

book reviews

Hoffenberg – physician and humanitarian

By L Ross Humphreys. Royal College of Physicians, London 2010. 174 pp. £20.00.

This story starts with Sir Raymond (Bill) Hoffenberg's young years in South Africa at the time of apartheid. At school he was both an athlete and a scholar, entering the medical school of the University of Cape Town (UCT) when only 16 in 1939. He could have continued at UCT through the war as his father advised, but chose instead to join the South African army having had to forge his father's signature to do so. He trained in Egypt before seeing a good deal of fighting in Italy as a Lance Corporal in a field ambulance unit.

It was not until 1946 that he could return to medical school. There Hoffenberg flourished, coming second in his year, representing the university in tennis, golf and squash while not neglecting rugby, water polo and boxing. Living student life to the full, his capacity to party and drink his contemporaries under the table, yet arise unharmed the next morning, was legendary. His career at Groote Schuur Hospital was supplemented by the postgraduate course at Hammersmith, where he worked with Russell Fraser and then at New End with Raymond Greene. Later he spent a year in America, furthering his knowledge about the use of isotopes in endocrinology. All was going well when Hoffenberg became increasingly vociferous in his opposition to apartheid. Having joined the Liberal Party at its inception in 1953, his outspoken concern for political prisoners, his support for the National Union of South African Students and most importantly his chairmanship of the Defence Aid Fund (which provided for the defence of those accused of political crimes) led to his being placed under a banning order by the government under its Suppression of Communism Act 1950. This effectively ended his career in South Africa, giving him little option but to leave the country in 1968.

He accepted an appointment with the National Institute of Medical Research at Mill Hill and later at the Clinical Research Centre at Northwick Park, but it was not long before he was elected to the Withering Chair of Medicine at Birmingham University. There, among many other achievements he fostered excellence in clinical work and teaching. Such was his reputation that it was no surprise when he was elected president of the

Royal College of Physicians (RCP) in 1983. He led the RCP in issues such as medical audit, the profession and the pharmaceutical industry, fraud in research, ethical issues in medicine and the unhappy state of the NHS under Margaret Thatcher. He was particularly concerned about issues at the end of life.

When he was elected president of Wolfson College, Oxford, in 1985 there followed a period in which he had the energy to combine the two presidencies. The years at Wolfson were largely happy ones for him, despite controversy surrounding the eviction of an unsatisfactory student and, more importantly, as to whether or not Professor Ernst Nolte, a historian with outlandish views about Hitler's Germany, should be allowed to give one of the college's prestigious lectures.

After retirement from both colleges, Hoffenberg and his wife Margaret joined their children in Australia, where he filled the chair of medical ethics at the University of Queensland with his customary energy and distinction.

Does this book get beyond an account of events in Hoffenberg's life and produce what is essential in a good biography, a vivid picture of the man himself? I think in this respect the author has done a good job, although the inclusion of such minute detail in some of the chapters tends to detract. Given that most, but not all, of his readers will come from the medical profession, he has not entirely solved the dilemma of how much to write or not write about strictly medical matters, particularly those concerning research. He dwells too much on that but is at his best in writing about the Hoffenbergs in South Africa, where he provides a fascinating account.

Shortly, before his death, Bill commented that he did not want to be portrayed as a saint, as he feared he might be in his biography. Given his life of high principle, integrity and achievement, it cannot have been easy for his biographer to avoid such a portrayal and I doubt that he really wanted to do so. The book that has emerged is an unreserved and glowing tribute to the man. If there were deficiencies or failures, they are not to be found here.

There are some attractive illustrations, but they could have been better reproduced. There are also some passages in the book where matters are revealed that some would have thought better kept private. It is a pity, too, that there are no biographical notes about the many people mentioned in the text. Despite these reservations there is much to admire in the book which, overall, is a well researched account of a remarkable life.

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