

## William Montagna, Ph.D.

**W**illiam Montagna was born in a small village in Italy in 1913, became a naturalized American citizen in 1927, and went on to a triumphant scientific career till his recent death at age 81. He was a monumental, indeed formidable, figure who had a profound influence on the growth of investigative dermatology. He was the greatest anatomist of the skin in the last half of the 20th century, a worthy successor to his immortal Italian forbears, comparable in stature to Malpighi, Golgi, Corti, and Scarpa.

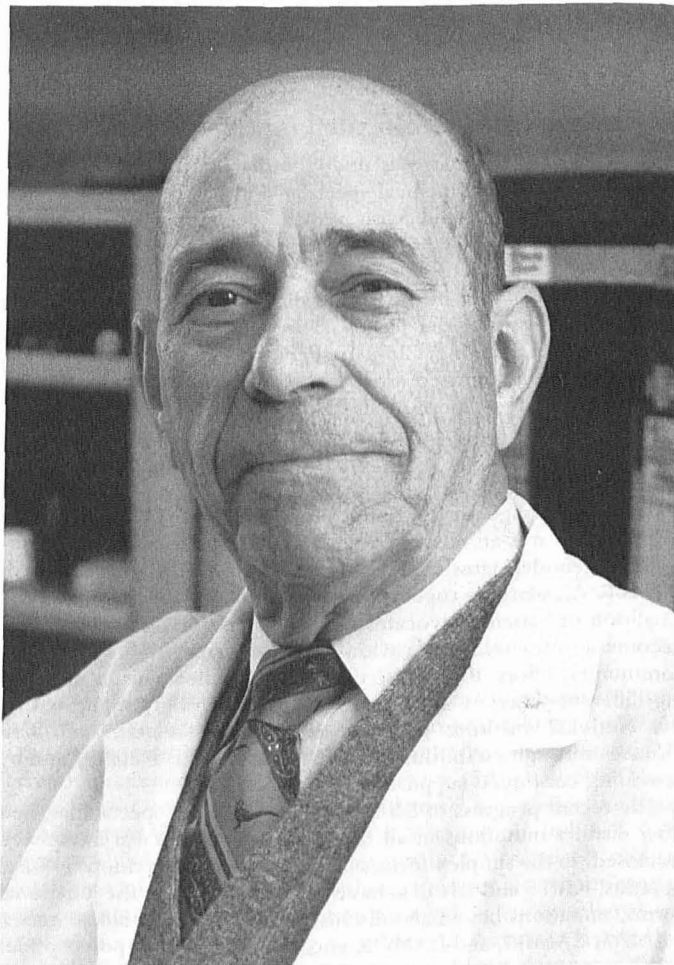
He prepared his histologic specimens with religious devotion and then rendered them with exquisite care into illustrations of great beauty. His fantastic eye for detail and his wonderment at the miraculous structural organization of the integument enabled him to construct a voluminous gallery of stunning histologic photos. These were not only truthful representations but were art forms that would merit admiration if exhibited at the Uffizi Museum in Florence. One of his last works, *An Atlas of Human Skin*, is a superb demonstration of his artistic talents.

A mere listing of his positions, honors, and achievements would occupy a dozen pages and still tell very little about this fascinating and engaging man. He was an impassioned teacher who excited everyone within hearing distance. He was also a great literateur who could write English with an imaginative flourish and originality that was the envy of all of his American-born colleagues. It is no exaggeration to classify him as a genius who could properly be placed among the outsized men who earn the title of "Renaissance Man."

He began his academic career in 1944 as an instructor in ornithology and zoology at Cornell University. He could identify with certainty every winged creature in his environment, even when these were only specks on the horizon to us mortals, and he would paint them in watercolors. He was also the complete biologist, whose knowledge of plants made him a fascinating companion on walks through the woods. No miniscule lichen or alga escaped his attention. The creative act that above all others made him unforgettable in the history of dermatology was his founding in 1950 of the annual conferences on the *Biology of the Skin*. These originally took place at Brown University, where he was an Associate Professor of Biology. These symposia were later moved to Oregon when he became director of the Oregon Regional Primate Center. He continued to sponsor these annual affairs until 1980; they thrive to this very day and will henceforth be known as the *Montagna Symposia on the Biology of the Skin*. Each symposium was followed by publication of the proceedings. These are now classics.

It is impossible to describe the excitement generated by Bill's inspired chairmanship and showmanship. We novitiates flocked to Providence in mid-winter to become Montagna disciples. Many of the attendees became prominent figures in the new age of investigative dermatology. To mention a few—Tom Fitzpatrick, Aaron Lerner, Walter Lobitz, Irv Blank, Harvey Blank, Walter Shelley, Al Kligman, John Strauss, Dick Dobson, Gene Van Scott, Al Lorincz, Fred Urbach, Gideon Matoltsy, Herman Chase, Raymond Suskind, Herbert Mescon, and Herman Pinkus.

Bill wrote over 450 scientific articles and six books, the titles of which reveal the diversity of his interests. These include a philo-



sophic treatise, *Science is Not Enough*, a charming and romantic account, *Skin: Your Owner's Manual*, and a scholarly anthropological text, *Man*. To dermatologists his best known volume, now in its third edition, is *The Structure and Function of Skin*. The first edition was a sensation to young researchers brought up on dreary, boring, morphologic descriptions of the skin and its appendages. Here was a new and beautiful view in which the mysteries of skin were revealed in detail while at the same time anatomy was correlated with physiology. His last book, *Black Skin: Structure and Function*, was published in 1993.

Montagna lived at least two full lives. He needed only 4 hours of sleep, bounding out of bed at 5 AM, returning for dinner at 6 PM, and finishing the day at the laboratory until the lights went off at 11 PM. Some would say he was a driven man. He was in fact inspired and was nearly always in a feverish state of creativity. He suffered fools badly and was given to vivid outbursts when he heard something he thought was fallacious or silly.

He knew how to have a good time and to squeeze pleasures out of many aspects of life. He was often hungry as a child but later became a gourmet and a three-star cook of Italian specialties. He was irresistible to men and women alike. He could play the French horn tolerably well, and guests at his home were wakened at 4:30 AM with blasts of the Mozart horn concertos. At the annual Biology of the Skin meetings in Oregon, Bill thought it was his duty to add a dash of culture to the assemblage of physicians. Accordingly, he persuaded his good friend, Jacob Aushalomov, who was the director of the Portland Junior Symphony, a world class orchestra, to bring his most talented musicians to perform at the dinner ceremonies. If nothing else, even the non-music lovers were all impressed by the virtuosity of the young performers.

An attenuated list of Montagna's honors and achievements barely touches the intellectual dimensions of this multifaceted man. He was president of the Society for Investigative Dermatology in 1969. He sat on a dozen editorial boards and was a member of 17 scientific societies and a consultant to a broad array of national and international organizations, including the National Institutes of

Health. In 1975, we inaugurated the annual William Montagna Lecture, which takes place at the annual national meeting of the Society for Investigative Dermatology. The Italian government acknowledged his extraordinary accomplishments by honors reserved for the truly illustrious, for example, the *Commendatore della Repubblica Italiana*. In 1972, he received the Stephen Rothman Award for distinguished achievement in investigative dermatology.

William Montagna was probably the last of the great generalists in the biology of the skin. To know him was an exalted privilege that gave each of us a lifetime of memories and colorful stories. It is not likely that a non-dermatologist will ever again affect our specialty to such an extraordinary degree.

Albert M. Kligman  
Department of Dermatology  
University of Pennsylvania  
Philadelphia, PA