Enfant terrible of Hollywood journalism
Rex Reed
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Register

Obituaries

Dame Bridget Ogilvie

Parasitologist who grew up on a sheep farm in Australia before moving to Britain and overseeing the Wellcome Trust's drastic expansion

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Ogilvie directed Wellcome Trust funding to the effort to sequence the human genome

It was the 1950s, in rural New South Wales, and John Ogilvie needed to have an awkward conversation with his bank manager. Their family farm, it turned out, was in a bit of trouble. The bank manager pointed to all the red lines in the accounts book.

Luckily, he had identified a pretty obvious course of action. The whole town knew that his daughter Bridget was away, studying for a degree. That was, he reasoned, both the problem and the solution.

"You're spending money on your daughter's university education," the bank manager said. "You should be spending it on more fertiliser."

John, oddly, did not see the logic in this. He was something of an eccentric when it came to education. "Well," he responded, "finest form of fertiliser I know."

By the time Bridget Ogilvie was recounting this anecdote, half a century on, the fertiliser had more than nourished her career. It was a career in which she had followed her passion for science — or, as she called it, "organised play for adults".

It was also a career in which she had controlled accounts the likes of which a rural Australian bank manager could only dream of. As director of the UK's Wellcome Trust she ended up handling a cheque so big it gained its own entry in Guinness World Records, disbursing sums of money exceeding what most countries spend on research.

Among those disbursements was one of the most significant in the history of science. The trust would end up writing most of the cheques for the Wellcome Sanger Institute, the UK laboratory that went on to sequence the first human genome.

Bridget Margaret Ogilvie was born in 1938, in Glen Innes, New South Wales, to John, an Oxford graduate, and his wife, Margaret. John, she recalled, was "an enthusiastic but not tremendously successful farmer". Margaret she remembered as "tremendously exciting" — telling stories around the farmhouse Aga, "waving the spoon about while she acted something out ... Father sitting there smiling with amusement and pleasure".

Their sheep farm was remote enough that until Ogilvie went to primary school, sometimes on horseback, she did not have any friends her own age. Even afterwards, wartime petrol rationing meant she did not play with peers after school, having to make do with her younger sister and brother and the sheep. "In some ways," she said, "it was an isolated existence, but I was as happy as a duck doing my own thing." There on the farm, heading out with the dogs, she would inspect the flock, and half form some of the ideas that would follow her through her career.

It was not a great place to farm. The winters were harsh, the grazing poor and the soil lacked key minerals. This meant the wool was very fine. It also meant, though, the sheep were half-starved and disease-ridden. Much of her work was gathering the livestock for "drenching" to treat parasites. It was not enough. Nothing seemed to work against the worms.

Yet, she thought, the sheep only had to be immunised once to be protected against bacteria. Why, she wondered, could we stop one but not the other? She would keep wondering about that until her PhD and beyond.

A doctorate must have seemed a long way away in her primary school, a one-room establishment in the bush in which all years were taught together. It still seemed a long way away in her boarding school. And few would have predicted it even when she became the only woman on her rural science course at the University of New England.

She was an oddity, but not an unwelcome one. The dean, she remembered,

At a rural university, her presence forced feckless male students to buck up

was delighted to have her to study, believing it would cause his feckless male undergraduates to buck up their ideas. Or, as he put it: "That'll make the so-and-sos work." He was right. "I arrived and there were a couple of exams and I knocked the socks off them!" said Ogilvie. "Then the average mark went up by 15 per cent and stayed up."

She stayed in touch with some of her fellow students. One later confessed: "The trouble was that when you arrived we had to play less rugby and drink less at the pub. You were a thorough nuisance."

They may have got sober and upped their game; she still stayed top of the class. On graduating she won a Commonwealth scholarship to study at Cambridge. For six weeks she and her fellow scholars travelled by boat via Sri Lanka and India and through the Suez Canal. They had, she said, "a whale of a time". Particularly enjoyable was the leaflet given to them by the British Council titled "How to live in Britain".

"One of the things that we used to fall about with laughter over was it said that in Britain when you meet people, you don't shake hands but you give a faint smile and say, 'How do you do?'" They spent the voyage practising their faint smiles on each other.

Whether it was through the faintness of her smile or the excellence of her work, Ogilvie thrived. In Cambridge she returned once more to the conundrum of the sheep parasites. What were the ways in which worms triggered — or did not trigger — immune reactions? How did they hide from the body's defences?

