J. Hyg., Camb. (1985), **95**, 519–520
Printed in Great Britain

Obituary

JOHN HENRY McCOY
1913–1985

Dr John Henry McCoy, until recently Director of the Hull Public Health Laboratory, and an Editor of this Journal from 1973 to 1982, died on 22 May 1985 after a short illness. Although his later years had been sadly troubled by ill-health his death was unexpected, and has left a serious gap in the ranks of Public Health bacteriologists.

John McCoy, 'Tim' to all his friends, was born into a farming family in County Antrim in 1913. Although he spent the greater part of his life in England he retained a deep and passionate love for Ireland, and he now rests in the family grave in Ballycastle. Much of John's eloquence and humour came clearly from his background and origins. He qualified in medicine at Queen's University, Belfast, in 1936 and spent the next four years in resident posts in biochemistry, bacteriology and serology at the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast. He obtained his D.P.H. in 1941 and in the same year joined the R.A.F. medical branch. He served with the R.A.F. in the Middle East until 1946, and was mentioned in despatches in 1945 for work on famine relief in Southern Arabia. On returning to civilian life he joined the Public Health Laboratory Service, spending the next six years in the Cambridge laboratory. He was appointed Director of the Hull Public Health Laboratory in 1952, a post he held until his retirement in 1979. The appointment suited him well. He exploited to the full all the opportunities for the study of the problems of environmental hygiene that were to be found in a busy industrial city with an active fishing industry, much processing of foods, a port through which animal feedingstuffs and fertilizers were imported, a polluted river, recreational beaches on the adjacent coast and a farming hinterland.

Over the years he established his position as the foremost sanitary bacteriologist in the P.H.L.S. He had an international reputation as an expert adviser on the microbiology of the rearing of poultry, cattle and pigs and on the monitoring of foods, water and milk. Much of his personal contribution to water bacteriology is to be found anonymously in the reports of such P.H.L.S. subcommittees as that which undertook successive revisions of 'The Bacteriological Examination of Water Supplies' or the working party on sewage contamination of coastal bathing beaches. His advisory role included the preparation of briefing papers for public inquiries into proposals for the discharge of sewage effluent into rivers or the sea, or into projects for the use of contaminated river water to augment city drinking water supplies. Discovery of contaminated cargoes of Icelandic fish involved him at one time in advising on the problems of the disposal of sewage from cities whose outfalls may be into frozen waters for much of the year. On topics such as these his fund of reminiscence was inexhaustible, and he could keep a seminar audience entranced well beyond his allotted time.

Given his farming background and the importance of salmonellas in both animal and human disease it was perhaps inevitable that salmonellosis would become Tim McCoy's overriding interest. His wide and detailed knowledge of the intricacies of imported animal feedingstuffs and fertilizers revolutionized accepted views on the source, mode of spread and methods of prevention of salmonella infection in man and animals. Several new *Salmonella* serotypes were first isolated in his laboratory. His spontaneous and off-the-cuff contributions on these topics at staff meetings revealed not only a detailed recall of relevant laboratory findings but also a comprehensive knowledge of the commercial and technical practices of the industries involved. In this context a colleague who was once taken on a tour of the Hull fish market recalls how alert he was to the hygienic implications of all that went on there in daily routine.

McCoy's published work greatly understates his impact on public health bacteriology, partly because so much of what he did is incorporated in working party reports, notably perhaps the three major reports on salmonellas – in abbatoirs and butchers' shops, in cattle in England and Wales and in meat products. Most of the publications under his own name were contributions to symposia on practical aspects of environmental hygiene, as seen from the medical bacteriologist's viewpoint, usually to gatherings of predominantly non-medical health workers. These papers were well written, didactic in approach and backed by thorough familiarity with recent literature. One quite outstanding paper on trends in salmonella food poisoning in England and Wales over the years 1941–72 was published in the *Journal of Hygiene* in 1975. In this, McCoy illumined the tabulations of P.H.L.S. annual reports with his encyclopaedic knowledge of post-war rationing policies, of the introduction of new foods, of changes in animal husbandry and of the relative proportions of flesh food from different animal species consumed in Britain, as dictated by economic or technological factors.

As an Editor, Tim McCoy was meticulous. A love of language, a passion for detail and a critical flair for spotting the flaws in a scientific argument ensured that few papers passed through his hands unaltered, and all were improved by his attention. Although this did not always endear him to his authors, nor make for rapid publication, it did ensure high standards of presentation, and was very much in the tradition of his senior colleague, R. M. Fry. As a man he was a valued and helpful colleague, an entertaining companion, an accomplished raconteur. He will be sadly missed.

In 1941 Sir William Savage published a slim volume on practical public health problems. In his preface he deplored the fact that because of their increasing involvement in hospitals Medical Officers of Health were tending to take less interest in specialized problems of environmental hygiene, leaving these more and more to the engineer and the sanitary inspector. In reviewing Tim McCoy's dedicated career in public health bacteriology it is salutary to reflect that today his discipline too seems somewhat out of fashion among medical microbiologists in Britain, and this may similarly be to the detriment of preventive medicine in years to come.

B.M.