

IN MEMORIAM

George Trevor Nurse (1928 - 2010)



George Nurse was born on 7 August 1928 in Vryheid, Natal, South Africa, the first of six children of a station master and his wife. Able to read and write at an early age, he read widely and voraciously, amassing knowledge which he deployed for the rest of his life. George was educated at Durban Boys High School and qualified in medicine at the University of Cape Town in 1951.

His first jobs were at Transkei mission hospitals and in government service in Nyasaland (now Malawi). This was followed by a stint as medical officer for a Norwegian fishing fleet in the Antarctic, where the crew entered him in a competition to establish which ship could 'produce' the individual with the greatest increase in body weight during their Antarctic months. George applied himself to the chocolate bars and other gastronomic treats which the crew provided. A photograph shows his 'gross' appearance at the end of the voyage!

In 1964 he obtained the Diploma in Public Health at Bristol University. After another stint in the Antarctic with the fishing fleet he returned to Nyasaland in the employ of the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association. Here he completed work for his PhD thesis, 'The Physical Characters of the Maravi', in anthropology from Wits University with Professor PV Tobias as his supervisor in 1974.

From 1972 to 1977 George was a productive research worker in the Department of Human Genetics in the School of Pathology, the South African Institute for Medical Research and University of the Witwatersrand. He published many articles on anthropology, medical genetics and linguistics, and two books: *Health and the Hunter-Gatherer* (1977) with T Jenkins and *The Peoples of Southern Africa and their Affinities* (1985) with JS Weiner and T Jenkins.

When carrying out research on the genetics of the people of Rehoboth in South West Africa (now Namibia) in 1974 - 1976, we needed to read the only major anthropological study on the population by Eugen Fischer, 1913. As our field worker, Patrick Pearsen, and I could not read German, George translated the 330 page book into English for our benefit!

George left for Papua New Guinea in 1977 (telling a newspaper reporter that he hoped it would not be a case of 'out of the frying pan

into the cooking pot!'). His research in the Institute for Medical Research on haematological traits, including the thalassaemias and ovalocytosis, demonstrated that both conferred protection against malaria.

In 1982, George married Gwen Duffy, a Scottish social worker. After a stint in Saudi Arabia, they moved to Papua New Guinea, where both worked at the University of Port Moresby (1984 - 1990). Thereafter they moved to Johannesburg, where George was Director of the SAIMR Blood Transfusion Service. After returning to the UK in 1992, George continued writing and translation (specialising in French, German, Norwegian and Afrikaans).

In many respects George was a genius and a polymath. He told me that someone had told him he had Asperger's syndrome, and I think he had some features of it. He was certainly eccentric. He claimed to have owned a slave, a young white South African man, who had advertised in a Johannesburg newspaper that he was for sale. George had an incredibly good memory and an encyclopaedic knowledge of subjects ranging from linguistics, to literature, music and history including the history of slavery.

George failed to qualify in medicine at the first attempt, the Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology having warned him that he would fail him if he sat his practical exam with his beard in place. George did not comply, was failed, and informed that he would be failed again if the beard was still luxuriant! At his second attempt George shaved off his beard before the practical examination and passed. We had 'birthday parties' celebrating the rebirth of his beard during the years he worked in my department!

George Nurse, a polymath and a bibliophile, built a fine library, which he bequeathed to the relatively young Catholic University of Malawi in Blantyre. Most of the books were about Africa, in particular Malawi and its history, so they have an appropriate home in the country in which George had spent much of his professional life.

George left precise instructions on what should happen on his death. He chose the music, stipulating exactly where each piece should be placed and even provided an oration. George's brother, Milton, did not read that oration at the funeral, saying: 'It would not be appropriate for me to read out words which were not my own and in some cases expressing ideas with which I do not agree'.

George Nurse is remembered for his scholarship, humour, eccentric ideas and accompanying antics. At a memorial gathering at the National Health Laboratory Service in Johannesburg there was laughter and joy as he was fondly remembered, and many stories about him told.

Trefor Jenkins