

Robert Smith Memorial

Jerry Kathman

Some of the best things in life are the product of happenstance.

John Murphy, professor emeritus of law at the University of Cincinnati, invited me to give a talk at something called the Irish Salon at the Queen City Club (John assured me it was a salon not a saloon).

After my remarks I took a seat next to a rather tall smiling man and introduced myself. In a splendid Irish accent, the fellow said his name was Robert Smith. We began a conversation which continued in one form or another for ten years.

Shortly after our initial meeting there was a message on my answering machine at home. Robert invited me to be his guest at the literary club. I had never heard the club. His message was so charming that my wife Liz wouldn't let me erase it for years and years. Just listening to Robert's voice would lift her spirits she said. I know that many in this room share her sentiments.

Over the years, I couldn't get enough of the stories that Robert would tell of his life in Dublin, London, Chapel Hill and eventually Cincinnati. Conversations with Robert on Monday evenings were special for many of us.

His early Irish stories are for me the best. His father was Catholic. His mother was Jewish and kept a Jewish home. Robert's father eventually converted.

I mentioned this because it's relevant to one of my favorite stories from Robert's early life. It's a tale from his days as a schoolboy in Dublin. Robbie, as he was then known, and his young pal Jackie were classmates at Wesley College High School.

De Valera's new Irish and very Catholic government was trying to revive Gaelic as a living, spoken language and the official language of the Irish Free State. The Irish Government had decreed that instead of saying "hello", the correct form of greeting in school should be "May Mary and God be with you" (in Gaelic of course) to which the correct reply was "May Mary, God and St. Patrick be with you" (in Gaelic).

This greatly troubled the two young Jewish boys, Jackie and Robbie. They went to the headmaster, a Methodist minister who fortunately was a rather decent man, and he readily agreed that the greeting would be secularized. He apologized to the boys that they were ever put in such a position.

Now most of us might end the story at this point. But not Robert Smith. In his usual telling, he would lift his index finger, look you in the eye and say, "this might have been the first act of resistance by Jews against an English-speaking people!"

I am able to share the details of this story because Myffy included them in a paper she read at her literary club. Myffy has shared a number of her remarkable papers with me. I once told Robert that by reputation he is one of the better writers in this literary club. When he goes home in the evening however he's not even the best writer in his own house. He readily agreed.

For me, the most inspiring thing about Robert was his devotion to Myffy. He told me more than once, that everything good in his life came from his marriage to Myffy.

Robert died one week before Valentine's Day. One week later was the first Valentine's Day in over seventy years that Myffy did not receive an original poem composed for her on that day by her loving husband Robert.

Phil Diller

Many here know bits about Roberts professional career, and to pay him tribute I hope to tell a few lesser known highlights. He almost did not go to medical school. He had received a scholarship for the first year and the family did not have the means to pay for the final 5 years. The headmaster at Wesley tried to discourage the family from Robert attending citing lack of funds for the 6-year program. Robert said, "Let me try." To economize he lived at home and being good at taking exams he began to tutor other students. By tutoring he supported his medical school tuition and graduated from Trinity College Dublin Medical School in 1945.

The academic medical career that followed was unique and his accomplishments will never be repeated. Along the way, Robert was often at the beginning of things in general practice and academic general practice.

1. When the **National Health Service** was formed in the UK, Robert was in the inaugural cohort of GPs to launch a NHS practice in 1949.
2. IN 1958 he was the first GP to win the **Hawthorne Prize** by the British Medical Association. This was for his MD thesis "Pain Sensitivities in General Practice."
3. When the **Wellcome Foundation** needed someone to direct the new **Clinical Pain Research Program** in 1960 they selected Robert.
4. In 1963 it was Robert who started the first **GP Research and Teaching Unit** at Guy's Hospital in London –the first academic unit associated with a medical school in the world.
5. Along with that GP Research and Teaching Unit was the **first clinical practice for training medical students** associated with a medical school at **Woolwich** near Heathrow Airport in London.

6. When the **Migraine Trust** in the UK was created in 1965, Robert was a co-founder and the first secretary. This trust still in existence 55 years later awards about \$650K lbs annually for research on migraine.

7. Before the specialty of family medicine in the US was founded in 1969, the University of North Carolina asked him to join the faculty in 1968 to prepare for a full Department; he became its **founding Department Chair** at UNC in 1970 and here at the University of Cincinnati in 1975.

