WALTER MERCER
1891–1971

Sir Walter Mercer, Emeritus Professor of Orthopaedic Surgery in the University of Edinburgh, Past-President of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh. Honorary Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, the American College of Surgeons, the Royal College of Surgeons of England, Ireland and Canada, and the College of Physicians and Surgeons of South Africa, Master of Orthopaedic Surgery honoris causa in the University of Liverpool, Honorary Fellow of the American Orthopaedic Association, the Association of Surgeons of Great Britain and Ireland, the Royal Medical Society of Edinburgh, and Emeritus Fellow of the British Orthopaedic Association, died one month before his eighty-first birthday.

He was Chairman of the British Editorial Board of this Journal for seven years. On the occasion of his eightieth birthday in March 1970 a special issue was published in his honour (Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery, volume 52-B, No. 1, February 1970), with tributes from surgical colleagues, academic associates and former students, and appreciations of his incredible skill as an operating surgeon, and of his ability as a great teacher and firm but kind examiner. There were tributes also to his authorship of a wonderfully written and now standard textbook on orthopaedic surgery, and to his strength of character in organisation. He was acclaimed, though he modestly disowned, as the greatest “general surgeon” within our memory. He
was presented with a leather-bound and gold-faced preparation of this issue at a ceremony in his home at Easter Belmont Road, Edinburgh, receiving representatives of the Editorial Board still with the sparkle in his eye, quick wit and warm-heartedness. We are grateful and honoured to know from his wife Maisie, Lady Mercer, that often in his remaining months of life he thumbed it through and reflected on the allegiance, respect and friendships that were so dear to him.

Born at Stow, Midlothian, and educated at George Watson's College and the University of Edinburgh, Walter Mercer graduated in medicine and surgery in 1912 with honours in practical anatomy, clinical surgery, systematic surgery and operative surgery. Already at this young age the destiny of a great surgeon was defined clearly. After surgical house-appointments in Carlisle, Berwick and the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary he gained a commission in the Army and served as regimental medical officer to the King's Own Scottish Borderers and the Royal Scots Fusiliers.

There must be few who were able to serve their country in surgical military duties in both the great wars of 1914-18 and 1939-45; but he did. In the first he was in the trenches of the Messines Ridge, the desperate struggles of the Somme and the third battle of Ypres. He was invalided home but continued to work in the military hospital at Bangour and on problems of tuberculosis at East Fortune Hospital until demobilisation in 1920. In the second world war he was consultant orthopaedic surgeon at Larbert base hospital and thoracic surgeon to Bangour hospital.

His success as a general surgeon was based not, as often it then was, on lists of gastro-enterostomy, thyroideectomy and operations on the breast, with perhaps an occasional haemorrhoid, skin cyst or bunion just to give verisimilitude to the otherwise unconvincing title of "general". He first concentrated on traumatic surgery and during the years of war made important contributions especially on the problems of amputation, later becoming chairman of the Ministry of Health advisory committee on artificial limbs. Then for some years his expert surgical technique was applied to oesophago-gastric and abdominal surgery. He next engaged in neurosurgery and soon became a pioneer of thoracic surgery. After visiting Dr Blalock in Baltimore he came home with suitcases almost empty of clothes but full of special instruments with which to establish cardiac surgery in Scotland. He delighted to use a stethoscope with tubes six feet long, the distal part sterilised to go into the wound but with earphones available to surrounding students who would never forget the loud bruit of a patent ductus arteriosus disappearing immediately after ligation. Then finally he applied himself to orthopaedic surgery and in 1948 accepted the first George Harrison Law Chair of Orthopaedic Surgery in the University of Edinburgh, during the next ten years developing the great school of orthopaedics of which that capital city is now justly proud.

His skill in operative technique was phenomenal, and Lady Mercer has given permission to reproduce the oil painting of him in theatre dress. With cool and calculating certainty, never with a wasted movement, never with apparent frustration or tension, his speed was such that it is said that one visiting surgeon went out for a cup of coffee while the patient was being prepared for arthroplasty of the hip and returned soon to find with dismay that the wound was being stitched up. He did not practise a strict Lane technique, and in fact used the flexed and ankylosed terminal interphalangeal joint of his left index finger as the safest of all retractors. Yet with technique so speedy and atraumatic the operative infection rate was far below the average in a pre-antibiotic era.

