



obituary

Sir Martin Roth

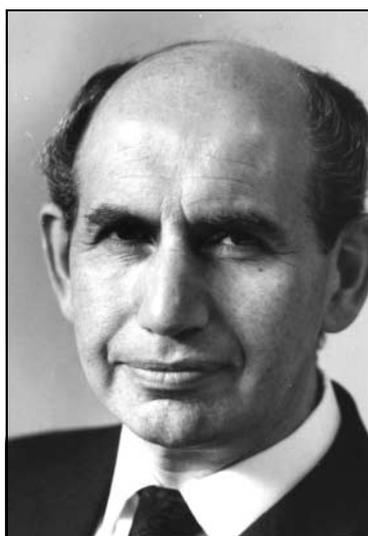
First President of the Royal College of Psychiatrists

Sir Martin Roth, first President of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, Emeritus Professor of Psychiatry in Cambridge and the most eminent British psychiatrist of his generation, died on 26 September 2006 at the age of 88.

Martin Roth was born in Budapest and came to London with his parents at the age of 8, to live initially in the East End. He was educated at the Davenant Foundation School, an East End grammar school with a long history of excellence. He entered St Mary's Hospital Medical School in 1937, qualifying in 1942 and working in Park Prewitt Hospital, then a military hospital. He obtained the MRCP in 1944 and his MD in 1945. He trained in neurology at Maida Vale Hospital, also obtaining some neuropathological experience, and in psychiatry at the Maudsley. He then worked at Crichton Royal Hospital with Willi Mayer-Gross, an eminent German psychiatrist who was a refugee from Nazi persecution, and was invited to be an author of *Clinical Psychiatry* (Mayer-Gross, Slater & Roth), which became a standard textbook. It was translated into five languages and ran three editions in the 1950s and 1960s.

He moved to Graylingwell Hospital in 1950 as Director of Clinical Research, a post that was the precursor of Director of the Medical Research Council unit. He became Professor of Psychiatry in Newcastle in 1956, and under his leadership the department became one of the most highly regarded in this country, with a number of colleagues who went on to chairs, including three in Australia. He moved to be the Foundation Professor of Psychiatry in Cambridge in 1977, to a department that was initially very small and under-resourced both by the University and the National Health Service. He built up a strong base of research, which has since facilitated development of a much larger department (receiving five stars in the Research Assessment Exercise). He retired in 1985, but remained much engaged in research and passionate about research issues until his eighties. The passion could be reflected in a tendency to overrun his allotted time in distinguished guest lectures at international conferences.

Sir Martin's research was clinical. He was particularly interested in psychiatric classification. His studies were over a range of disorders, including depression and anxiety disorders, but his pathfinding



work was in disorders of the elderly. In an early study at Graylingwell Hospital, he established the modern nosology in what had earlier been viewed as a single unitary degenerative illness, showing that five types of disorder with different features and prognoses could be separated: senile psychosis (Alzheimer's disease), arteriosclerotic dementia, paraphrenia, depression and confusional states. A number of later studies replicated and extended this work. In Newcastle he collaborated with neuropathologists to explore quantitatively the role of plaques and tangles in Alzheimer's disease. In Cambridge he established a collaboration with a Nobel prize-winning molecular biologist, Sir Aaron Klug (later President of the Royal Society) to examine neurofibrillary tangles and established the structure of the paired helical filaments of which they are composed, and that a major constituent is an abnormal isoform of tau protein. Indirectly this has also led to much further work by others in Cambridge on abnormal protein depositions in brain diseases. His academic and research standing were recognised by numerous highly distinguished prizes, honorary degrees, visiting professorships, memberships of advisory committees and of the Medical Research Council. He was knighted in 1972. He was particularly proud when he became one of the small band of psychiatrists to have been elected FRS, in 1996, for his pioneering work in old age psychiatry.

He was elected first President of the Royal College of Psychiatrists in 1971, to take office in 1972. The foundation of the College had been opposed by some senior psychiatrists and by junior doctors concerned at a proliferation of potentially difficult examinations. There was

unhappiness regarding the candidates proposed by the Council of the precursor organisation, the Royal Medico-Psychological Association. Martin Roth was proposed by a group of members and was elected comfortably. Some younger objectors to the College were present at the inaugural meeting, but in a memorable inaugural address Martin Roth won them all round. He told a long anecdote about the formidable competitive examination for the civil service in old imperial China. More than 10 000 candidates were gathered for days in a sealed venue, from which none could leave. Some died, including examiners, and they would be lowered over the walls. Blank papers and copies of last wills and testaments were not uncommonly handed in by candidates whose minds had snapped under the stress. One Grand Examiner became unhinged, tore up the papers and had to be bound to his chair. As this cautionary tale proceeded, the good nature of the narrator became increasingly apparent. He began to smile and then to laugh. The audience joined in and laughed long and loud. The atmosphere changed magically and all then proceeded easily and well.

Sir Martin's contributions to the College thereafter were immense. Under his leadership the College established a regime of inspection of training posts, to ensure that trainees received the training to which they were entitled. Trainees received a voice in College affairs. The College achieved its proper influence with Government and among other Royal Medical Colleges. His untiring work with donors and persons of influence ensured the acquisition of the building at 17 Belgrave Square which became the College's permanent home.

Sir Martin was a man of considerable gravitas, which was combined with warmth and an interest in people. His portrait which hangs in the College conveys his essential qualities well. He was a gifted orator, with a repository of memorable anecdotes and quotations. Behind this exterior was a happy family man and a gifted musician who considered a professional career, and continued to play the piano and be absorbed in classical music in his eighties. He married, in 1945, Constance Heller, an equal in every way. Lady Roth provided great support through a long and happy marriage and devoted care in the last few years of his increasing frailty. Among their three daughters, one is a psychiatrist and another a psychologist.

Eugene Paykel

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