

Andrew Rae Gilchrist (1899–1995)

Andrew Rae Gilchrist's influence in cardiology is still felt to this day. For good reasons he has been described as 'a giant amongst giants'. Physically he was a big man, but it was his intellect and his clinical and teaching skills that put him in the first rank of physicians at a time when Edinburgh boasted some of the world's greatest. The other 'giants' who worked in Edinburgh's Royal Infirmary at the same time were Stanley Davidson, Derrick Dunlop, James Cameron and James Learmonth.

A son of the manse, Rae Gilchrist qualified in medicine in 1921 and afterwards held several valuable junior hospital posts. However, at that time, he showed little sign of interest in cardiology. His first post was at Addenbrooke's Hospital, Cambridge, followed by a year in paediatrics at the East London Hospital for Children. He then trained in neurology at Queens Square, London, and spent a year at the Rockefeller University Hospital, New York, before returning to Edinburgh.

As fate would have it, four senior Edinburgh physicians died of pneumococcal pneumonia at that time so, at the age of 31, Rae Gilchrist was appointed to fill one of the vacancies. Cardiology was then a new specialty. In Edinburgh its development can be traced through George Alexander Gibson (best remembered for the eponymous Gibson murmur of patent ductus arteriosus), William Ritchie (who described and researched atrial flutter) and Jonathan Meakins, a Canadian physician who became the Chair of Therapeutics in Edinburgh in 1919.

One of Meakins' junior staff was Rae Gilchrist who went on to research oxygen therapy in



Rae Gilchrist portrait by Henry Raeburn Dobson.

paroxysmal ventricular tachycardia, the treatment of complete heart block, digitalis and atrial fibrillation. Equally significant was Rae Gilchrist's interest in cardiac problems of pregnancy, which led to his establishing the Antenatal Cardiac Clinic in the Simpson Memorial Maternity Pavilion.

Rae Gilchrist became an expert in electrocardiography and reported the first seven cases of myocardial infarction in Edinburgh. In time he became an international authority on heart block.

Just as he had pioneered antenatal cardiac care so too did he develop a paediatric cardiology service, recruiting one of his colleagues, Bobby Marquis, to run the service.

In 1939 he persuaded Sir John Fraser, one of Edinburgh's most distinguished surgeons at that time, to ligate a persistent ductus, and in the following year cardiac surgery was introduced to the Royal Infirmary, events described by Rae Gilchrist when he gave the Gibson Lecture in the Royal College of Physicians in 1944.

Countless doctors worked with Rae Gilchrist, as students, juniors and fellow consultants, many going on to great fame and at least four becoming presidents of the RCPE. Ian Hill, Sheila Sherlock, Hamish Watson, Bruce Paton, James Lowe, John Tulloch, Bobby Marquis, Desmond Julian, Michael Oliver and John Richmond, to mention but a few, went on to teach and inspire others as they had been moulded by Rae Gilchrist.

Rae Gilchrist served as RCPE President from 1957 to 1960 and once commented that the College was 'really light relief' from the very heavy load of clinical work in hospital and private practice!

Rae Gilchrist was married twice, first to Emily Faulds and after her death to Elspeth Wightman, and had two children. He retired at the age of 66 after a major myocardial infarction. However, he recovered, for some time physically frailer, but intellectually as astute as ever.

Elected in 1929, Rae Gilchrist was the longest surviving fellow of the RCPE. In 1990 he was made Honorary Fellow. His life spanned almost the whole of the twentieth century. His influence will last even longer.

Derek Doyle

Further reading

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- Andrew Rae Gilchrist. *Munk's Roll*. Vol. X, p. 164. Available from: <http://munksroll.rcplondon.ac.uk/Biography/Details/1759>