

MEMOIR

RONALD SIDNEY SKERMAN

I first met Ronald Skerman, who died on 19 April 2002, aged 87, in February 1968 when I was an undergraduate applying to the Prudential for a job. Having negotiated the formalities of the staff department, I was ushered along the imposing management corridor into Ronald's office. Ronald was, indeed, an awe-inspiring figure. On his promotion some months after that interview, he moved into an even more imposing office — wood-panelled and of large dimensions. You certainly felt you were 'coming into the presence', and, indeed, it is only within the past few years that I had the temerity to call him 'Ronald' as opposed to 'Sir'.

Ronald joined the Prudential straight from school in 1932, qualified as an actuary in 1940, progressed through the ranks, and became chief actuary in 1968. He 'retired' in 1979, and went straight onto the board, becoming its deputy chairman in 1985.

Within the Institute he played a very active part in a number of areas. He became President in 1970, and in that capacity signed and presented me with my Fellowship certificate. In 1980 he became one of a very select band when he was awarded an Institute gold medal. He strongly supported the idea of setting practice standards for the profession, and hence the publication, in 1975, of the Institute's first guidance note, which was for Appointed Actuaries. It was a controversial initiative at the time, because many members thought that all should be left to the judgement of individual actuaries.

He was a highly respected figure in the insurance industry, becoming Chairman of the Life Offices' Association, the British Insurers' European Committee, and the Common Market Working Group of the Comité Européen des Assurances. He was awarded the C.B.E. in 1974 for his services to the insurance industry. Subsequently, he was a member of the Royal Commission for Civil Liability and Compensation for Personal Injury.

Ronald was a man of considerable intellect, and presented a number of papers to the Institute. He had a superb mastery of the net premium valuation system, recognising both its strengths and limitations. His intellectual and practical brilliance in this field led to his presenting a very significant paper in 1968 to the German Actuarial Society on the subject of insurance solvency — which became the famous 'Skerman's Six Principles'. Indeed, these were finally translated into the European Union Third Life Insurance Directive in 1991. Because of his European work, he decided to have French lessons, and such was his enthusiasm that he continued, in retirement, to listen to the BBC World Service news in French at 6.30 each morning! Another activity post-retirement was to take an Open University mathematics degree; I have every sympathy for the tutor who, no doubt, had to respond to Ronald's solutions and observations.

I was only too well aware of Ronald's intellect. I once presented Ronald with a 30-page report with a certain logical weakness on page 15. The next day Ronald's secretary showed me into his room and explained that he had had little time to consider the report. He confirmed that, but said he had one question — on page 15! However, Ronald was not just a theoretician — far from it. Frank Redington (his predecessor as chief actuary at the Prudential) wrote: "He had an almost flippant scepticism for human foible and was impatient of the vain pursuit of perfection when it hindered sensible progress." Ronald himself, in his Presidential Address, said: "It would be easier to draft a satisfactory code of professional conduct if the world in which we lived was one of our choosing, but it is not." Being theoretically correct was not sufficient for Ronald, the solution had to be practical.

However, it is impossible to talk about Ronald without mentioning his sense of humour. To describe this as dry does not do justice to it; it was 'Sahara parched'. Indeed, many people did

not realise this, and fell right into the trap. For some reason, at an early age, I found it possible to answer back. At his retirement party I was talking to him, and someone came over and reminded him that he had recruited me. His typical response was: "We are all allowed to make one mistake in life." On another occasion he presented me with a problem which I found impossible to answer. I went back some days later with this news, to which he replied: "If I had been able to answer it, I would not have bothered to ask you." I was delighted that Ronald was able to attend my own Presidential Address, and he sat at my table at the dinner which followed. He engaged my younger son in conversation for much of the meal, and at the end commented: "Your son is as bad as you are."

I am conscious, in penning this tribute, that, from another place, Ronald will be scrutinising it with his critical eye. Pope Pius IX formulated the doctrine of papal infallibility in 1870. I am delighted to say that Ronald Skerman decreed presidential infallibility in 1980, and I would remind him of it. In responding to the presentation of a gold medal, he said: "Of course it is impossible for a President to err in what he says." Another quote from his Presidential Address sums everything up: "I regard integrity as the first essential quality of an actuary." Ronald totally exemplified integrity. I pay tribute to Ronald for all he contributed to me personally and also for his enormous contribution to the profession and the wider world.

PETER CLARK