

Obituaries

Professor Lee Robins



Formerly Professor of Sociology, Washington University, USA

Lee was born in New Orleans on 29 August 1922 and throughout her life she retained the warmth and hospitality of gracious, elegant Southern ladies at their best. She received her academic education at Radcliffe College and Harvard University where her already outstanding intellectual skills were honed

and developed, so that she became the world's most outstanding psychiatric epidemiologist and longitudinal researcher. She obtained her BA in 1942, MA in 1943 and PhD in 1951 – all in her chosen field of sociology. She joined the faculty of Washington University School of Medicine as a research assistant in the Department of Psychiatry in 1954. In 1959, she became Assistant Professor of Sociology, Associate Professor 3 years later, and full Professor of Sociology in psychiatry in 1968. In 1991, she was named University Professor, a prestigious title restricted to particularly eminent scholars whose contributions span different disciplines. Thereafter she taught in arts and sciences, social work and psychiatry. She founded the Masters Programme in Psychiatric Epidemiology, which still flourishes. In 2001, she retired to become Professor Emerita, continuing her research and her mentorship of numerous junior and senior staff of multiple disciplines. Sadly, her final years involved battling with cancer of the colon, with Lee eventually dying peacefully at her home in St Louis on 28 September 2009.

I first got to know Lee in 1961/62 when I spent a year working in New York. All my advisors said that I had to meet Lee, who had recently conducted the world's best long-term longitudinal study. I immediately realised that she was a very special person in numerous respects and this was fully borne out when I spent 3 weeks teaching at Washington University a few years later. Her research was of stellar quality, reflecting rigorous methodology, but it was her creative thinking that especially stood out. She set herself very high standards and helped others to aspire to similar heights. Strikingly, there was no competitive destructiveness; rather, Lee represented the calm, balanced voice of wisdom. But, Lee was no narrow academic. She was a superb hostess at the dinner parties at her home, with guests from the worlds of academia, poetry and politics. The conversation was always lively, with discussions (sometimes arguments) about the Vietnam War (a key concern at the time), scientific issues and controversies, theatre, books and poetry. Eli (Lee's husband) was the more dominant and argumentative, but always interesting and well informed, whereas Lee was more contemplative. She was obviously an attractive, feminine woman – never coquettish, but warm, empathic and interested in others. Everyone was aware of the force of her intellect but she used it in a gentle,

positive manner, respectful of, and interested in, other points of view. Even so, there was no doubting the brilliance of her mind.

Lee first achieved international fame with her 1966 book, *Deviant Children Grown Up: A Sociological and Psychiatric Study of Sociopathic Personality*, which had been preceded by several papers on the same study. She had been quick to seize the opportunity which child guidance clinic records (which were about to be destroyed) provided in order to determine how the young people fared as adults. Their course was compared with that of a general population sample living in the same geographical area. Nearly half a century later, the book is still worth reading as a model of what can be achieved through a longitudinal study, provided that the crucial design features and methods of analysis are followed. Great care in measurement was used and tremendous ingenuity in tracing the sample and gaining their cooperation. The findings showed that the key predictor of adult outcome was child behaviour rather than social disadvantage. Conduct disturbance was shown as the precursor of antisocial personality disorder, but it was emphasised that many cases of conduct disorder were not followed by personality disorder. Even more strikingly, the findings showed that childhood behaviour was a powerful predictor of serious stresses and adverse environmental circumstances in adult life. The recent focus on how people shape and select their environments was long preceded by Lee's findings on the topic.

Characteristically, Lee was concerned that the findings might not generalise to other populations. To tackle this question she conducted another long-term follow-up study of a general population of Black males born and reared in St Louis in the early 1930s. The findings proved to be remarkably similar to those of the earlier studied White males. A review of other research confirmed the conclusion that a very sturdy set of long-term predictors had been identified.

A further study of equal importance was Lee's follow-up of enlisted men who had served in Vietnam during 1970–71, together with matched civilian controls. The findings were startling and challenged the wisdom of the day. The five major findings were: almost half the men had used narcotics in Vietnam and a fifth were addicted; the order of progression in drug usage followed the availability of substances and not their intrinsic 'hardness' (thus heroin was more available than alcohol); a pre-service history of serious deviant behaviour was the strongest predictor of drug use whereas war stress was not (most started using heroin within a week of arrival in Vietnam); only 5% of those who were addicted in Vietnam were addicted in the USA in the first year after returning (moreover, recovery from addiction did not require abstinence); the variety of drugs used after return was a better predictor of adverse social outcomes than the particular drugs used. Both the media and policy makers were reluctant to accept the implications of these findings but, as Lee's Okey Memorial Lecture (published in 1993) showed, they have stood the test of time.

