he continued his

productive research career publishing many further papers with David Kay, Bernard Tomlinson, a pathologist, and other collaborators. These dealt with psychiatric aspects of ageing, depressive illness and anxiety states, which were published in psychiatric and other medical journals. He, finally, had written more than 250 scholarly papers.

In 1971 Martin Roth was elected as first President of the newly founded Royal College of Psychiatrists. He had been a member of Council of its predecessor (the Royal Medico-Psychological Association) from 1962–1968 but was not on Council during the three turbulent years (1968–1971) when there was serious dissatisfaction with the proposed plans for the new College. Junior psychiatrists were concerned that they would be shut out of the new body. In 1971 three members of the Council of the R.M.P.A. had been proposed to stand for election for the presidency. Fortunately, the junior psychiatrists were sufficiently unhappy about the possible choices and looked for a further candidate. They prevailed on Martin Roth who agreed to let his name go forward on the very last day that nominations could be accepted. This was extremely fortunate in that he was comfortably elected and subsequently made an outstanding President. Although he was elected in 1971 he did not take over as President till the Annual General Meeting in 1972. The months between the granting of the Charter and the formal inauguration of the College were darkened by the continuing acrimonious dispute between the College and a body of able talented and articulate psychiatrists in training. These were concerned about possible further examinations which appeared to them to be superfluous and the belief that their senior colleagues were acting with unashamed complacency and self-interest. The months between his election and induction as President enabled him to consider the unhappy situation of the new

College, the serious concerns of junior psychiatrists, who had now formed the Association of Psychiatrists in Training (APIT) and were threatening to boycott both the new College and its proposed new examinations. He realised that the College was committed under its Charter to establish a membership examination in psychiatry as soon as possible and that the threatened boycott was causing considerable apprehension. A protest of some kind was expected at the inaugural meeting but as the newly elected first President he was determined to reconcile the warring factions and had taken immense care in drafting his inaugural Presidential Address. After his induction as President he gave his Lecture in which he laid out some of the changes that were now required. Having stated that the College was now his first priority, he pointed out that its primary responsibility would be the maintenance of standards of professional practice, the upgrading of postgraduate education and the accreditation of hospitals and training programmes without neglecting the efforts needed to advance the subject by scientific work – all these were inseparable from the quest for higher professional standards.

He ended his address by tackling the problem of the new examination noting that there were deeply felt, sincere and genuine grievances and there was a substantial basis for them. In this masterly address, he finally compared the College's proposed new examination with that of the competitive examination for posts in the government service of Imperial China a millennium earlier. He reassured his audience that it was not the College's intention to proceed down that road. He gave an historical account of the Chinese competitive examination where acute mental disorder and sudden death were not uncommon among the 10 to 12 000 candidates who gathered for the ordeal

which usually continued for a number of days. The sealed entrance gates were not to be opened even in the event of the demise of the Grand Examiner. (His corpse would have had to be hoisted over the high wall that surrounded the examination precinct.) By the time Professor Roth had reached the section describing the blank papers and copies of the last will and testament handed in by those of the candidates whose minds has been deranged by stress, sombre faces had melted. He was barely audible above a new noise beginning to rock the hall. He finally reached the case of a Grand Examiner whose reason became unhinged and who tore up the papers handed in and bit and kicked those who approached him until he was finally secured and bound hand and foot to his chair. The audience laughed until they wept – the air had been cleared and tension diffused.

Immediately after his address there was an open discussion in which grievances were aired and concessions made regarding exemptions from examination fees. By the end of the day, decisions had been reached and assurances given by the new President. He agreed to convey the views and feelings expressed at the meeting to the newly elected members of Council. With the election of other new officers it was possible for the College to move rapidly to take over its new responsibilities. Junior doctors were immediately co-opted on to College committees as ‘participant observers’ as there was nothing in the Charter to stop this. As the new President said ‘we must play the rules according to the game rather than the other way round’.

It was not surprising that the University of Cambridge sought him to be its first Professor of Psychiatry. This was his final post (1977–1985). Initially he collaborated

with Leslie Iversen's MRC Neuropharmacology Unit, focussing on neurotransmitter studies. He then approached Sir Aaron Klug to develop a collaboration with his group to investigate the molecular structure of the neuro fibrillary tangle. At the same time he developed the Cambridge Examination for Mental Disorders of the Elderly. He continued his productive research career there until very late in his life as Emeritus Professor and Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge.

Martin Roth had many awards for his scientific achievement and he was festooned with honorary degrees and other civic honours. These included visiting professorships and lectureships and much activity on academic bodies, scientific organisations and learned societies including editing scientific journals. He was knighted in 1972. Having brought geriatric psychiatric research into the modern era the award that gave him the greatest pleasure was his election to the Royal Society in 1996 for his life time achievements in the study of the mental illnesses of old age. He was the doyen of British psychiatrists.