

Sir George Alleyne  
Director, PAHO\*  
5 July 1996

---

**THE HOUSES THAT JOHN BUILT\*\***  
(London, England)

---

Professor Shetty, Professor and Mrs. Waterlow, colleagues and friends.

It is an honour to have been asked to give this tribute to John Waterlow — and I intend to use one of the pristine meanings of the word *tribute*, as something of value given as a token of loyalty or esteem from lieges to their lord. In days of old men paid tribute in specie and spices, in precious stones or the bounty of the land. Silver and gold have we none, but what we bring to you as a tribute this evening, John, are our appreciation of what you have done and our admiration of what you are — all etched and framed in the recollection of personal experiences.

I will pretend that I have returned to ancestral roots and am an ancient griot and will tell some of the stories of your prowess and your interactions with us, with the security that our tradition of oral history stitches the true and meaningful tapestry of the past. This is not to decry or diminish the official historical record that gives your biographical data. So, to please the conventional purists I will repeat those data briefly and tell how you were born 80 years ago, the son of a diplomat, in a year that is marked in the annals of nutrition by McCollums' discovery of vitamin B — that your character was properly moulded by study of the ancient classics — that you duly completed your medical training in the midst of the war and shortly afterwards set out on your tropical odyssey with the first stop in Iraq where you worked on the physiology of the adaptation to heat. You have numerous awards and degrees to your name, few more precious than your degree of Doctor of Science Honoris Causa from my University or your Fellowship of the venerable Royal Society and your Queen has recognized your overseas service by making you a Commander of the Order of St. Michael and St. George.

As I prepared to bring this tribute to John, my mind ran on Shakespeare's lines

*When to the sessions of sweet silent thought  
I summon up remembrance of things past*

and my remembrances all kept coming back to the Tropical Metabolism Research Unit — the Unit, as if there was only one such — and my sweet silent thought was that this was the house that John built. It is in this house that many of his scientific children that spoke today were born or nurtured,

---

\* **Pan American Health Organization, Pan American Sanitary Bureau, Regional Office for the Americas of the World Health Organization**

\*\* **Tribute to Professor John C. Waterlow MD, FRCP, FRS, DSc (Hon)**

and from this house so many of them went forth to beget their own scientific children and to form a new kind of extended family. For each one of these children time and circumstance may create different memories of this house, but all will recall the evercaring and watchful *paterfamilias*.

John had started to lay the intellectual foundations of this house as he worked in the various islands and territories of the West Indies. This was a time of intense ferment and excitement in the Caribbean over the creation of its own University. This was a time when John met and talked and worked with those visionaries who assisted in this creation — men of the stature of Priestly, Irvine, Springer and Sherlock! And I must not forget Miss Perham! By the time the physical superstructure was actually built in 1954, the University College as it was then, had become a reality and groups of young West Indians wandered about the valley of Mona robed in red gowns, and people like John helped them to believe that they were indeed inheritors of the traditions of Padua.

I do remember John vaguely from my days as a medical student in physiology and recall that he smoked a pipe, drove his Riley like Jehu the son of Nimshi — furiously — and took bits of children's livers. My clearest first personal contact and perhaps the only time we as it were met on an equal footing, was when we were admitted to the Membership of the Royal College of Physicians on the same day — with Max Rosenheim presiding. But while I had to run the steeplechase of written, clinical and vivas, John, for his recognized place in medicine was being admitted without examination!

I will speak mainly of John's achievements in Jamaica and the Caribbean. But I do recall a phrase he used or was used about him as he left Jamaica to build a new house in London — *coelom non animam mutant qui trans mare currunt* — those who cross the sea change but the sky and not the spirit. If this is indeed so, then I am sure that John's English saga was but a continuation of his Caribbean sojourn, and the house he built here heard the same scientific chatter of his children at work, and will also bear forever the stamp of his craftsmanship. The building of his houses and all that went on in them and around them has made John Waterlow a legend in his time. This is a legend with many parts.

