A. S. BLUNDELL BANKART
1879-1951

The sudden death of Bankart on April 8 deprives us of yet another of the giants of surgery who were the creators of modern orthopaedics.

Arthur Sidney Blundell Bankart was born in 1879, son of James Bankart, F.R.C.S., of Exeter. He was educated at Rugby School, at Trinity College, Cambridge, and at Guy’s Hospital. Qualifying in 1906, he served first as house-physician and then as house-surgeon at his own hospital, and later became surgical registrar and tutor. He must have been attracted to surgery from the first because he lost no time in obtaining the academic qualifications, being admitted Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of England in 1909, and Master of Surgery of the University of Cambridge the following year. During this period he came under the influence of Arbuthnot Lane who was then perfecting the "no touch" technique and this stimulated his interest in bone and joint surgery to such effect that, in 1909, he became the first surgical registrar at the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital which had that year been formed by amalgamation of the Royal Orthopaedic Hospital in Hanover Square, the National Orthopaedic Hospital in Great Portland Street, and the City Orthopaedic Hospital in Hatton Garden. It was here that he first had freedom as an operating surgeon and developed the precise and amazingly fast technique that was the envy of his pupils. He was fond of telling how, when the surgeons went away for their summer holidays—and it seems that they all went at once—he discharged all the old
patients and brought in a full complement of new ones; these he operated upon without delay, working the operating theatre staff as never before, and achieving a record turnover. He liked the actual business of operating more than any other aspect of his work, and right to the end of his career he thought the ideal way of spending a day was an eight-hour operating session.

In 1911 Bankart was appointed in quick succession Surgeon to the Maida Vale Hospital for Nervous Diseases, Assistant Surgeon to the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital, Surgeon to the Belgrave Hospital for Children and Surgeon to the Queen’s Hospital for Children. That was at a time before the modern surgical specialities had developed, and he was practising simultaneously in orthopaedic surgery, in neurosurgery and in the surgery of children. He must indeed have been a busy man and small wonder he learned to work so quickly and acquired the characteristic walk that was almost a run and was the despair of generations of house-surgeons who could barely keep up with him. He always preferred to run up several flights of stairs rather than to wait a minute for the lift. The first world war found Bankart working harder than would be possible for most men; so he was not taken into the Army, but instead he added a number of the smaller military hospitals to his burden; and, after Shepherd’s Bush was opened, Robert Jones brought him into the fold to work there as well.

His appointment as Surgeon to the Maida Vale Hospital for Nervous Diseases in 1911 marked the beginning of an interesting phase in his career. From 1911 to 1933, when he resigned from the staff, he carried out the major part of the surgery at that hospital. And after appointment as Orthopaedic Surgeon to the Middlesex Hospital, he performed as well, at the behest of Dr Campbell Thomson, neurologist to the Hospital, much of the neurosurgical work there, and continued with it almost up to the beginning of the last war. He was perhaps more interested in spinal than cranial surgery. He was certainly very successful with spinal operations and was one of the first in this country to perform lateral cordotomy for the relief of pain. He was a great admirer of Charles Sherrington and took a close interest in experimental work in the nervous system. Indeed it was probably this that gave him the factual approach to the treatment of disease that he retained throughout his life.

The first world war was a period of rapid expansion for orthopaedics and at its conclusion the London teaching hospitals, or most of them, appointed orthopaedic surgeons to their consulting staff. Bankart at that time was at the height of his ability and he was most disappointed not to be elected to the staff of Guy’s, his own hospital, but in 1920 he was appointed to the Middlesex as its first orthopaedic surgeon. He gave up some of his lesser commitments so that he could devote more time to the task of building his new department, but it was uphill work and many years were to pass before he made much progress. At first he had one out-patient clinic a week, but no beds except such as he could borrow from the less conservative of his colleagues. When finally he convinced them that orthopaedics had passed out of the strap and buckle stage, he was rewarded with three male and three female beds in his own right, and a few cots in the children’s ward. It was not until the new hospital was completed in 1935 that he had his own wards, and the organisation of a unified fracture service was delayed until after the second world war. When his assistant surgeon went into the Army he ran the department, together with an additional 100 temporary beds at Mount Vernon Hospital, with little help except from student house-surgeons, and although he reached the official retiring age in 1944, he gladly continued for a further two years.

