

OBITUARY – John McLean OBE



“Irreplaceable” ... “a departed father” ... “a great man” ... “a great dentist” ... “a brilliant mind” ... “a great conversationalist” ... “a first class orator” ... “an outstanding person” ... “the innovator” ... “leading light of world dentistry” ... “a wonderful and special person” ... “the end of a great life” ... “a great man of our time” ... “a giant” ... “the end of an era” ... “passing of a legend” ... “a sensational individual” ... “so much class” ...
And the end of a chapter in all of our lives...

These were just a few of the many comments and remarks made from all corners of the world within 24 hours of the passing of a great man who was a husband, father, grandfather, scientist, academic, researcher, clinician. Innovative ideas and concepts, some too much before their time, included alteration of the dentin layer by acidic acrylic in 1953, the bonding of porcelain to metal in the 1960s, the advent of high-strength aluminous cores in the 1970s alongside the development and clinical utilization of the glass ionomer cements are part of this chapter. Volumes could be filled with the biography, curriculum vitae, anecdotes, stories and photographs that would only partially represent the unique individual that was John McLean.

For a man known for his oratory skills (he was, after all, an admirer of Sir Winston Churchill), and aesthetic use of the English language, any words seem inadequate, almost pathetic, when attempting to describe the man behind the legend, for that is what John was, a legend (defined as mythical or supernatural beings). John had the power, the knowledge, the insight, and the conviction, to continually buck the trend, to go against traditionalists, to “think outside the box” (did he also invent that concept?). He followed Sir Winston’s ideal: “A man does what he must – in spite of

personal consequences, in spite of obstacles and dangers and pressures – and that is the basis of all human morality.” Only a legend can endure the pressures of constantly breaking new ground for almost seven decades.

Much has been written throughout the years of John’s accomplishments in his chosen profession: as an honoured student, clinician, academic, researcher, innovator/ inventor, mentor, father figure, and “old sage”. Again, books have, and can be filled with these facts, which encompassed a huge part of his life. However, we should never forget the human being behind these cold objective achievements... He was a loving husband (again to quote Sir Winston: “My most brilliant achievement was my ability to be able to persuade my wife to marry me.”) Upon his retirement from clinical dentistry, he had been hoping to be able to enjoy the future with his lovely Diana, but unfortunately, she was taken ill. They spent several years in their beautiful home in Hampstead, where he, along with his four daughters, cared for and nursed Diana. After her passing, John initially lost some of his interest in traveling, but with the support of his “girls” and good friends, he again traveled and participated in conferences, symposia, and meetings worldwide. He was always included on the program, as “the voice of reason”. Again, to quote Sir Winston “I am certainly not one of those who need to be prodded. In fact, if anything, I am the prod.” John’s “girls” and friends often felt the prod!



He enjoyed socializing with, and the camaraderie of his international friends and colleagues. John was a true bon vivant, gourmet and possessed a definite sense of “joie de vivre”. Churchill said, “My rule of life prescribed as an absolutely sacred rite of smoking cigars and also the drinking of alcohol before, after and if need be during all meals and in the intervals between them.” Again, John and his “idol” were of the same philosophy. He taught many of us the finer things of life, the correct wines to go with specific dishes, which single malts were “true” single malts without additives, historical notes and how they related to current affairs and how to act civilized! Many of us felt that helpful prod throughout our relationships with John. We should not forget his inimitable sense of humour, sometimes biting, always to the point! He bestowed nicknames on a number of his friends and colleagues, which became their moniker, some of these more flattering than others! He was immensely proud of his British heritage and his Welsh and Scottish roots, which manifested in taking friends to his clan’s ancestral home at Duart Castle on the Isle of Mull, or discussing the resiliency of the English during and after World War II. He was equally proud of his personal and professional relationships with many on the “other side of the pond”, although he would agree, tongue-in-cheek, with Churchill, “You can always count on Americans to do the right thing – after they’ve tried everything else.” John shook things up in the 1970s in Boston by changing preparation designs for crowns. He taught the current generation of prosthodontics teachers at Louisiana State University.

Among his closest friends were the leaders of dentistry; the mentors to many, the teachers to all. He always gave credit where credit was due, making sure that those who had come before him, who had done pioneering work, were given acknowledgement. He would often comment at lectures that some of the presenters were attempting to re-invent the wheel! He definitely subscribed to George Santayana’s philosophy that “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”.

Just four weeks prior to his death, he participated in the European Academy of Esthetic Dentistry’s meeting in Gleneagles Scotland and many of us had the sense that he was saying goodbye. The Academy’s members and guests ensured throughout the three days that John understood the position he had attained in the profession and the enormous number of friends he had made, crossing generations and international boundaries. He truly loved the camaraderie, ambience, friendship, professionalism and adulation thrown at him by everyone present.



John McLean now joins his dearest friends Ed Jeansonne, Lloyd Miller and Peter Scharer and can finally have that long-awaited discussion with Sir Winston Churchill who said, "I am prepared to meet my Maker. Whether my Maker is prepared for the great ordeal of meeting me is another matter." I know that Dr Mac will more than hold his own in that vaulted company!

John McLean leaves behind a long list of students, colleagues, friends, and family who will forever treasure the time they had to spend in the presence of greatness. We can all be grateful for having had the opportunity to be part of his journey. As John was having a "discussion" with one of the Gleneagles eagles at the falconry school, we had a sense that he was lecturing the poor bird on how he should actually be flying, and letting the bird know that he himself would be soaring through the ether shortly... most likely better and loftier than most.

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