Sir Raphael Cilento: 
a Personal Tribute

In 1935 I was enrolled in the sub-junior year at the Church of England Grammar School, East Brisbane. Most of this group were new boys but a few had come from the preparatory school. Among these was a blond haired, well built youth, who I was told, was Cilento. This was Raff the eldest of the tribe. About the same time the family moved into their house Seiano at the corner of Villa Street in Ipswich Road, Annerley. My own family had lived three hundred yards away for many years. So it was inevitable that I would eventually come to know the family. Not only were Raff and I in the same form at school but we did medicine in the same year. By the time I first met his father, Sir Raphael had been knighted for his services to medicine and Lady Cilento was already writing her columns for the paper.

At that time there were five Cilento children and the sixth was born some time later. They were a lively bunch. To a rather shy person merely observing them was a revelation. The Victorian idea of a child being seen and not heard did not apply to them. They all had enquiring minds and, despite their very full lives, both parents found time for discussion on a wide range of subjects. These included the classics, sport, history and science.

Sir Raphael's second name was West. He is a descendent of Benjamin West, a painter at the Court of George III and the second president of the Royal Academy. All the Cilento children inherited some of this artistic talent but also developed other talents of their own. Sir Raphael himself in later life took to painting.

Over many years Lady Cilento contributed regular columns on medical matters in newspapers. The first of them was published under the name of Hygeia. This was a joint effort between Sir Raphael and Lady Cilento. Over the many years that these columns have been published, I am sure that Sir Raphael was a great help in writing them.

The family was very hospitable; most entertaining was on Sunday afternoon and evening. On some occasions I was included in the group. Sir Raphael was very kind to and tolerant to his children's friends. Some guests were national figures. (I first met Dame Enid Lyons there). But often they were their own friends. In this small group, Sir Raphael was an excellent raconteur and with his quick wit and agile mind could easily match any of the other stories that had been told. The result was often hilarious. I can remember on a number
Sir Raphael Cilento at unveiling of plaque at Fassifern Reserve, 1966. (R.H.S.Q. Collection)

of occasions telling Sir Raphael a story which he acknowledged with a quiet smile. A few days later I heard the same story told to a group of people as it should have been told in the first place. These evenings were very happy affairs. Sir Raphael was a good speaker under any circumstances whether it be a large meeting, delivering a lecture, on radio or in committee. It was I believe in these smaller groups that he was outstanding. Members of deputations have told me that they have come away from meetings quite mesmerized.

Sir Raphael graduated in 1918 from the University of Adelaide and married two years later. After a period in New Guinea with the Australian Army, he was appointed physician to the Sultan of Perak, Federated Malay States. In 1921 he joined the service of the Commonwealth of Australia as Medical Officer of Tropical Hygiene and was sent to London where he obtained a diploma in Tropical Medicine and Hygiene. He was awarded a Doctorate of Medicine in Adelaide in 1922. Until 1934, he held other appointments in Tropical Medicine for the Commonwealth. He was one of the principles of the Cilento-Hermant Mission sent by the League of Nations to investigate health problems and conditions throughout the West Pacific in 1928-29. It was during his time with the Federal Health Department that many of his papers on tropical diseases were published. One of these was the *The White Man in the Tropics* the publication which according to Professor G.C. Bolton in his history *A Thousand Miles Away*, finally demolished the theory that the Queensland tropics were unsuitable for Europeans. In 1934, the Queensland Government appointed him Director General of Health and Medical Services. In the following six or seven years Sir Raphael organised major changes in Queensland medical services. In these same years he undertook a course of study and passed the examinations to become a barrister-at-law in 1939. When the medical course was commenced at the
University of Queensland in 1935, Sir Raphael was appointed Professor of Social and Tropical Medicine. He also compiled *The Tropical Diseases in Australia* which was used by students and also by the American Army in South West Pacific during the Second World War. His course was always very well organised.

As a would-be historian I have come across Sir Raphael in another of his talents History. As a result of his service in New Guinea with the Australian Army in 1918, he was later invited to contribute a chapter on New Guinea in the official history of the Australian Army Medical Corp. (Colonel A.G. Butler). For many years he was President of the Royal Historical Society and was elected a Fellow of that Society. He wrote extensively in its journal. Assisted by the late Clem Lack he compiled and edited *Triumph in the Tropics* for the centenary celebrations of Queensland in 1959. For any serious Queensland historian this is compulsory reading. After his return to Australia in the early fifties, he did a lot of writing and there are, at present, his uncompleted autobiography and two historical books, not published.

During the Second World War although he volunteered for the Army he was requested to remain on Home Service. Then came another period of his very active life. He was with the United Nations from 1945 to 1952 occupying the position of Chief Medical Officer of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration in the British Zone of Germany with the rank equivalent to that of Major General. Later he became the Director of Refugees and Displaced Persons largely among the Arabs in the Middle East and director of Social Activities Department of the United Nations in New York.

In the early fifties he resigned from that organisation and returned to Australia with the expectation of a diplomatic appointment. However, changes had taken place in Canberra and this was not to be. So this vigorous man with the brilliant mind was never again to be occupied in a major administrative job. This was Australia's loss and nobody else's gain. Apart from conducting a small general practice at Mooloolaba, dabbling in politics and giving news commentaries on the A.B.C. he spent most of the next ten years in writing, invigorating the Royal Historical Society of Queensland and the National Trust.

I knew Sir Raphael as the parent of a friend in his own home. I knew him as a lecturer and teacher. I have read much of what he wrote historically but I have had no direct experience of him as a medical administrator. However one cannot but be impressed at the innovations that he introduced which have stood the test of time and copied by others. In many ways he was, like other great men, before his time.

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