Mercer's presidency of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh marked a renaissance from what his successor Sir John Bruce described as previously "almost entirely an examining body and a parochial surgical society" to a live and inspiring College with vigorous post-graduate surgical training, teaching in basic sciences, restoration of buildings and museums, establishment of its own publication The Journal of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, and re-establishment of Royal patronage. In reminding His Royal Highness the Duke of
Edinburgh that the last Royal Sponsor of the College had been King George III, and deciding to present a valuable piece of Georgian silver from barber-surgeon days, Walter Mercer’s aura of kind benignity was reflected when having said: “Your Royal Highness we wish to give you this... bleeding bowl”, Prince Philip at once replied “I am bloody grateful”.

The Chairman, Editor and all present and past members of the British Editorial Board of the *Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery* join in a special tribute to Walter Mercer, our chairman for the seven years from 1954 to 1961. Just before that, he had for two years made invaluable contributions to the success of the first joint meeting of orthopaedic associations of the English-speaking world. Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the United States of America and many other countries in 1952, never hesitating to travel the four hundred miles from Edinburgh to London, week by week and month by month, to develop and promote the organisation that proved to be so successful. Immediately he turned to the corresponding endeavour of the combined Journal of all these countries with unfailing industry, enthusiasm, courtesy and kindness. Norman Roberts of Liverpool has written: “I have many happy recollections of the days when I served under his chairmanship. He presided with tact and good humour and not only kept the members of the Board in order, but also managed to control the ebullience of the editor”. Ebullient or not, the editor too has the happiest memories of sharing endeavour with a firm and strong man whose qualities he so appreciated and whose memory he so warmly cherishes.

Perhaps the most happy of all our memories is the hospitality of his home. No matter whether he met us on the overnight train from London at a very early hour, driving himself to an already prepared bath and breakfast, or whether we shared or heard of his prowess in tennis or golf with his wife Maisie, we always felt welcome. We will preserve these memories with Lady Mercer and her son David.

R. W.-J.

VISCOUNT MALVERN
1883-1971

The Viscount Malvern—whom many remember better as the former Godfrey Huggins, student at St Thomas’s Hospital, house physician, house surgeon and then medical superintendent of the Hospital for Sick Children, Great Ormond Street, and later Rhodesian surgeon and statesman—served in the war of 1914-18 as surgical specialist in England, France and Malta, and during that time wrote his book on *Amputation Stumps: Their Care and After-treatment*.

He was born in Kent and was educated at Malvern College. After gaining fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons of England he went to Rhodesia in 1911, pursuing general and, later, surgical practice. He was elected to the Southern Rhodesian Parliament in 1923, became Prime Minister in 1934, and then in 1953 Prime Minister of the Federation of the Rhodesias and Nyasaland until 1956. It is remarkable that this man continued in active surgical practice until the age of sixty-seven and nevertheless performed prime-ministerial duty continuously for no less than twenty-two years, a Commonwealth record. In this time he bestowed on the land of his adoption great benefits that sprang from his qualities of vision, realism, understanding and integrity. He became Knight in the Order of St Michael and St George (K.C.M.G.) in 1941, Companion of Honour (C.H.) in 1944, Privy Councillor in 1947 and Peer in 1955. He was recognised by honorary degrees in medicine and law from the Universities of Oxford, Rhodes, Witwatersrand and London.

His work on *Amputation Stumps* is dominated by the problems of sepsis, which are dealt with in great detail. He emphasised that amputation of an infected limb may not be the last and should be carried out as distally as possible, sparing especially skin and bone; that flush amputation is an extravagance; and that retraction of soft tissues should be controlled. He
recognised the importance of timing, especially in reamputation, which must be truly final, and which he considered should be delayed until oedema has disappeared. His book is outstanding and contains many oft-forgotten principles.

H. J. B.

The life of my close friend and surgical colleague Sir Godfrey Huggins, later Lord Malvern, was quite remarkable. For more than fifty years he continued surgical practice in Rhodesia with great orthopaedic contribution, at the same time moulding the development of that country exactly as Cecil Rhodes himself had planned. His aim was to achieve equal opportunity for everyone, coloured or non-coloured, English-speaking or native-speaking, with equal opportunity of education and university training for every member of the community, insisting that there should always be one vote for one man, but only when that one man through freely given education had achieved the ability to write his own name and shown sufficient responsibility to make slight savings.

With the problems that we now have in Rhodesia we should remember the great contribution made by Lord Malvern, whose ideals in promoting the advance of an underdeveloped country were superb. His contribution was not only medical and surgical, but also economic and social, in promoting the advance and intellectual development of millions of African-born friends who trusted him. He was indeed a great man.

R. W.-J.

REFERENCE