Michael Abercrombie with M. L. Johnson (his wife) and Robert Abercrombie (his grandson).

Michael Abercrombie

14 August 1912 to 28 May 1979

First editor of the *Journal of Embryology and Experimental Morphology*

The death of Michael Abercrombie removes from the world of contemporary developmental and cell biology one of its most quietly influential figures. It cannot remove the admiration that he won, inside and outside the laboratory, for his scientific work, or, from those who knew him, the deep affection evoked by his personal qualities.

For most readers of the *Journal of Embryology and Experimental Morphology* Abercrombie will be best known as an active research worker, as the director of a great research laboratory, and as one of the founders, and the first editor, of the journal. However, he was also an important figure in each of several other fields – but notably as a popularizer of science. The periodical *Penguin New Biology*, which he and his wife, M. L. Johnson, founded and jointly edited (latterly in partnership with G. E. Fogg) was perhaps his most considerable enterprise in this genre. The Penguin *Dictionary of Biology*, of which he was one author, was equally successful.

Abercrombie's work as an experimental embryologist began when he joined C. H. Waddington in exploring the properties of the avian organizer. Soon afterwards the outbreak of war turned him to work, inspired by J. Z. Young, on Wallerian nerve degeneration, the Schwann-cell proliferation associated with it, and wound healing – work in which he was joined by M. L. Johnson and others. When he later turned to other aspects of developmental biology it was with a confirmed interest in co-ordinated cell behaviour as a component of developmental processes. Although his interest in avian embryology persisted, work on the social behaviour of cells – normal and neoplastic – became a preoccupation, and his analysis (with J. E. M. Heaysman) of contact inhibition of movement was to prove a turning point in modern cell biology. Abercrombie's contributions to cell morphology, cell population dynamics and cell behaviour were characterized by his search for accurate quantitative measures of the processes he was studying. He was a demographer, as well as a sociologist, of cell populations, and helped to bring new rigour to the study of them.

Abercrombie was the key figure in the founding of the *Journal of Embryology and Experimental Morphology*. In the aftermath of the Second World War the Dutch embryologists C. P. Raven and M. W. Woerdeman had sought to establish an international, but Europe-based, journal which they hoped would be called *Morphogenesis*. They received every encouragement from the developmental biologists they approached, but the project failed for want of an enlightened publisher. Abercrombie and a group of British biologists (G. R. de Beer, J. D. Boyd, F. W. R. Brambell, Honor B. Fell, W. J. Hamilton, Sidnie M. Manton, P. B. Medawar, D. R. Newth, C. H. Waddington, J. Z. Young and S. Zuckerman) were later to be moved by a similar ambition and, after several abortive efforts, succeeded in making satisfactory arrangements for publication with the help of the Company of Biologists. Their Dutch colleagues and other European biologists gave generous support and JEEM was born in 1953. Its gestation had lasted for more than two years and involved Abercrombie in a great deal of patient negotiation.

Abercrombie was the unquestioned choice of the Editorial Board for the position of editor and he served alone in that capacity for nine years (1953–62), being responsible for seeing Volumes 1–9 to press. As might have been expected, he proved a patient and helpful, but demanding, editor to his authors. One feature of his editorial philosophy was, perhaps, unusual. He took the view that while journals could, and should, by the standards they exacted, be effective in improving the quality of scientific work and exposition, it was no part of the business of any journal of primary publication to be over-exclusive. If work was really worthy of publication, and if a journal were in other ways a suitable vehicle for it, then it should be accepted. Journals, in other words, should not attempt to establish for themselves artificially high standards at the expense of their competitors.

The first editor of JEEM certainly had a full agenda. Over and above such problems as persuading its then printers to take their own schedules seriously, and the diplomacy involved in simultaneously satisfying its publishers, its owners, and its financial sponsors, the journal had been founded in the hope that its Editorial Board would not only take an active interest in its affairs, but would also promote developmental biology in other ways. Thus at the biennial International Embryological Conferences sponsored by the Editorial Board, the editor met its members and reported to them. While performing these functions Michael Abercrombie accumulated both friends and respect and came to exercise a growing, and always public-spirited, influence on the international developmental scene.

He later shared the editorial burden of *Advances in Morphogenesis*, and of the Cambridge University Press monographs in the developmental and cell biology series, served as a Board member of the International Society of Developmental Biologists, and as President of the British Society for Developmental Biology. His death came in the final year of his service as Director of the Strangeways Research Laboratory, the great institution at which his earliest work had been done. His other affiliations had been to the Zoology Department of the University of Birmingham, and to the Anatomy and the Zoology Departments of University College London.

Although his diffidence of manner truly reflected a modest and unselfseeking character, it concealed an inner strength of purpose and a devotion to science that were not in question. His colleagues, students and friends will share a feeling of gratitude not only for the help he gave them, but also for the example that he set.

D. R. N.