

Professor Donald Ritson Gunn

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'This is the story of a famous surgeon. Famous surgeons are today an extinct species. Up to the middle of this century, someone who had inherited or learned the manual skills needed for reconstructing the human body, combined with a capacity to command and dominate those around them, was an admired figure. Medical science has now advanced to the point where that sort of person is no longer needed or employable.'

Adrian Marston: Hamilton Bailey: A Surgeon's Life (1999)

A strong and low pitched voice resounded in the room, 'Good Morning. I have worked in many great institutions, with many great people,, if you want to be a great leader, you must first see how these great minds work,, perhaps someday, one of you here will be like them. Thank you. Please carry on

It was early in the morning; we were having our daily trauma rounds. Our Professor of Orthopaedic Surgery, a respectable man, of great eminence, taking the trouble to educate us young minds on our country's medical history. As he spoke, he pronounced his sentences slowly and distinctly, with a conscious effort to communicate his ideas to the audience.

Youthful embarrassment in the presence of my Professor prevented me from asking any questions. One question lingered in my mind after that day however; who are these great people and can one learn to be one?

In different settings, different people have accomplished many great things. These are the people who stood out from the masses and the story if without them will be incomplete or monotonous so to speak. At the peak of their eminence, we will end up with only a few people, so call the truly great, or the giants.

Cleverness and talent differs from greatness according to William Hazlitt (1778-1830), an English essayist in 'The Indian Juggles', just as 'voluntary' differs from the 'involuntary'. A great man's influence should have no boundaries according to him. No man is truly great who is great only in his life time and the acid test will be the pages of history.

A man at the peak of his profession is not a great man. He is a man who has mastered his craft, but he is not great unless he has the mark of a great moving intellect, who lays not in other shadow but one even without his smallest skills, will still be regarded as great.

'John Hunter was a great man – that any one might see without the smallest skill in surgery. His style and manner showed the man. He would set about cutting up the carcass

of a whale with the same greatness of gusto that Michael Angelo would have hewn a block of marble'.

Every generation of physicians can recognize a few mentors who shaped its thinking about matters both technical and humanitarian, who wove both disciplined excellence and a caring spirit. For my Professor's generation, his mentor was Professor Donald Ritson Gunn.

My Professor has always wanted to write about his life, experiences, reminiscences and one of the stories he wanted to dictate is that of the late Professor Donald Ritson Gunn, a Professor of Orthopaedic Surgery in Singapore, in the 1960s. A man known to have the character of the highest honor and integrity, rightly so, as there is more to medicine than just knowledge and wisdom. He would give money to the ward's nurses to buy food and medicine for the patients who could not afford. It is not only for his contribution to medicine that he will be remembered, but also for his personal qualities. No one who knows him will forget his unique combination of a commanding presence, gentleness, concern and a highly developed sense of fun that made his company a delight.

Donald Ritson Gunn was born on 2nd May 1920 in Cheshire, United Kingdom. His father and uncle were both Fellows of the Royal College of Surgeons. His father was attached to Heswell Children's Hospital, Cheshire. His paternal grandfather explored New Zealand with a friend, being the first to cross New Zealand on foot. Lake Gunn (South Island, New Zealand) was named after him.

Donald Gunn was the youngest son, having three brothers and one sister. Two of his brothers were killed in World War II. His eldest brother George Ward Gunn was awarded the Military Cross and later when he was killed in action in North Africa in 1942, he was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross, the highest British Military award. His second brother Philip McLaine Gunn joined the Special Air Service (SAS) and carried out raids behind German lines in Europe, fighting with the Partisans and Commandos. He was awarded the Military Cross. He died in a jeep accident during the war. His third brother John Ridley Gunn served in Europe and survived.

Donald Gunn was educated the Mortyn Preparatory School and the Sedbergh Public School in Yorkshire. He was a keen sportsman and captain of his school's rugby team. He played cricket for Edinburgh University where he studied medicine and graduated in January 1943. After a short internship he joined the Royal Army Medical Corp and was sent to Lucknow, India in July 1943. In 1944, he joined the Chindits in Burma¹ and served as the medical officer to the 2nd Battalion Duke of Wellington's Chindits.

He trekked on foot through the jungles and mountains to Northern Assam fighting the Japanese all the way. Later he joined Force 136 and was parachuted behind the Japanese lines to destroy the infamous Death Railway^{2,3}. After the war, he spent a year with Force 136 helping the French in Indo-China.

He traveled by train from Bangkok to Singapore to catch a boat to England. His travel through Malaya made him fall in love with that country and Singapore and he made up his mind to return. Donald Gunn was demobilized from the Royal Army Medical Corp in 1947.

In 1948, Donald Gunn joined the Birkenhead General Hospital, Liverpool as a house surgeon and was later appointed Orthopaedic Registrar. There he met his wife Margaret Tanner Evans (Tanna) from Wales who was the junior theater sister. They married on the 10th March 1949. Their eldest son, Ian Philip was born in June 1952 and second son, Peter Donald was born in Kuala Lumpur in 1956.

In September 1952, Donald Gunn was admitted as a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh and in December 1952, he obtained the M.Ch.Orth.(L'pool). He worked for a while in United Kingdom to gain further experience and in August 1953, he was appointed as the Consultant Orthopaedic Surgeon to the Malayan Medical Services and became the first orthopaedic surgeon to work in Malaya.

