

# In memoriam : Dr. John R. Baker, F.R.S.

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IN MEMORIAM — DR. JOHN R. BAKER, F.R.S.

This symposium volume is dedicated to the memory of Professor John R. Baker (1900-1983), who through his biography of Abraham Trembley, did so much to bring to light the contributions of one of the great biologists of the eighteenth century. The following obituary appeared in *The Times* of London, June 16, 1983. (H.M.L. and P.T.)

Dr. J.R. BAKER

Dr. J.R. Baker, F.R.S., who died on June 8 in Oxford at the age of 83 had been an outstanding figure in Oxford zoology for three generations. His enthusiasm and his width of knowledge were enormous.

He was born on October 23, 1900, the son of Rear-Admiral Julian A. Baker. After student days at New College, Oxford, he studied the breeding of animals in the New Hebrides, demonstrating its seasonal character notwithstanding the relative constancy of tropical conditions. It was this interest in the sexual cycle which led him to consider the importance of limitation of human populations and to work on contraception which was far in advance of his time.

But his most important work was concerned with microscopy and the study of the cell: Before the advent of the electron microscope he had begun a major attack on the problem of "cellular machinery". That took him into the field of microscopy and cytology.

His fine critical powers and his honesty of observation made him the ideal student for such work. He pointed out how dangerous it was to interpret the artifacts recorded in dead cells after fixation and chemical treatment as directly representing structures actually present in the living substance, and endeavoured to discover precisely what these treatments did to cells.

Subsequent work fully bore out his caution and showed the value of his criticism, though his forthright attack on other people's ingenious theories and interpretations led him into many controversies. Without ostentation but with great force he showed how traditional histological and cytological methods could be made to yield exact information. That was an invaluable service to the study of the cell at that time.

His critical approach prevented him from spectacular theorizing: had he indulged in that, recognition of the importance of his work would have come to him sooner — though less surely. He was always respected internationally.

He was a rare personality; a man of enthusiasm with force of character, of vast knowledge but without vanity, and a man of pure sincerity. Jokingly, he once said of himself, “Sincerity, 100 per cent — tact, nil.” But his kindness and complete absence of malice could make even the toughest argument an exciting pleasure, and however roughly he handled an opponent’s views it was impossible not to gain affection for such a great and kindly man for whom the truth of the matter was the only important — and interesting — thing.

He was made Reader in Cytology in Oxford in 1955, and F.R.S. in 1958. In 1964 he was elected a Professorial Fellow of New College, and in 1968 an honorary fellow. His qualities and the pains he would take to help other workers made him invaluable in his Editorship of the Quarterly Journal of Microscopical Science and he was president of the Royal Microscopical Society in 1964-65. His fearless and logical mind led him to found the Society for the Freedom of Science, a matter he had much at heart.

He had an intense interest in human affairs and this, with his special qualities, led him to his interest in the history of science. He will be particularly remembered for his admirable biography of Abraham Trembley which appeared in 1952.

His interest in all kinds of men led to the writing of his largest book, *Race* (1974) which was an attempt to discover whether there is a reality behind the idea of race. A biography of Julian Huxley, *Julian Huxley, scientist and world citizen* was published in 1978.

Many will remember his pleasant house at Kidlington and discussions and arguments with him there.

He was twice married. First in 1923 to Inezita Davis and secondly in 1939 to Mrs. Helen Savage. There were a son and a daughter of the first marriage.