This is not an obituary in the traditional sense. It is not a detailed account of his career, his academic achievements and his honours. It is rather a personal appreciation that attempts to capture his contribution to medicine in the University of the West Indies and by extension in the Caribbean. Although this is personal, I believe that there are hundreds of doctors and other health professionals in the Caribbean and in the Diaspora who can relate to this and see in it many of their own recollections of him. With his passing, we have come to the end of the line of original foundation professors of the Faculty of Medicine and in our remembrance and appreciation of him we cannot but recall the contribution these pioneers made and whom they influenced. We wish to believe that the values they tried to inculcate have been transmitted to the generations of health professionals who never knew them but have been taught and influenced by those of us who were so fortunate.

Eric Kennedy Cruickshank came to Mona, Jamaica, in 1949 at the tender age of 34 to be the foundation Professor of Medicine in the newly minted University College of the West Indies. I met him even before I came to Mona, as it was, he along with Philip Sherlock interviewed me in 1951 amid the luscious gardens of the Barbados Museum for entry to the College. I still recall his acute observational skills from that interview.

I have often wondered what could have induced a young Scotsman with a young bride who probably had the prospect of a distinguished academic career in his own University of Aberdeen to undertake such a challenge. One would imagine that such a task would have been undertaken by more mature men, with extensive administrative experience. I would guess that the decision was shaped in part by a spirit of adventure, by the desire to see tropical medicine again and not from the confines of a Japanese prisoner of war camp. There was perhaps also the wish through the training of doctors, to help to create something noble that would be of continuing service to a part of the world whose health indicators showed that help was needed. He probably wished to conduct research on some of the diseases of the Caribbean which might yield their secrets to the collective enquiry of enthusiastic investigators in a university environment. Indeed, his early description of the clinical features of the spastic paraparesis that he labelled “Jamaican Neuropathy” laid the foundation for the seminal work on its aetiology by one of his students – Pamela Rogers-Johnson.

Eric Cruickshank contributed handsomely to the headiness of those early years. There was not only the challenge of all the administrative work to be done in starting an academic department, of taking his turn at the Deanship of the Faculty and I am sure it was no mean feat to be able to counter the sharp and often acerbic comments of the Principal, Thomas Taylor. But perhaps an equal or even greater challenge was to win the respect of the legendary and accomplished Jamaican physicians at the Kingston Public Hospital where for a year the medical students had clinical teaching before the University Hospital of the West Indies was finished.

In this last category, he more than held his own. He was a superb clinician and his attention to every detail, his emphasis on intellectual honesty and rigour, his sharp observational skills which some of us attributed to his bird-watching, his overall diagnostic acumen and his empathetic attention to his patients as persons and not cases have helped shape the practice of medicine in the Caribbean for generations. It was, in great part, his skill at arriving at a diagnosis from the use of one’s own senses and his manner of communicating with patients that was a major factor in convincing many like me to follow the discipline of internal medicine.

It must not be forgotten that perhaps because of his Scottish background and training, with the emphasis on the
social aspect of medicine, he was in large part responsible for the formation of the Department of Social and Preventive Medicine which was formed out of his Department of Medicine. None of us who were privileged to be his disciples will ever forget his clinical ward rounds which to the young seemed interminably long, but on reflection were needed to emphasize the importance of the attention to detail about the patient and his or her physical and social environment. He gave every patient the time and attention necessary to be able to understand him or her as a person and not as a case. Long before the profession became hooked on new truths such as risk factors and evidence based medicine, these were the approaches and methods used by Eric Cruickshank.

But he was not a metronomic martinet and certainly not the traditional dour Scot. How do I remember his participation in our Medical Smokers when Red Stripe beer at sixpence per bottle lubricated the staff/student relationships but never to the extent that one group lost respect for the other! The revels of a Saturday night or the hard-fought game of tennis and the ward round on Monday morning were never confused.

His generosity of spirit will always remain with many of us. Of course, there would have been administrative decisions which did not find favour with everyone, but that is usually the nature of good administrative decisions. But no one will forget his unfailing courtesy to those with whom he interacted – doctors, nurses, medical students, orderlies – the lot. This did not restrain him from insisting on the standards of dress and conduct which he would often say reflected the tidy mind that good physicians must have. I know personally of his kindnesses and I am sure I am not alone.

I had the honour and privilege of succeeding Eric Cruickshank as Professor of Medicine and I can pay him no better tribute than to hope that I transmitted to those who came after me the same kinds of values and principles to be followed in medicine of which he was an exemplar.

When Mark Twain advertised to be allowed to edit his obituary, he said that the facts available to the obituarist were not really important, but he was concerned about “the conclusions which he shall draw from them and the judgments which he shall deliver upon them”. As I pointed out, this is not a traditional obituary, but I am absolutely sure that my judgment and that of my contemporaries is and the judgment of history will be that Eric Kennedy Cruickshank was one of the principal architects of a splendid edifice that will endure for ever and of which the Caribbean can be justly proud.

Thank you Professor Cruickshank.

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