ALEXANDER MITCHELL
1881-1953

Alexander Mitchell came of medical stock; his father and grandfather had been country doctors practising from a village in Aberdeenshire, pleasant enough in summer but grim enough in the snows. Throughout his life he remained strongly attached to this part of the countryside, and to it he returned—a homing habit Aberdonians have. Another custom of the north-east, now alas too rare, was to give a boy destined for medicine a good general education first, and so at the age of twenty Mitchell graduated M.A. (with the old "seven subjects") in the University of Aberdeen. Qualification in medicine followed in 1905, and the higher degree in surgery (Ch.M.) in 1907. At first he practised in the country, although he did some surgery in Fyvie and in Elgin, cottage hospitals with a splendid record in the care of country folk; but by 1914 he had been appointed both to the Royal Hospital for Sick Children and to the Royal Infirmary in Aberdeen.

Experience in the Royal Army Medical Corps during the first world war strengthened his interest in orthopaedic surgery and on his return to Aberdeen it became his chief vocation, although he remained a general surgeon until 1936, when he took over the new orthopaedic unit in the Royal Infirmary. From this unit he developed the orthopaedic service of the north-east of Scotland, which he directed during and after the war. When he gave up surgery, he found an outlet for his energy in hospital management.

I met him first in 1932 when I was appointed to the Chair of Surgery in the University of Aberdeen, and I and mine have had twenty years of unbroken kindness from him and from his. As sometimes happens with the physically afflicted, he seems early in life to have
come to terms with his handicap: a process which involves a purification of the spirit that sets its mark upon a man. The outward sign of this was an indomitable courage which refused to accept any restriction upon his riding, the only form of physical exercise open to him, and one which he followed with an almost perverse insistence up to the last, an insistence which not infrequently alarmed his friends. As was his habit, he remained entirely if unostentatiously faithful to his horse Redwing, whom he counted as a friend; and it is good to know that a "next-best" home has been found for this remarkable animal, as his rider would have wished. The inward sign was the effortless way in which he immediately established affectionate relationships with most children, and working relationships with even the intractable. To be with him in a children's ward was always an education in the art of surgery. Before such patients were segregated, he would give me his advice upon orthopaedic problems most generously: and—like the man—it was always simple advice, and eminently practicable.

Mitchell's broad education, wide interests and long experience made him a wise counsellor. His opinions were always definite and expressed in the clearest of terms. If the matter were private, one had to be prepared, on occasion, for unpalatable advice; often enough further reflection showed him to be right. In public matters his complete disinterestedness made his opinions and advice most influential; and I believe that it played a substantial part in the rapid and frictionless establishment of the orthopaedic service in the north-east. He was a man who had a mind, and knew it: and he was careful that others knew his mind. But no thought of himself was allowed to influence his views, and he was most generous to his fellows. Only two things disturbed his generally benevolent outlook: sins of omission, and any suspicion of "wangling." Then there would appear the prophetic malar flushes and the ominous stare, and the culprit would be left in no doubt of Mitchell's opinion of him.

He was good enough to serve two terms as an examiner in Surgery in the University of Edinburgh, and an excellent examiner he was—simple, direct and eminently fair. The whole staff looked forward to his arrival; everyone (even, I understand, the "ploughed") enjoyed meeting him.

I believe that the future history of surgery in Scotland will emphasise the part played by Alexander Mitchell in its development. Much more importantly, the memory of this simple, kindly, upright, accomplished man will continue to influence his colleagues and his students throughout their lives, and the multitude of his friends.

J. L.