The imperial theme

John Galloway

A History of the Imperial Cancer Research Fund 1902–1986. By Joan Austoker. *Oxford University Press: 1988. Pp. 375. £40, $84.*

RESEARCH institutes, like people, have secret lives. It is the job of a good historian, as of a biographer, to unveil them and suggest how they underlie the one on public show.

In this particular history, the contrast in willingness to display the secret and the more apparent lives is seen rather clearly, the result of what looks like cold feet on the part of the Imperial Cancer Research Fund (ICRF) and Oxford University Press. For this is not, as the title claims, a history of the Fund from 1902, when it was founded, until 1986. The history itself stops short in 1979, the year Sir Walter Bodmer became its scientific director, and from then on Sir Walter himself takes up the narrative in what is described, not very accurately, as an "epilogue". Dr Austoker seems to get close to the secret life in a readable piece of painstaking scientific history. Sir Walter's style is more that of an annual report to the shareholders — very much more the apparent life. There are shades here of all those writers, like T. S. Eliot, who refused to have biographies written about them. And who can blame them? But it has made this a less good book than it would otherwise have been.

We seek in the secret life insights into the apparent life. To pursue the literary biographical metaphor, what compulsions, rooted in the insecurities of its early life, led to features of the Fund's behaviour as it grew to adulthood?

Dr Austoker is skilled in tracing corporate neurosis. For example, she describes the successful libel action of July 1979 in which the High Court found for the Fund and against the *Sunday Mirror*. The action was taken as a result of the newspaper's publication of claims that ICRF was investing too much of its income, and a clear implication that what people were giving was to pay for research, not to invest. Earlier that year *New Scientist* had also suggested that investment was far too big, as eight years previously had *The Lancet*. Even earlier, the Cancer Research Campaign had protested about a public appeal for funds by ICRF more or less on the grounds that the Fund already had enough money in the bank. The tendency to rely on or be defended by a large capital sum can be traced to the earliest days of the Fund's existence. Dr Austoker quotes from the first annual report of 1902, in which it was asserted that the aim was

> . . . not to expend any part of the principal so that in the event of the nature and causes of cancer being discovered, the fund should be available for the utilisation and application of the new knowledge and prevention and curing the disease.

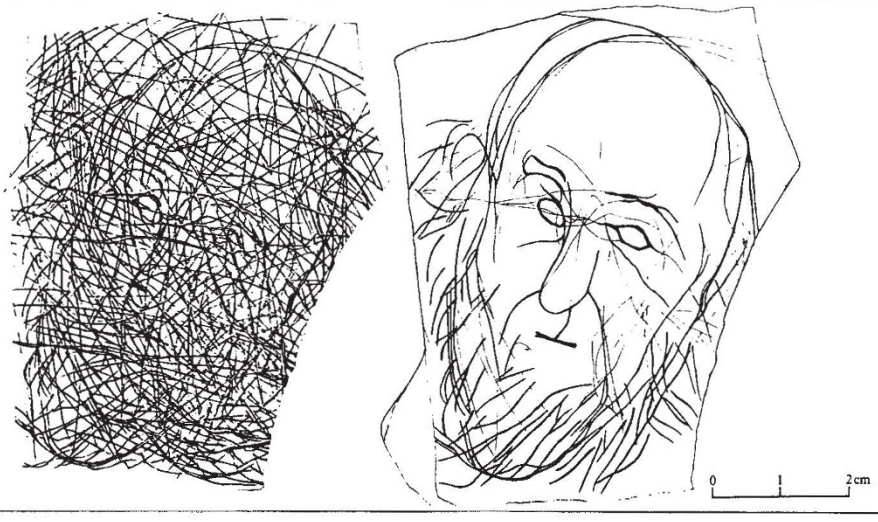
Someone clearly thought the war would be over by Christmas.

The run in with the *Sunday Mirror* was not the only legal action involving the Fund on a point of principle. Ernest Bashford, the Fund's first director, attacked quackery in cancer treatment in the *British Medical Journal* in 1911 and found himself on the wrong end of an action by Dr Robert Bell (whose patients were treated dietetically and with injections of formic acid). Science collided sharply with free-market medicine. And science lost. Bell was awarded £2,000 plus costs.

What characterizes ICRF and distinguishes it from the Cancer Research Campaign (for which I work), is that overwhelmingly it tends to support research in its own laboratories, most notably at those in Lincoln's Inn Fields, London. (By contrast, the Cancer Research Campaign supports research largely through grants to universities, teaching hospitals and a number of research institutes.) It is this commitment to a large permanent research structure that has, not unreasonably, been used to justify a continuing reliance on a large capital investment. The existence of a permanent research institute with a strong corporate identity — which ICRF certainly possesses — heightens our expectations of some sort of continuity in the themes of its research, not only innovation, which is important enough, but also a sustained interest and effort.

In practice it looks as though each new director tended to impose his own interests on the organization and to some extent sweep away what was there already. Yet although unbroken lines of research interest are not really traceable over long periods, the Fund's researchers have at different times made notable contributions to the development of important theories. Given ICRF's present-day commitment to dissecting the problem of cancer using molecular genetics, it is appropriate that Dr Austoker rehabilitates James Murray, the second director, giving him a good slice of the credit for the idea that cancers originate in chromosomal damage; Murray had been a student of Theodor Boveri before joining the Fund but it is usually Boveri who has the credit for these ideas early in the century. Murray was also able to demonstrate inherited tendencies to mammary cancers in mice through breeding experiments, important work, but work which could not be developed satisfactorily until much later when better strains of mice had been bred.

The Quaker pathologist, Cuthbert



Hidden treasure — the face of a bearded man painstakingly extracted from the muddled engraving on a plaquette found at La Marche, Vienne, France. The layer of the La Marche site containing these engravings, which is unusually rich in representations of the human form, is dated at about 14,280 years BP. The picture is one of many in Images of the Ice Age *by Paul G. Bahn and Jean Vertut, a detailed examination of life in the Ice Age and of archaeological methods in general, accompanied by Vertut's colour photographs of European palaeolithic art. The book will be published on 26 January by Windward, London (price £15); Facts on File will be the publisher in the United States.*