I and many others can attest to the truth of the legend of the master — the skilled craftsman with a respected place in the guild of his peers — true scientists. He imbued large numbers of us with a love for scientific enquiry, to follow what we took to be the truth, always with the belief that the nutritional sciences were one of the true basic sciences and when we encountered difficulties — *solvitur ambulando!* — a sentiment that was clearly appreciated by Bob Marley when he advised us not to worry because — *every little thing will be alright!*

Even if I wished, I could not comment on his prodigious scientific output — the presentations today are testimony that many of the strands of his thinking are now solid connecting cross links in the web of nutrition research. I am sure there were doubters and detractors who scoffed at some of his early ideas, but he might have been comforted by that famous quote from Wilfred Trotter that the most powerful antigen known to man is a new idea.

John's masterly imprint is still seen in the Caribbean Medical Research Council. He was the first Scientific Secretary of the Standing Advisory Committee that preceded the CCMRC. He arranged the first scientific meeting in 1957, one that I remember well — especially one presentation by Dr. Ivan Parboosingh who described a case of *unusual uterine bleeding associated with pregnancy* that required some 50 pints of blood and Dr. Parboosingh described every one of them, pint by red pint — or so it seemed. Dr. Giglioli showed pictures of British Guyana's dykes and streams and the efforts of this Demerara doctor to rid that country of malaria.

John Waterlow showed us impatience with the artificial separation of research — he used to say, there are only two kinds of research — good and bad. In the true tradition of the master he let his apprentices grow and believed that he serves his master ill who remains a pupil still. As a master and genuine leader, John displayed and displays perhaps the most important quality of a leader — the leader listens. Many of his staff often watched in amazement as he closed his eyes, listened, and at the end of a presentation removed his pipe and said *I am afraid I am rather slow and don't really understand these things* and then would proceed to reach into the heart of the matter. I have aped this on occasion with varying success because false rumour has it that sometimes my lowered lids indicate that I am indeed asleep, thus making it impossible for me to make the appropriate comment.

John led by example and from in front — he set high standards and expected such of his staff. He believed in self-experimentation and many of us followed, sometimes with results that were hilarious if not scary. I wish I had time to tell you how incompetent he made some of us feel when we began to make our own constriction pipettes. I think he was only matched for invention by John Garrow, who, when I tried to make a balance and set the center of gravity above the fulcrum, observed kindly that my time as a youth might have been spent more profitably than doing Latin and Greek.

John is justly proud of his two scientific *magna opera* — *Protein Turnover in Mammalian Tissues and in the Whole Body* and *Protein Energy Malnutrition*. My Organization was pleased to translate the latter into Spanish. With his usual modesty he describes it as *a book that might be interesting and useful to physicians and public health workers*. Its conclusion is a masterly mix of optimism and reality and I have often referred to the quotation he repeats from Leon Sinisterra who said *it is not the function of scientists to change the economic and political structure of a society, but it is our responsibility to understand its inequalities and limitations, because it is within this context that we must exercise our knowledge*. John ends with the affirmation that nutritionists have a special role, since they are the lynch pins of the cooperation between different sectors.

I can vouch that he has not lost his master's touch and his semi-Socratic approach to teaching. Recently he led me into a discussion as to how we prostitute the concept of rights by affirming that so many things, food and health for example, are basic human rights. He posited that we do Lord Bryce an injustice when we go beyond the basic civil, religious and political rights that are assured in a democratic state.

There is also the legend of John the benevolent patron. He was and is kindness personified to many of us — he helped large numbers of people — distinguished scientists, maids and messengers, gardeners and guards. But sometimes he hid this with a deliberately gruff quip. While I was working in the Unit I went to Boston for a semi sabbatical and unfortunately got chicken pox, which prevented me from attending some meeting that John thought was important. When this news was transmitted to Jamaica, John was heard to say *Dammit, I expect my staff to have had chicken pox before they come to work with me!*

