In and Out of Medicine

Man at the top

The myth that judges are unapproachable and out of touch with reality probably arose because of their elevated position in court (surrounded by barristers and books), their wigs, and their robes. They also have power, of course, to decide the destiny of those in the dock. Off stage, however, they are less formidable; even so, they would not be judges at all if they weren’t clever, resourceful, and knew a great deal more about human nature than the man in the street, or, for that matter, a doctor. Lord JusticeOrmrod was originally a doctor, and he attributes the course that his life has taken to the two examinations he failed in his youth.

Roger Ormrod’s first failure was not to win a scholarship to Cambridge; instead, he won one to Oxford, where he met his wife. His second failure was in anatomy at his second BM; the college insisted that he must stay on another year to get a degree worthy of a scholar, but he balked at the prospect of more physiology and was allowed to take law finals (which he passed). His father, a solicitor, was anxious that he should not take up an uncertain career at the Bar and insisted that he become a doctor (his grandfather and uncle had been doctors), so he went to St Thomas’s as a clinical student. While there he was offered a good pupillage at the Bar with a reasonable likelihood of staying on in chambers—if he went at once. Once again, he had to decide between two professions, both of which attracted him, and opted for the Bar—partly because he wanted to get married, and that seemed a long way off if he stayed in medicine. He took the precaution of arranging with the dean at St Thomas’s that he could return if things didn’t work out, but they did: he was kept on at his chambers, married in 1938, and managed to make ends meet until the war. Sir Roger then decided that he would be of more use as a doctor—he was nearly qualified—but received a somewhat dusty answer from the new dean at St Thomas’s. The Radcliffe in Oxford had just improvised a clinical school and accepted him in April 1940. While studying for his finals he also practised a little at the Bar, and the experience he had gained of getting up briefs proved helpful in preparing for exams. His wife had a good job in the book department of the British Council, so their finances were restored.

From 1942 to 1945 Dr Ormrod was in the Royal Army Medical Corps—he went to France just after D-day and to India after the Japanese war had ended (but too late to stop the Army machine from sending him there). As he says, he would never have seen India otherwise—lawyers do not travel to international conferences in the same way that doctors do.

After the war he was again faced with conflict: should he return to the Bar or continue as a doctor? No one then knew how the National Health Service was going to work and, when he saw that five people were doing the job he had done as a house physician at the Radcliffe, he accepted with great reluctance the invitation from his old chambers to return to the Bar. For a long time Sir Roger regretted his decision and didn’t feel that he was doing anything useful with his life. He was commissioned in 1949 to write a book explaining the NHS Act and was glad to get 100 guineas for this but it was, he says, “an exceedingly dreary book” and, apart from innumerable papers, he hasn’t written anything since. Eventually he started working in the Family Division, and this made all the difference. Here his medical background was particularly useful because the problems were human rather than legal.

He has always been interested in psychiatry (he is chairman of the Institute of Psychiatry) and has kept up to date with advances in medicine, so his knowledge was invaluable when he sat on the first working party set up by the Department of Health after the 1959 Mental Health Act to consider the future of Broadmoor, Rampton, and Moss Side special hospitals. Later he gave evidence to the Butler Committee on Abnormal Offenders and has retained an interest in abnormal offenders (but sees no easy way out of the dilemma of what to do with them) and in the prison service. He thinks that the Home Office should have responsibility for abnormal offenders rather than the Department of Health because it is so difficult to mix penal and therapeutic elements. In retrospect, he thinks, too, that the old system of magistrates making detention orders is a better one than the present one of the nearest relative signing the order.

Sir Roger went from strength to strength, took silk in 1958, and was very surprised to be made a judge soon after he became a QC. He was, however, relieved to have a secure salary for a change and no longer be dependent on luck and good health. His two main claims to fame are the April Ashley (sex-change) case, and his success—before Parliament changed the law—in establishing that the court had power to order children’s blood groups to be checked to prove or disprove paternity. His most controversial decision (along with Lord Denning and Lord Justice Lawton) was to rule that after the Attorney-General had refused to intervene the court had the right to listen to an individual appeal for an injunction to restrain the Post Office workers from holding up mail to South Africa. The House of Lords peremptorily reversed this decision, something that worried Sir Roger—slightly.

The Ormrods have no children of their own but at various times have looked after about 10 young people who have left their homes for one reason or another; sometimes these were children of friends, some were hardly known to them, but they stayed on for years, and often get married from the Ormrods’ spacious and welcoming house in Holland Park (guarded by two friendly Yorkshire terriers, whose barks are undoubtedly worse than their bites). Lady Ormrod was a magistrate and, according to her husband, is particularly good with disturbed
or distressed people and provides a warm and comfortable home for anyone in need. Sir Roger is a great do-it-yourself man and is as likely to be found in paint-stained overalls as in more formal clothes, but even in his overalls he looks too distinguished to be mistaken for a builder. They have a small house in the middle of Exmoor, a retreat for vacations. Lady Ormrod says that barristers make good husbands because they get rid of their aggression in court; they also keep mentally active for longer than most people and become ill less often. The retirement age for judges is 75, though any judge may draw his full pension after 15 years on the bench (Sir Roger could draw his now if he wanted to, but has no intention of going just yet). The work in the Court of Appeal is much more onerous than in the lower courts, and could be compared to the position of a well-established consultant reverting to a busy registrar's life, the paradox being that the older a judge gets the harder he works. Sir Roger is quite content, however, and doesn't find the idea of being a law lord particularly attractive.

