



## PERSONAL VIEW

### Santa Claus or grandfather clause?

Dear Aunt Ethel,

During the second six months of internship at Groote Schuur Hospital, when we were covering four internal medicine wards divided between two firms, Toby called an informal meeting.

'Look, I'm the only Jewish house officer among the six of us: Christmas means nothing to me. I'll be on duty all day provided that I'm off for the Jewish holidays.'

This was a fair offer, so Toby duly celebrated his religious holidays free from any ward work or calls. The rest of us looked forward to a guaranteed Christmas off duty: festivities looked very promising as nurses and doctors were arranging an all-day party. However, a complication was brewing. Toby had become interested in a nurse who was a gentile – and an organiser of the Christmas entertainment. As this involvement progressed he sounded less and less convinced that Christmas meant nothing to him, and discussed mistletoe and mince-pies in longing terms. There was also the matter of who might



*From photograph of the first resident medical staff at Groote Schuur Hospital, February - July 1938. Dr R A (Paddy) Caldwell is on the right.*

distract the lovely young lady in question during the festivities if he was slaving away all day on the ward. Eventually he put his cards on the table, choosing a good psychological moment: a seventh intern had been seconded to our wards.

'Look, Christmas now means more to me than I suspect it does to the majority of you. How about splitting the duties that day? Draw names out of a hat. 6 am to 6 am, four-hour shifts between six house-officers, the seventh has the day off.'

This was reasonable: personal conquests were non-existent; we liked Toby; we wanted his romance to succeed. In any case only four hours each, with an outside chance of none at all, seemed hardly a problem. *Chutzpah* baffles logic. Then the draw took place. Fair and square, Toby pulled the seventh

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straw, and three of us landed prime time shifts. Mine was from 2 pm to 6 pm.

Christmas was bedlam. After a quick ward round, I acted as Santa Claus to the four wards: only the most confused patient recognised her doctor. A patient with meningitis whom we had regretted resuscitating after he arrested proved not to be brain-dead: just stone-deaf. He roared with laughter at the little elasticised animal which Santa, on a whim, produced. Then I tore off to a farm an hour's drive away to be Father Christmas again, on a blazing-hot day, wearing a mask that denied visual acuity, mounted side-saddle on a recalcitrant horse. I bolted an enormous roast-turkey dinner and screamed back into Cape Town in time for my shift. Things were hotting up on the wards after a peaceful morning. Admission after admission rolled in, preventing any easy departure at 6 pm: more like 8.30. By then the all-day festivities were at an end.

Toby had had a great day and on the ward next morning, he asked how our Christmas had been. I recall a sardonic and laconic: 'Nowell? Ja ... Fine!'

He did have the decency to marry her.

I have been Father Christmas on many Yuletide occasions since, riding pillion on a motor-bike once, arriving in a speed-boat on another stint. One did not really question why one went beyond the call of duty. Now at last I know the reason for the compulsion: it's inborn, it's genetic ...

When I e-mailed Kit Vaughan to congratulate him on his biography of Allan Cormack, *Imagining the Elephant*, he told me about *At the Heart of Healing*, the recently published history of Groote Schuur Hospital's first 70 years. With a holiday ahead, I bought a copy. Simultaneously my wife got a call from Jenny

Still, a journalist and family friend in Cape Town. At a UCT summer-school lecture she'd seen a DVD of Dr Caldwell as Santa Claus at Groote Schuur Hospital.

It was in 1937, so it was not I: and it was New Somerset Hospital, not Groote Schuur: the former was closing as the latter was due to open. My father, as a 'June bride', had walked into history by being on the last resident staff of Somerset and the first of Groote Schuur: but I did not know about any Santa activities.

A night or two later I received a phone call from Howard Phillips, a professor in the Department of Historical Studies at UCT and one of the chief authors of the book. Jenny Still had spoken to him after the lecture. He suspected that Santa Claus was my late father, and if so would I be interested in seeing some film footage? Since the upcoming holiday was in the Cape, I accepted with alacrity and met him a fortnight later in the UCT history building, where he showed me a DVD made from film footage taken by a nursing sister. This documented the transition from New Somerset Hospital to Groote Schuur as 1937 ended and 1938 began.

Although Father Christmas jumped around in a manner not reminiscent of my Dad, the jerky actions matched those of which his grandchildren complain regarding their father. When the unmasking came, there was *my* father, just as he looked in the photograph I have in my office: of the first resident staff of GSH. Our sons have an inherited white-bearded task ahead of them; and the book is well worth reading.

Yours affectionately

**Robert-Ian**