

Obituary

RAOUL FOLLEREAU
1903–1977

Raoul Follereau is no more. He died in Paris on 6 December, 1977 in his seventy-fifth year. And the world of leprosy will never be the same again.

He was a colourful figure, larger than life. The sober scientist and the detached research worker in leprosy might try to ignore him, to dismiss him as a theatrical interloper into the domain of their serious unemotional activities. But Raoul Follereau had to be heard; he made himself heard, like a barrister pleading a case—or a cause.

He was master of the magnificent gesture and the sonorous phrase. At the International Leprosy Congress in Tokyo in 1958, he soundly berated the participants, in that eloquent rounded French of his, for their preoccupation with the experimentally infected mice to the apparent neglect of the actually infected man. Even those who could not follow the flow of his untranslatable Gallic oratory could not but be impressed by the sincerity of his convictions.

This was the real Follereau, trained in philosophy and law, a born journalist with a real literary flair, a man genuinely moved by compassion for the underdog, the sufferer from leprosy.

Having seen for himself the deformed victims of neglected leprosy, he resolved fifty years ago to devote himself to their well-being. Adzopé, on the Ivory Coast, was his brain-child. The Order of Charity he founded in 1948. World Leprosy Day, now observed in no fewer than 137 countries, was another of his realized dreams. ELEP, the Federation of European Anti-leprosy Associations, was formed in 1966 largely owing to his vision and persuasive advocacy. Now ILEP (the “I” representing an international component) brings together voluntary organizations that are responsible for the medical care of a third of those of the world’s leprosy sufferers who are getting treatment. Two years later, the Fondation Follereau was founded, now with branches in several countries.

It was Follereau who roused the conscience of French-speaking peoples in both metropolitan France and beyond the seas to the plight of neglected and ostracized leprosy sufferers, and it was he who in the course of 32 round-the-world journeys and visits to 102 countries goaded governments into action and spurred individuals to do something for leprosy sufferers. He was more than a thorn-in-the flesh to reluctant officials, more than an exposé of bumbledom and bureaucratic procrastination. He saw that decisions must be taken at the highest level if attitudes were to be changed. At his instigation the French National Assembly unanimously passed, on 25 May, 1954, a Resolution calling on the United Nations to adopt a veritable Charter for leprosy sufferers the world over. That they did so is a tribute to his prestige and pertinacity.

Sometimes, it must be admitted, his flowery and highly-charged French phrases grated on less emotional Anglo-Saxon ears, and his equating of

deformity with leprosy did not exactly please his more scientific listeners. But Follereau never claimed to be a scientist. He was a man with a heart, a large heart, and his sympathy and love overflowed to those who were—and, unfortunately, still are in some situations—despised and ostracized. He was in his own inimitable and highly personal way trying to remove the stigma and the segregation, the ignorance and the inertia, that kept leprosy sufferers from being accepted as men, like other men.

The Apostle of Charity, this travelling Vagabond, this St Francis of the twentieth century, is no more. Untiring in his travels, eloquent in speech, indeflectable in his advocacy of the rights of leprosy sufferers, he rode roughshod over bureaucratic red tape and scientific pretensions, and with a worthy impatience confronted the world of leprosy.

We shall not see his like again. When he was needed, with his special gifts and unique experience, he was there. And there to help.

Raoul Follereau is gone, but he lives on in those he has inspired to follow his ideals, and he lives too in those whose lives have been made richer and fuller by his presence and his touch.

S. G. BROWNE