Her investigations led to a post at the National Institute for Medical Research at Mill Hill, north London, and foundational research into what are now known as IgE antibodies. Working under Peter Medawar, the Nobel prizewinner, here she could have happily continued what was already a distinguished research career — and she might well have done, were it not for an approach by the director of the Wellcome while chairing a meeting in a villa on Lake Como.

She had, by then, got "terribly restless". One of her ancestors, William Ogilvie, served for 30 years in the Royal Navy under Nelson. Then, after the Napoleonic wars, he had gone with his brothers to Australia. His brothers drowned on the journey but he survived and built his life anew, ending up with an estate and a vineyard. This was — oddly — an inspiration. "I've always been very fascinated by this man who had two entirely different careers," said Ogilvie. She wanted two careers too.

There, beside an alpine lake, she took up an offer to switch jobs and run the Wellcome's tropical medicine programme.

The trust was already a big funder of medical research. Over the two decades that followed it would become a gargantuan funder of medical research. Its funds came from Burroughs Wellcome, a pharmaceutical company. Shortly after she joined, it developed two antivirals. The first tackled one of the commonest infections, cold sores. The other, AZT, tackled one of the scariest: HIV. After that, the money started to flow.

By the time Ogilvie took over as the trust's director in 1991, its backing of research rivalled that of the UK government. When, in 1995, the trust sold its remaining shares in Burroughs Wellcome to Glaxo, the deal was sealed with a £2.5 billion cheque, which remains the biggest in the history of banking. As Ogilvie put it, they had "lashings of money".

"It was just a mind-blowing experience," she said. "You don't do the usual things because you can't sensibly suddenly increase the amount of money for individuals." So they needed to do unusual things.

In 1992, just such an unusual thing came along. The trust had got wind that institutions in the United States were looking to poach John Sulston, a Cambridge-based giant of genomics. They wanted him to do something audacious: sequence the entire human genome. The Wellcome, working with the Medical Research Council, convinced Sulston, with a very big grant, to do that audacious work in the UK. "The Americans were astounded to find this UK-based charity with suddenly so much money," recalled Ogilvie.

Soon they were to become more astounded. The Wellcome helped to fund the Wellcome Sanger Institute, an entire institution to house Sulston's team. "It was amazing, watching the whole experience," said Ogilvie. The race to sequence the human genome became a transatlantic collaboration.

Two years after Ogilvie stepped down as director of the Wellcome Trust, in 2000, Bill Clinton and Tony Blair held a joint press conference. "Today," said the US president, "we are learning the language in which God created life." Ogilvie would look on her part in that as one of the great achievements of her second career.

If William Ogilvie, her swashbuckling vineyard-owning ancestor, had two careers, she arguably had three. After leaving the Wellcome, as befitted a grandee of science, she took on a suite of advisory roles. She became a trustee at Cancer Research UK and chair of the Association of Medical Research Charities. That could have made for a gentle landing into retirement. But, looking at Britain and the world in the early 2000s — a time of scares over vaccines and genetically modified foods — she became increasingly depressed that, as she put it, "the Age of Enlightenment has been dimmed".

She wanted to change its lightbulb. She became a founding trustee of Sense About Science, a UK charity whose mission is to improve the public understanding of science and promote the use of evidence in public life. Her unofficial mission statement for it, recalled Tracey Brown, its director, was to "kick the shins that others were unwilling to kick".

"At one board meeting she declared, 'If Sense About Science ever becomes the establishment, I will resign'," said Brown. "I teased her afterwards about how that would sound in the minutes as said by Dame Bridget Ogilvie FRS FMedSci. We laughed but I knew she was serious."

Sense About Science continues, as does the Sanger. Today, at its Cambridge base, sequencing a human genome — which once cost hundreds of millions of pounds and took many years — is routine. It was from here during the pandemic that the UK led the world in reading the shifting genomes of hundreds of thousands of Covid-19 infections. It is also from here that, today, we have read the genomes of tens of thousands of other organisms, revolutionising our understanding of evolution and biology.

Among those organisms that have been sequenced you will find one *Haemonchus contortus*. It is small, wriggly and — to some — extremely important. It is better known as the barber-pole worm. And it was also known, all those years ago, to a young Bridget Ogilvie as the reason her father's bank manager was unhappy, the farm's accounts were in the red and her sheep were dying.

Dame Bridget Ogilvie, parasitologist and director of the Wellcome Trust, was born on March 24, 1938. She died on April 27, 2026, aged 88