OBITUARY

Raymond Latarjet 1911–1998

Raymond Latarjet, scientist, explorer, author, philosopher, bon-vivant, “man for all seasons.” It is difficult to write an obituary for a person who was so much alive. One of us (HK) saw him for the last time last year. He used a cane to support himself but his mind and spirit were unimpaired. We still see him smiling in his half-gentle, half-ironic way. Latarjet did not suffer fools gladly, but he was never rude or abrupt in his dealings with other people.

He was an innovator in his scientific endeavors in the fields of radiobiology, oncology and virology. He left his legacy in many fields; among these are the “Luria-Latarjet curves” for intracellular viral growth. Other fields, more than ten different ones, benefitted from his extensive contributions: first recognition of viral-induced mutations; mutagenic features of water soluble carcinogens; viral-induced cancers; radiobiology of slow viruses; bone marrow transplantation in radiation-compromised individuals. But what perhaps is more important was his eternal quest for things new and exciting. The study of the ozone in the atmosphere and the effect of the sun rays on terrestrial organisms by a 24-year-old Latarjet show how early in his life he was interested in phenomena which only decades later became objects of extensive study by others. Climbing mountains and participating in polar expeditions were also a testimony to this independent spirit of Latarjet.

He had an incredible knowledge of literature, and his interest in music was intense since he was married to an eminent professor at the Conservatoire de Paris. Again, Latarjet searched poetry and music for some important message which may have escaped other readers.

Two of us were fortunate to have been visiting scientists in his laboratory during our early years in research: one (SBL) on a leave from medical school and the other (TB) directly upon graduating from college. In each case, his love of science and generosity of spirit in opening his laboratory to fledgling scientists made lasting impressions.

Besides extensive scientific writing, Latarjet also was the author of four books, one of which, “d’Abord Vivre,” received the Prix de l’Académie Française.

Elected to the French Académie des Sciences in 1976, Latarjet received many other honors including his membership in the Académies des Sciences et de Medicine d’Argentine and honorary doctorates from the Universities of Leeds, Rio de Janeiro, and Padua. He was the recipient of the Médaille d’or des Sports, the Charles Léopold Mayer Prize of the Académie des Sciences, the Grand Prix des Sciences de la Ville de Paris, the Médaille Finsen de l’Association International de Photobiologie, le Prix Griffuel du Cancer, and the Prix de l’Institut de la Vie.

Just before his death, Latarjet was honored in the hospital by the Ambassador from Japan, who presented to him the Medal of the Empire of the Rising Sun.

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Raymond Latarjet


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