

RAGNAR GRANIT (30 October 1900–12 March 1991)

The scientific accomplishments of Ragnar Granit have been enumerated and evaluated many times during his lifetime and after his death in 1991. In this essay I will try to convey an understanding of the environment of his formative years, the circumstances that helped shape his career, and his personality, for no one can become a scientist of his stature and impact without also being an extraordinary human being. That rather little has been written in the English language about these aspects of Raggen (as he was known to colleagues, friends, students, and staff), is perhaps because so many of his scientific colleagues, those who knew him intimately and were his friends—Alexander Forbes, Detleff Bronk, Keffer Hartline and William Rushton among others—died before him. Moreover, not everyone saw through his rather reserved outer shield.

In 1928 Granit spent a brief period in the laboratory of Sir Charles Sherrington in Oxford; he returned there for a longer stay in 1932–33. From this association Granit developed great admiration and sincere respect for Sherrington, about whom he wrote a biography that was published in 1966. In it Granit stresses that Sherrington was not a self-righteous man but rather was “deeply aware of life’s difficulties and sensitive to people, their needs, feelings and motives of action.”¹ Those words aptly describe Raggen as I knew him.

He was born in 1900, a member of the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland, at a time when Finland was part of Russia. Within his father’s as well as his mother’s family cultural interests flourished with little attention to science. Topics such as physics and chemistry were seldom mentioned. Literature, music, and art dominated the daily life of both families. In his 1983 autobiography² Granit recalls that his father “was of the then rather common opinion that the responsibility of any school was to produce a cultured individual and that the language of the Romans constituted the foundation of all culture.” And so, from age ten to nineteen Granit attended the Swedish Normallyceum in Helsingfors, the capital of Finland. Thus his initial education was dominated by Latin, Greek, and the arts while the sciences received scant attention. It seems likely that growing up in a bilingual country where both native languages and political freedom were threatened by the Tsar’s “Russification program” made its mark on the schoolboy. During the spring term of 1918 school was interrupted and Raggen turned soldier in Finland’s war of independence from Russia.