The third topic to note is Lee's central role in the US Epidemiological Catchment Area study of more than 20 000 people, using her diagnostic interview schedule to determine

the incidence of psychiatric disorders. Again, her attention to design issues and measurement made for success.

Lee was in high demand to serve on national and international panels and task forces, including the World Health Organization expert panel on mental health. Deservedly, too, prestigious honours flowed in, including the Paul Hoch Award from the American Psychopathological Association in 1978, the Rema Lapouse Award from the American Public Health Association in 1979, the Sutherland Award from the American Society of Criminology in 1992, the Nathan B. Eddy Award from the College on Problems of Drug Dependence in 1993, and Honorary Fellowship of the Royal College of Psychiatrists in 1990. As this selection illustrates, her awards span a diverse range of areas.

Lee's first husband, Eli, died in 1994 after a long drawn-out neurological illness, and in 1998 she married Hugh Chaplin, a fellow faculty member. I saw them both soon after their marriage when they came to the UK and it was obvious how happy they were.

Lee is survived by Hugh and her four sons, Paul, Jamie, Tom and Nick, eight grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. Her scientific contributions will clearly live on but she will be remembered as much for the warmth and generosity of her personality. For me, as for many others, she was both a crucially important mentor and a much loved friend.

Michael Rutter

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Dr Brian Augustine O'Connell



Formerly Director, Northgate Clinic, London

Brian O'Connell was born in Dublin on 8 November 1926 into a large Irish family whose paterfamilias, Timothy O'Connell, held a senior office in the Eire Department of Agriculture. Brian was educated at Belvedere College, described as 'an establishment run by the Jesuits for upper middle-class

Catholics'. For his medical training he attended University College Dublin, graduating MB, ChB, BAO in 1950.

Early on in his medical career, he decided to specialise in psychiatry, with emphasis on the forensic aspect. In pursuit of his aim, he took wing to Scotland and worked as a research registrar at the prestigious mental hospital, Crichton Royal, at Dumfries, for 4 years. He then headed south to London where he worked first at St George's Hospital, under the eminent Professor Desmond Curran, and then at the Maudsley, grabbing the offer to be seconded to Broadmoor Hospital, the UK's famous, or infamous, criminal lunatic asylum, where he gained a wealth of experience.

But his experience was crowned by his selection for a World Health Organization fellowship to the USA, where he had his pick from the rich variety of establishments devoted to forensic matters.

Returning to the UK with such an abundance of UK and US teaching under his belt, he could afford to wait for the most appropriate job to become available. And, in the event, he was allowed only a short time to twiddle his thumbs: a job came

vacant which suited his talents and experience to a T. The job was vacant for medical director of the Northgate Clinic in north London which was succinctly described as 'an unconventional holistic and extremely successful centre with teenager mental health problems'. As is universally recognised, Brian was an undisputed success whose successor will be difficult to find.

Although his work so satisfactorily filled his day, he saw to it that at the end of the day he 'shut up shop'. For his private life, he sought a quite different milieu. His close friends were not medics, but *littérateurs*, journalists, artists and, in particular, those involved with the theatre. He loved discussion and argument – the more heated, the better – and, tell it not in Gath, he enjoyed a game of poker, accompanied, no doubt, with more than a modicum of the 'hard stuff'.

It is not surprising that, when he decided to marry, his choice for a wife was an actress, Fionnuala O'Shannon, whom he married in 1964. Tragically, she developed pancreatic cancer and died after what a friend described as a 'long and lively marriage'.

Brian himself, by a grim irony, also developed pancreatic cancer; he died on 18 September 2009.

So passed from the scene one of the most colourful characters of our time – a brilliant psychiatrist, scholar, raconteur and *bon viveur*. I can vouch for all these attributes. Years ago, I spent a delightful holiday with him in Crete, a country which gave him an opportunity to display his classical erudition. But he was never a bore, and when the occasion arose, he could charm the birds off the trees, metaphorically of course.

Henry R. Rollin

Photograph by Lelia Doolan

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