

## Leonard Noon

I have been asked to write a personal note about my old friend Leonard Noon whose “preliminary” paper concerning his projected research on hay-fever is reprinted in these Archives. Alas, he never lived to write again: he died in 1913. This one article was written while he was fighting phthisis on what proved to be his deathbed. He had as alert a mind as I have met in the long years since his death; it needed no prolonged explanation to pick up his ideas or for him to pick up yours, though he usually approached a problem from an unexpected angle – as is the way of epistemic scientists.

Noon was the only son in a family of four: his father was a mathematics master of Charterhouse School, and his mother was the sister of a famous housemaster of the same school.

As schoolboys we were thrown together because in that excessively classical school we were both of the very few who specialised in Science. Still more were we mated by always shooting as the last pair in the numerous matches which culminated in the inter-public-school contest for the Ashburton Shield; he fired the last and winning shot for Charterhouse in the 1895 contest.

To read Medicine, Noon went up to Cambridge (where, by the way, he stroked the First Trinity Boat); from there he went for his hospital work to St. Bartholomew’s Hospital in London. So we didn’t see much of each other’s work until we went together to the Pasteur Institute in Paris for the winter of 1905–1906 where we worked in the laboratory of Professor Borrel in the winter course on pathogenic bacteria and moulds.

There, to keep our hands in, for we had both of us tasted the sweets of research work, we started out of official hours to immunise guinea pigs against glanders. This rather unsuitable and dangerous research was surprisingly tolerated by Professor Borrel after he had closely watched our novel but careful technique. This was “The



Technique of the Teat and Capillary Glass Tube” elaborated by Sir Almroth Wright. These methods caused some stir amongst the French students; and Professor Nicolle, after watching us closely one day, said with a shrug “*évidément c’est une affaire pour les prestidigitateurs, et*” (looking with disapproval at the excited French students) “*pour amuser les enfants*”.

When we were back in London again I persuaded Noon to leave his work at St. Bartholomew’s and join Almroth Wright’s laboratory at St. Mary’s Hospital where I had already been working for several years. Thereafter Noon worked with us daily, and work really was engrossing at that time since we usually didn’t get away from the laboratory till past midnight and often worked on till three or four in the morning, and sometimes till dawn.

Yet we had plenty of outside distractions, and Noon’s interests were very diverse: he was fond of small boat sailing (as in the photograph), rowing, rock climbing and rifle shooting (as already related). I remember one day when we were going to our shooting practice Noon said unexpectedly that he wondered if it wasn’t our duty even *now* to give up all medical work for the study of aviation, because it seemed probable that the safety and future of the British Empire would depend on English people getting one jump ahead of competitors in heavier-than-air flying. That was in 1907 and well before Blériot flew

the Channel in 1909. We discussed the project gravely as young men will, but the lure of Almroth Wright and research at St. Mary's was too strong for us.

Ideas for possible researches on immunisation were as thick as blackberries in Wright's laboratory at that time. Among other projects Noon became interested in the possibility of treating the midsummer hay-fever by immunising against the grass pollen which Blackley had shown 40 years previously to be an essential factor in the causation of that disorder. His sister, Dorothy Noon, collected grass pollen for him, and as he fell ill I had to help more and more in the laboratory. He had no idea of the multiplicity of disorders for which hay-fever was to become the prototype and we thought that the specific irritation of the grass pollen was the whole of the story of hay-fever. Also, in spite of the recent great success of Wright's treatment of typhoid which was exclusively prophylactic, he and his laboratory were not quite clear as to the comparative disadvantages of therapeutic immunisation or, as I call it, Hamaphylaxis. Noon, I believe, was not quite clear on this point either, but it is easy for us to be wise after the event.

After some tentative but vital experiments on the specificity of grass pollen for true hay-fever in which he amply confirmed all that Blackley had written about it in 1868–1872, and after he had in addition proved as we think the polyvalency of all *English* grass pollens for hay-fever, poor Noon, who was never robust, began to lose weight and developed a cough with night temperature; then he spat up tubercle bacilli, and was promptly exiled from the laboratory. He chose to go for "complete rest" to a well-known inn much frequented by rock climbing friends in the Peak district. With rest the night temperature left him; he put on weight and felt full of vigour again. So, foolishly but characteristically for he was always rather "over-engined for his beam", he went rock climbing with his non-medical cronies. When they were half-way up a difficult ascent Noon had an acute haemorrhage, but had to go on up in spite of it. He got back to the inn more dead than alive; there he took to his bed and never left it for work again. After two years in bed when he wrote this article on hay-fever he died in 1913 – a sad extinction of an ardent, gay and lively spirit.

Noon doesn't seem to have been photographed professionally in adult life, and I can only find amateur snapshots for reproduction here; but these perhaps give the character of the man better than more formal photographs can do.

*John Freeman, London.*