8. Robert was the Faculty sponsor for the **first Student Run Free Clinic** in the United States; Student Run Free Clinics are now common across the US.

9. He founded the **Headache Center** at the University of Cincinnati COM in 1981

10. Robert was the first family physician to receive **The Daniel Drake Medal**, the highest award given by the UC COM in 2007, the **American Headache Society Lifetime Achievement Award** in 2012, and the **Cincinnati Health Care Heroes Lifetime achievement** award in 2016.

He was a gentle visionary and a pioneer. Time and again, epiphany played a significant role in his life story. He had many inspiring moments **where he saw possibility long before others**. Understanding the role of the family doctor in 1954, recognizing that there were no departments of general practice in London in 1960. That General Practice and later family medicine could become an academic discipline in its own right. That became his life mission. He was one of the founding fathers of Academic Family Medicine. He was the right person at the right time in history; a fitting example of Pasteur's axiom that "chance favors the prepared mind."

Dave Edmundson

On Wednesday, February 5th, at approximately 6 PM, Robert Smith passed away quietly in his sleep. Jerry Kathman, Phil Diller and I will each memorialize our friend in turn.

For 15 years Robert and I rode together to Literary Club meetings. During our times in the car we had many fascinating conversations, and later, when his hearing failed, I heard many fascinating monologs, some of them many times, each time charmed with some aspect of his story telling. Robert's life had many twists and turns intersecting with a cast of remarkable figures. In the interest of brevity, which was never his strong suit, I will share two.

Robert and the Republic of Ireland came into being in Dublin at about the same time, in 1921. His father had a position in the British bureaucracy and, to make himself more agreeable to the Brits, had changed his name to Smith from McGown, which translates roughly as son of a smith. His brothers worked as coopers for Guinness and as passionate partisans for Irish freedom, participated in the Easter 1916 uprising, were captured and condemned to death. Robert's father went to his superiors and begged for their lives and succeeded only in having their sentences reduced to life imprisonment. When freedom came to Ireland and the prisons were emptied of their political prisoners, Robert's uncles emerged and carried a grudge against his father that only healed slowly. They had meant to be martyrs and earn glory, only to be thwarted by a British bureaucrat and their own brother in the bargain. Such were the complications of independence for the Irish.

Robert came to Chapel Hill and the University of North Carolina Medical School from Guy's Hospital in London to establish a family/community-medicine specialty. He was there because the state legislature had enacted laws demanding the med school produce the sort of doctors their constituents most needed – family docs. This Robert set about doing, and won the hearts of his students by supporting their desire to open a clinic in next-door Carrboro, then an impoverished neighbor of Chapel Hill. The specialists who had run things to suit themselves and did not approve of the clinic were understandably mild in their welcome. They went so far as to siphon money from Robert's program to use on their own projects. The only supportive

associate on the faculty was a Dr. Isaac Taylor, the father of well-known performer James. After a few years in North Carolina, sensing that his future there was limited by the old-guard faculty, he fielded offers from several American medical schools to begin family-practice specialties and chose Cincinnati. That he succeeded has been well demonstrated by Phil Diller.

Robert Smith joined the Literary Club in 1982, and in his 38 years served as Secretary for four years and President in the 2005 -2006 year. Among his 16 papers represented in the web site, most reflected his love for and pride in Dublin, his home city. He was particularly fond of Irish authors and did papers on Goldsmith, Yeats, Shaw, Swift, Joyce, Becket, Burke, Wilde, and Heaney. In "comalye" form, his papers were interlarded with his own poetry, of which he was very fond. Other papers included references to his medical career and Winston Churchill, who for his leadership in one of Britain's darkest hours had earned Robert's admiration and affection. Perhaps in honor of his uncles, he made frequent reference to the leaders and martyrs of the usually futile attempts to shake off British rule, including Wolf Tone, Edward Fitzgerald, and Maude Gonne.

He loved our club, as reflected by his regular attendance and his habit of sitting at the front table in animated discussion until nearly all others had left. One of his favorite Irish songs included the following verse and perhaps an apt ending for this memorial:

Oh all the comrades that ever I had
Will be sorry for my going away
And all the sweethearts that ever I had
Would wish me one more day to stay
But since it falls unto my lot
That I should go and you should not
I'll gently rise and softly call
Good night and joy be with you all