The appreciation of John's benevolence came flooding back to me as I reread all the letters he has written to me since 1963. I am sure all or many of you could have a similar experience. Not only was I touched by his benevolence, but I am green with envy that his handwriting has not deteriorated over the last 30 years. He was always concerned for practical but important aspects of our daily living in addition to finding time to comment on our research. In one special letter to Dave Picou and myself during a rather difficult period, he wrote, *there are always times when one feels one has backed the wrong horse, but I don't think it does much good blaming the horse.* Then he went on to predict that, in the long run we would not regret having joined the MRC. He was correct of course. And almost every letter ended with *Love to Sylvan!*

This attention to our welfare was shown to all his Caribbean associates and on reflection, I am struck with his passion for promoting West Indians and insisting that West Indian institutions should be run predominantly by West Indians who must have enough self-confidence to embrace the international collaboration and interchange that is crucial for the flowering of good science. I got a sense of the "why" from the closing words in John's address at the 40th anniversary of the CCMRC when he said

*When I was an advisor to ODA, I used to urge that to their slogan of 'Aid to the Poorest' they should add another slogan: 'The Promotion of Self-reliance'. That is what institutional support is all about. But I urged in vain. It was not always so. Looking back 50 years, I cannot help thinking that there was more vision in those days. I hope that the wounds inflicted by colonialism and racial discrimination will not completely obscure the fact that in the dark days of the 1940s, at the height of a ferocious war, someone somewhere in Whitehall was planning these new universities which, in the works of the American biologist, Stephen Jay Gould, will "undergird with a shared humanity that infinite variety which custom can never stale."*

But John, I can say without equivocation or any fear of contradiction that you are one colonial officer who has never had any guilt to expiate in this regard and you did more than your share of healing wounds.

There is also the legend of John Waterlow as the liver of the good life, around whom numerous tales were spun about his racy Riley car which I believe went to car heaven in Jamaica. Many recall the wine and cheese soirées given by him and Angela and the more daring will tell of his earlier parties in which every guest on entering got just one drink — his or her own bottle of rum. Horace's phrase *carpe diem* — snatch the sleeve of today — could aptly be applied to John

Waterlow whose life has been so strung with adventures, and the magic of whose personality such that one forgets that he is a man of ordinary size.

The only thing strange about John to West Indians was that in spite of Lewthwaite's encouragement, he never spoke about cricket although it is true that in the sixties Englishmen did not speak politely to West Indians about cricket. However, I do recall him teaching Sylvan and me to play croquet which I soon appreciated is a most vicious sport that brings out the worst in human nature and belies the image created by ladies in white at Hurlingham.

It is to the legend of the international John that I now turn, because it holds a special significance for me. You have heard today of John's international work in nutrition, but his concerns and influence were much wider and he was known in other international scientific circles. It is these contacts and interests that are partly responsible for my present position. John was Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Medical Research of the Pan American Health Organization and it was during his tenure that I became a member of that Committee. Thus began my association with PAHO. I was Rapporteur of the Committee for several years and in the fullness of time became its Chairman. I eventually joined PAHO as head of its Research Unit — came for one year, stayed for two and the rest is history.

I have pictures of two persons in my office. One is of my wife, the other is of John Waterlow. To those persons who ask me who he is; I say that he is the last person I called "*boss*", because of his intellectual capacity and leadership.

No tribute to John Waterlow would be complete without praise for Angela — a wife for all seasons who never hid her pride in her man's achievements but was never so unduly dutiful that she would not give a frank and candid opinion. She is a woman of tremendous talent who has left her mark in a pictorial sense on the houses that her husband built. We all owe her much.

Professor Shetty, Jane Addams said of George Washington what I will end by saying of John Waterlow

*The lessons of great men are lost unless they reinforce upon our minds the highest demands which we make upon ourselves — they are lost unless they drive our sluggish wills forward in the direction of their highest ideals.*

John's lessons will not be lost and for that we who are here, and the many who wish to be here, thank him.

All I have said is true, for as Mamadou Kouyaté, one of the great griots of Mali said, *we are the memory of mankind — my word is pure and free from all untruth.*