Lord Justice Ormrod regretted abandoning medicine (the academic life would probably have suited him well) but he has used his background to good effect and most would agree that his choice of career was right. The Bar is a gamble, and in his case the gamble paid off. He was a governor of Barts until 1974 and is still a governor of the Maudsley and Bethlem joint hospitals, has been an honorary professor of legal ethics, and many men have been inspired by him, but his main satisfactions are that he was made an FRCP in 1969 and a Lord Justice of Appeal in 1974.

MATERIA NON MEDICA

Tempus fugit

“What did you say, Times or Time? Is that weekly or monthly?” asked my newsagent when, knowing that the shop had changed hands, I checked that The Times would be delivered on 13 November. The shop has been taken over by refugees—an Englishman and his Iranian wife—and they don’t deliver any longer. Apart from Iran, what important events have there been since the paper disappeared a year ago, and how many other people have never heard of the “greatest newspaper in the world”? My recollection is hazy because I have relied on the BBC for news (taking an alternative paper smacked of treachery, and, in any case, I don’t enjoy them), but something must have happened. There was, of course, the general election: was the large Conservative majority partly due to more people deserting to the Daily Telegraph than to the Guardian, and would things have turned out slightly differently if a more balanced view had been available? Would an editorial have called for a massive Liberal vote (one did, once, in Sir William Haley’s time)? If irate and influential voices had been raised in the letters to the Editor would we have had quite such an awful winter, would the Post Office users have allowed our telephone bills to arrive six months late (long after extravagant summer visitors and students had departed for ever), and would the postal service have become quite so deplorable and at such cost? What would people have said about bits of Skylab raining down on Earth, the ridiculous ITV strike (unmourned by me), the Pope, Edward Kennedy (still time for that), Lord Mountbatten’s death, Rhodesia, petrol prices, the boat people, derailments, British Rail chalets on the links at St Andrews, and the weather? Who has got married, had babies, or died? I’ve no idea (apart, that is, from Lord Mountbatten and the people who get put in the BMI). And what has happened to Vanessa’s loonies and Wagner without Bernard Levin, and to our English without Philip Howard?

I don’t much care any longer (that’s what happens when you don’t read a paper), but once again I shall avidly read The Times at lunch-time (at the expense of more social activities) and feel guilty if any snippet of news or comment escapes my notice. At least I have learnt that living without a newspaper is not in the end of the world and that news isn’t all that important—but I am looking forward to finding out what other people are thinking—HEATHER WINDLE (London).

Nuts and bolts and such

On our holiday in Cornwall this year it rained. Nothing unusual about that but it led to a visit to St Just and an excellent exhibition of arts and crafts run by the local branch of the Cancer Research Campaign in a school hall. Exhibitions in school halls are not usually my cup of tea and I was at first disinclined to follow my wife in her visit but fortunately I did and was most pleasantly surprised. The highlight of the exhibition for me was the sculpture and metal work. I remember a lifetime bronze bust of Pope John Paul II which radiated the charisma of the man himself, but what I found most fascinating was the work of one artist, Don Brealey of Penzance. His basic materials are pieces of everyday ironmongery—nuts and bolts, screws, nails, pliers, and such. I bought a small piece of his work which particularly caught my eye. It is a representation of three soldiers and a cannon. The bodies and legs are fashioned from pliers. Screws, ball-bearings, washers and nails form arms, heads, hats and words. All very pedestrian, but the measure of the artist is that the group comes alive. To me they are seventeenth century French soldiers; it is a hot summer’s day, and time hangs heavily. Two of the men are lazily cleaning their swords, one standing and leaning against the business end of the cannon and the other sitting on the barrel back to back with the first. The third is riding side-saddle fashion on the proximal end. The tilts of the heads and the curvature of bodies and limbs capture perfectly the impression of men of action in a moment of calm and relaxation.

Of course it’s a gimmick. But it is exploited perfectly and my little group of soldiers continues to give me great pleasure.

(PS My wife says they’re pirates waiting for their next victim to come along—it all depends how you look at things.)—DOUG ADDY (consultant paediatrician, Birmingham).

Normally distributed behaviour

At least two of the fishing hotels that I know in the north-west Highlands have made a virtue out of necessity in relation to staff shortages and costs by abandoning service at the meal table and inviting guests to fend for themselves in the feeding trough. This buffet service provides a fascinating insight into human behaviour. It succeeds because of the tendency for this to follow the normal statistical distribution. At any meal there are three classes of trencher-persons. Those who know what they want, have no particular feelings that this is different from home and so proceed as they always do: they are the mean. Those who are obsessed by the fact that instead of being passively helped to the same amount as their neighbours, they are now seen to be helping themselves; to avoid being classified as ungentle they limit what they take and fall on the low side of the mean. Finally, there are those who confronted with the groaning platters see the opportunity to make pigs of themselves and stuff accordingly; they are the high side of the mean. All the proprietor has to do is to take a surreptitious sample of quantities to establish a standard deviation and budget accordingly and a good deal more precisely than if he had to reckon that everyone might eat the same. At the same time he introduces a pleasing air of flexibility into the meal. A fellow like myself off the hill, loch, or river need not rise hungry nor a pecker feel overwhelmed by standard helpings.

All very satisfactory but the system is not without anxiety. At one paradise, the provender for packed lunches is laid out the same way at breakfast time. Agonising decisions clearly racked the guests—to eat first and pack Afterwards, so risking the possibility that the choice or quantities for lunch would be reduced by the rapacity of others; or to pack first and be stigmatised as one who felt his fellow guests couldn’t be trusted to leave a fair share; or to go for the best of both worlds by drifting casually to the table during the course of breakfast and helping oneself surreptitiously while looking as though you were admiring the view. Once more statistical behaviour was followed. The three strategies were distributed as one might expect and no one was disadvantaged.—HUGH DUDLEY (professor of surgery, London).