In August 1956, Donald Gunn left Kuala Lumpur and after a short holiday came over to Singapore in November 1956 as the Senior Lecturer in Orthopaedic Surgery in the University of Malaya. In 1961, Donald Gunn was appointed Professor of Orthopaedic Surgery in the University of Malaya. In January 1962, on the establishment of the University of Singapore, Donald Gunn became its first Professor of Orthopaedic Surgery (Orthopaedic surgery was carried by the general surgeons till 1952, when one of the two chairs in surgery was converted to the chair of orthopaedic surgery).

In 1964, Donald Gunn organized the First Singapore Orthopaedic Meeting – the first such meeting in South East Asia. The meeting had delegates from India, Thailand, Hong Kong, Japan, Philippines, Malaysia, New Zealand and Australia. Because of the great success of that meeting, the Second Singapore Orthopaedic Meeting was combined with

the Australian Orthopaedic Association Meeting in 1966.

A great proponent of Orthopaedic Training and Education, he started the weekly Saturday conferences for discussion of challenging and interesting cases for orthopaedic surgeons and doctors in training. These conferences have been going for the last 40 years.

Unfortunately, for the past few months, the interests in these meetings had been waning. The attendance in the meeting has been falling and trainees did not show up most of the time.

Donald Gunn and his wife Tanna took special interest in the Crippled Children's Association in Changi and the St. Andrew's Orthopaedic Hospital. They helped to found the Spastics Children's Home in Gilstead Road and the Society for Aid to the Paralyzed with its sheltered workshop in Tiong Bahru. Donald Gunn was the patron of the Society for the Aid to the Paralyzed from the time of its inception till he left Singapore.

Donald Gunn moved to the United States of America in August 1967. There he was made first Associate Professor of Orthopaedic Surgery, University of Washington, Seattle. From December 1971 to December 1973, he was conferred Professor of Orthopaedic Surgery and the Orthopaedist-in-Chief of the Harborview Medical Centre, Seattle, Washington.

In December 1973, Donald Gunn moved into private practice and was appointed Clinical Honorary Degree of Doctor of Science. For his wife Tanna and his contribution to the handicapped and the disabled, the Singapore government conferred on both Donald Gunn and Tanna Gunn the Public Service Star – the Bintang Bakti Masyarakat (BBM)⁵.

Professor Donald Gunn was respected for his own charisma, medical acumen and tenacity, but most importantly for the pioneering projects and the networking he had put in place before he left. He is the foundation builder for our local orthopaedic surgery community. Few people, even with outstanding contributions now, will be able to displace him as one of the most important figure here.

Professor Donald Ritson Gunn has rightly earned a place in our history.

1. The Chindits were the largest of the allied Special Forces of the 2nd World War. They were formed and lead by Major General Orde Wingate DSO. The Chindits operated deep behind enemy lines in North Burma in the War against Japan. For many months they lived in and fought the enemy in the jungles of Japanese occupied Burma, totally relying on airdrips for their supplies. There were two Chindits expeditions into Burma, the first in February 1943 Operation Longcloth, consisted of a force of 3,000 men who marched over 1,000 miles during the campaign. The second expedition, Operation Thursday, in March 1944 was a much large scale. It was the second largest airborne invasion of the war and consisted of a force of 20,000 British and Commonwealth soldiers with air support provided by the 1st Air Commando USAAF.
2. The Special Operations Executive was established by a War Cabinet decision of 22 July 1940 to create a new organization demanded by Prime Minister Winston Churchill, "to co-ordinate all action, by way of subversion and sabotage, against the enemy overseas". Its headquarters were in Baker Street, London. In Asia, where S.O.E. was known as "Force 136", the life of a secret agent was quite different. Here there was no solid, well organized group of local people fighting the invaders, such as the French Resistance movement in France, with whom S.O.E. agents could align themselves. Most of the native peoples in the Japanese-occupied countries (Hong Kong, Malaya, Burma, the Netherlands East Indies, Siam, French Indochina and the Philippines) were either indifferent or antagonistic towards the Europeans who they felt were attempting to re-impose colonial rule. There was also much hostility among different factions within the countries. Most of the time, S.O.E. had to enlist the support of local communist guerrillas in the fight against the Japanese.
3. The Death Railway stretched for 415 km from Thanbyuzayat in Burma to Nong Pladuk in Bangpong District in Ratchaburi province in Thailand. 304 km of the railway was located in Thailand and the remaining 111 km in Burma. More than 16,000 prisoners died during the construction of the railway or about thirty-eight prisoners for every km of railway built. The prisoners died because of sickness, malnutrition and exhaustion. There was very little or no medical treatment available and many prisoners suffered horribly before they died.
4. World Orthopaedic Concern is an international society for orthopaedic education in developing countries. Its terms of reference are to improve the standard of orthopaedic and reconstructive surgery in the tropics and subtropics, mainly by education of medical students, doctors and paramedical personnel in economically poor countries. Over the years World Orthopaedic Concern has become regionalized and now have active groups in Singapore (for South-East-Asia), Australia, USA, Canada, India, UK, France (for the French speaking region), Germany (for the German speaking region), Spain (for the Spanish speaking region), Netherlands, South America, Japan, Italy, Hungary, Korea and Portugal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Kenya and Nigeria.
5. Singapore: Publish Service Star Instituted: 1963: Awarded to any person rendering valuable public service to Singapore or distinguishing themselves in art, sport, the professions, business, etc. Former ribbon (1963-96): Red with white edges and a narrow white central stripe. '1st Donald Gunn Lecture', Singapore Orthopaedic Association, Prof V K Pillay.