Bankart made many contributions to orthopaedics, the best known being his operation for recurrent dislocation of the shoulder. When he first described it in 1923, it did not attract much notice outside the circle of his immediate colleagues. He was not interested in publicity and showmanship, and scorned present day morals which allow a surgeon to take a new operation on tour complete with a "première" followed by a "general release." He believed that if an idea were good it would soon enough be accepted by others. Indeed
that was the case here because a further paper on this operation that he published in 1938
was well received; and although surgeons as a whole were slow to adopt it, perhaps because
it is technically a little difficult, it is now performed throughout the world. It is probably
the only procedure for the treatment of recurrent dislocation of the shoulder that can be
relied upon, and upwards of a hundred different operations have been described.

In addition to his own contributions, Bankart had a great influence on British orthopaedics
as a whole because of the directness of his approach which excluded careless thought and
slipshod work. He was quick to debunk unsound or superficial argument, and the publication
of a paper based on false premises was almost certain to invoke the quick response of a letter
by his caustic pen in the weekly medical press. But Bankart was not opposed to new ideas;
indeed he welcomed them and was quick to try out any new operation that had a logical
basis. He was equally prepared to investigate a procedure that gave good results although
the reason was not apparent. His attitude to manipulative surgery is a good example. He
was confronted in his daily practice by patients with a variety of complaints who failed to
respond to the orthodox treatment of contemporary practice, and yet afterwards were quickly
relieved by bone setters. He set out to investigate this phenomenon and became acquainted
with Herbert Barker, who was famous as an unqualified manipulator, watched him work
and saw his patients afterwards. As a result, Bankart was convinced that patients with
certain ailments were helped by manipulation whereas he himself would not have benefited
them (and on the other hand Barker was a wise enough man to learn something from Bankart
of the dangers of indiscriminate manipulation). Bankart therefore began to perform
manipulations himself, found out when it was indicated and added the technique to his
therapeutic armamentarium. He reduced the claims of manipulators from "miracles" to
plain facts, showed how simple the procedure was, made it respectable and put it on the
orthopaedic map. The culmination of this work was his book, Manipulative Surgery,
published in 1932.

Bankart's position as a power in orthopaedic surgery was recognised by his colleagues
from the first, and as he matured he was granted the highest honours they could bestow.
In 1913 he became the first honorary secretary of the newly formed Sub-section of Orthopaedic
Surgery of the Royal Society of Medicine, and in 1935 he was elected president. He was a
Founder Member of the Société Internationale de Chirurgie Orthopédique et de Traumatologie
and an Honorary member of the Société Française d'Orthopédie. He was a Founder Member
of the British Orthopaedic Association, Honorary Secretary from 1926 to 1931, and in 1932
and 1933 he had the distinction of serving as its President.

Bankart had few hobbies and his life centred around his surgery. In the evenings he
was to be found as often as not in his study in his lovely home in Edwardes Square surrounded
by open books and with a part skeleton or a new instrument in his hand. Pondering his vast
clinical experience and drawing on his great knowledge of physiology, he elaborated the
theories on which he based his daily practice. A man of strong convictions and supreme
personal honesty, he could not be diverted from the course he believed to be true; and when
he had decided that a certain procedure was the best, even when he had devised a new
operation, it was practised on the next occasion it was called for, were the patient a
millionaire or a dustman.

Although a man of courtly bearing and great charm, he did not easily establish intimate
personal relations with his colleagues. This often puzzled those who were attracted by his
manner and the obvious frankness of his character, but failed to understand that he was a
shy man. He was a connoisseur of life and appreciated the good things it holds, especially
other people. He really did enjoy other people, and once his shyness was overcome he
contributed to the company in full measure. Bankart was a friend above price, never veering
with the wind. Tolerant of error, intolerant of fools, a giant amongst men. // P. W.