

The end of the beginning?

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This year, Martin Raff is almost 65 and, as most professionals in the United Kingdom do, he will now embark on the next lease of life – retirement. To mark this occasion, friends, former students and postdocs, and current colleagues gathered at a British Society for Cell Biology meeting held in his honour last month at University College London.

The meeting — organized by Anne Mudge — brought together immunologists, developmental neurobiologists and cell biologists, as a reflection of the diverse fields that have been significantly influenced by Martin’s work over the past 35 years.

In addition to his research achievements, Martin has made invaluable contributions to the education of the next generation of scientists. Not only has he co-authored four editions of ‘the book’ (*Molecular Biology of the Cell*), but he also had the foresight to recognize the problem of students specializing too soon. As a result, he had an instigating role in introducing the four-year PhD programme at the Laboratory for Molecular Cell Biology at UCL, a scheme with lab rotations in the first year that is now being adopted by other institutions around the country.

Science in retrospect

Despite his success, Martin modestly attributes most of his reputation to two things — luck, and his mentor, Av Mitchison. In his ‘science in retrospect’ seminar, Raff recalled how, having started his career as a clinical neurologist in Boston, it was his interactions with Mitchison that triggered his U-turn towards immunology. When he chose to leave the United States because of the Vietnam War, Mitchison offered him a place in his lab in Mill Hill, London, despite Raff’s lack of immunological scientific training and apparently against the advice Mitchison received from some of his colleagues. The initial result was a seminal paper (*Nature* 224, 378 1969) in which Martin demonstrated a marker for T lymphocytes — a paper which Mitchison refused to put his own name on, despite his instigation of the work. In the years that have since passed, Raff notes he has not found “such generosity of spirit” elsewhere.

What will he be remembered for? Throughout the meeting, colleagues paid tribute to, among other things, Martin’s passion for discussion (indeed, one speaker noted that he thinks Martin was raised without any notion of grey), his remarkable ability to focus on the task at hand and his irresponsibility (in that he spent his time doing what he loved best). And what will he miss? Martin says it is the very thing that drove him throughout his career: “the sheer pleasure of intellectual discovery”.

Although having looked forward to this time, Martin plans to remain connected to science, as well as to pursue other interests. In addition to having agreed to do one more edition of the book and remaining on several advisory boards, Martin has recently become editor-in-chief for the newly launched *Journal of Biology*. Another significant issue on his agenda is the current situation in the United Kingdom and elsewhere regarding treatment of the dying and the illegal status of euthanasia, which he feels we will look back on some day as barbaric. So rest assured, far from disappearing onto a golf course, Martin will no doubt continue to have a significant influence on science and science policy for many years to come. □