

Dr RF Robertson (1920–1991)

Ronald (Ronnie) Foote Robertson was educated at Perth Academy where he was dux, and at the Edinburgh University medical school where he graduated in 1945 with honours and was awarded the Ettles Scholarship and the Leslie Gold Medal as the most distinguished student of his year.



FIGURE 1 Dr RF Robertson (RCPE).

He became clinical tutor in the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary, where he soon acquired an impressive reputation for his teaching and clinical skills. He was awarded the degree of MD with high commendation in 1953. In the 1950s competition for consultant posts was intense and Robertson spent just over ten years as clinical tutor/senior registrar. As Chairman of the SE Scotland Hospital junior staff group he worked tirelessly to improve service conditions and job security of trainees, for whom he was an eloquent and effective spokesman, an activity which may have harmed his own career prospects but which earned the gratitude of his peers.

His appointment as consultant physician to the Deaconess and Leith Hospitals saw his reputation as a sagacious clinician and as an inspiring teacher reach even greater heights. A combination of professional excellence and a warm genial personality made him universally popular, especially with patients who found in him a clinician who inspired total confidence.

He relished the social occasions at these small hospitals such as the Christmas Day festivities at the Deaconess where he featured prominently in the consultants' wheelchair race along the Pleasance and the augmented sixteensome reels in the hospital courtyard.

His appointment in 1976 as consultant physician to the Royal Infirmary was an indication of the esteem in which he was held by his colleagues as was the large number of doctors who consulted him for advice about their own health problems or those of their families.

Robertson became FRCPE in 1953 and he gave superb service to the College over the next 30 years. His presidency during 1976–79 saw an impressive enhancement of College prestige and influence under his dynamic leadership. His high professional standing was further recognised by appointment as Physician to the Queen in Scotland, his appointment as CBE in 1980 and his Presidency of the British Medical Association in 1983–84. He went on to become a very effective chairman of the Joint Committee

on Higher Medical Training (JCHMT) of the three British Royal Colleges of Physicians. Between 1977 and 1989 he received the Honorary Fellowship of seven Colleges and Academies of Medicine and many invitations to give prestigious lectures in the British Isles and overseas.

Robertson's own recreational interests were fishing and curling, both of which he pursued with enthusiasm and considerable proficiency. He greatly enjoyed the conviviality of medico-social life in Edinburgh and was a polished and highly entertaining after-dinner speaker. He cultivated a rather solemn and portentous style in recounting hilarious and somewhat irreverent anecdotes and reminiscences often featuring

famous Edinburgh medical personalities and usually including choice items from his huge repertoire of Scottish tales, jokes and comic verses. Robertson was a superb raconteur and a fervent connoisseur of literary humour with a special taste for O Henry, Dorothy Parker, Damon Runyon, PG Wodehouse and Saki but his favourite was the Canadian academic and humourist Stephen Leacock to whom he paid a special tribute in a sparkling discourse on the nature of humour which he gave as Chairman of the Aesculapian Club Dinner in March 1989. The oration entitled 'the Humours of Harvey' which he gave as the Harveian President in June 1986 was another tour-de-force in which wit and scholarship were delightfully combined.

Over the years Robertson's teaching was hugely appreciated by overseas-trained doctors attending courses in Edinburgh and as College Overseas Postgraduate Director he was able to place many of them in Scottish hospital training posts. His friendships with those doctors were renewed and strengthened when he met them during Presidential visits to medical schools in many different parts of the world. He was probably better known overseas than any other Edinburgh physician of his time and wherever he travelled he was cordially welcomed by Fellows who had experienced not only his teaching but also the warm hospitality of his home.

Ronnie's Presidential portrait, which hangs in the Royal College of Physicians, is a good likeness in which his wisdom, his humour and his kindness have been admirably captured. It is a fitting memorial to a great President, a caring compassionate doctor, a brilliant teacher and a good, kind, gentle man.

Iain MacLaren