

## Obituary

### J. M. MUNRO KERR

M.D., C.M., F.R.F.P.S., F.R.C.O.G., LL.D.

PROFESSOR J. M. MUNRO KERR, Professor Emeritus and formerly Regius Professor of Midwifery and Gynaecology at Glasgow University, died at Canterbury on 7th October, 1960, towards the close of his ninety-second year. His death marks the end of an epoch in obstetrics—an eventful era in which he played a leading part for over sixty years and in doing so established for himself an international reputation and a permanent place in obstetric history.

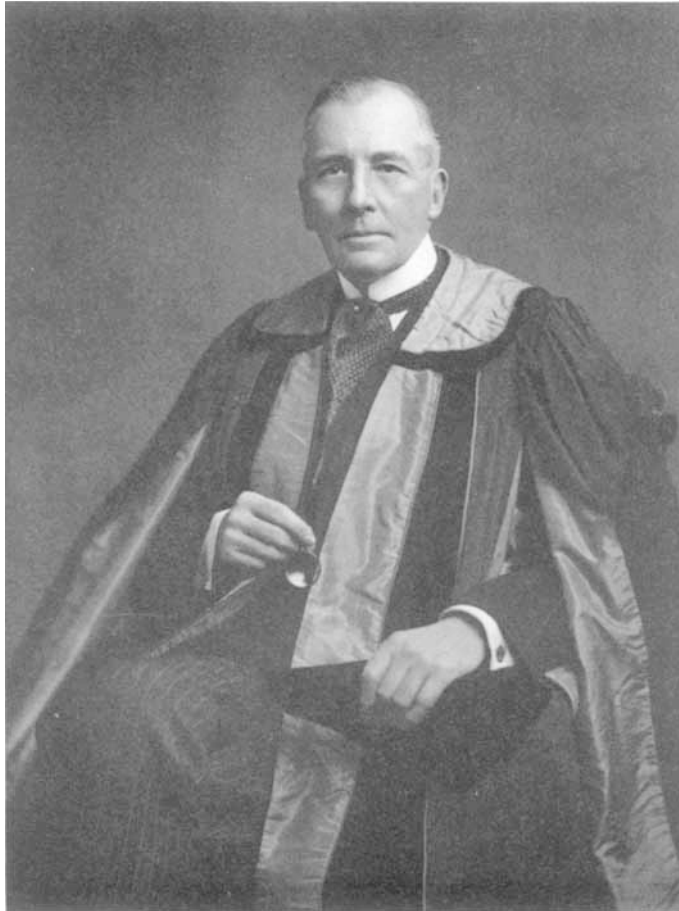
John Martin Munro Kerr was born in Glasgow on 5th December, 1868. His father was a ship-owner, and the same newspaper which intimated the birth of the baby announced on the advertisement page that three of the firm's vessels were loading at the docks in readiness for their departure—the fine Clipper Barque "Tuisco", 360 tons, to the Barbados; the Beautiful Clipper Schooner "Menthorn", 219 tons, to Bahia; and the Handsome Clipper Barque "Mary Ada", 328 tons, to St. Vincent and Granada—details which convey more clearly than mere dates the significance of ninety-two years.

He was educated at Glasgow Academy and Glasgow University where he graduated M.B., C.M. in 1890. Thereafter he spent two years in a variety of resident hospital appointments in this country, and in later years he was vastly amused when it was pointed out to him that the only record of his doings during this period is an entry in the Residents' Journal of the Western Infirmary to the effect that he was famous in the mess for his rendering of the song, "How can you treat a poor maiden so?"

The next two or three years were occupied by an intensive study of obstetrics and gynaecology abroad—particularly in Berlin, Jena and Dublin. While in Dublin he developed for the Rotunda Hospital an affection which he retained for the rest of his life. He repeatedly spoke of it with admiration, and year by year he studied its Annual Report with the greatest interest.

In 1894 he returned to Glasgow and became Assistant to Professor Murdoch Cameron who at that time was Regius Professor at the University, a senior surgeon at the Royal Maternity Hospital, and senior gynaecologist at the Western Infirmary. In 1896 Munro Kerr was officially appointed to the Staff of the Maternity Hospital, and in 1900 he was elevated to the status of Visiting Surgeon. This was extremely rapid advancement, and indeed it entailed his promotion over the heads of several people who were senior to him. But time has justified the apparent injustice, and in speaking of this incident Munro Kerr always stressed the fact that this early appointment gave him his great opportunity when he was young enough in mind and body to use it to much greater advantage than he could have done had it come ten years later.

Having acted as Assistant to Murdoch Cameron in the gynaecological wards at the Western Infirmary for several years he was appointed Chief of the second gynaecological unit in that hospital in 1907. Three years later he became the Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at the Andersonian College of Medicine, one of the extra-mural schools which



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no longer exist but which were important institutions in their day.

Then in 1911 he became the first occupant of the newly-established Muirhead Chair of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, a University appointment which carries with it the charge of a Unit in the Royal Maternity Hospital, and a Gynaecological Unit in the Royal Infirmary, Glasgow's oldest hospital and the one in which Lister did his classic work. Later, in 1927, he succeeded Murdoch Cameron as Regius Professor at the University, which appointment he held until he retired in 1934 at the age of sixty-five.

Such were the main steps in his academic career. But he had many other interests. All through his life he showed tireless enthusiasm for every form of medical activity. He was a Foundation Fellow of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, its first Vice-president (1929-1932), a Member of Council from 1929-1935, and a Trustee from 1929-1947.

In 1895 he became a Fellow of the Royal Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow, and in 1933 he was elected its President. He was a Fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine, Vice-president on several occasions, and President of the Section of Obstetrics and Gynaecology for the years 1941 and 1942. In addition he was a Fellow (and later an Honorary Fellow) of the Edinburgh Obstetrical Society; and in turn a Fellow, President, and Honorary Fellow of the Glasgow Obstetrical and Gynaecological Society. In 1922 and 1932 he was Vice-president, and in 1934 President, of the Section of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at the Annual Meeting of the British Medical Association.

Inevitably, he was called upon at one time or another to act as External Examiner to the Universities of St. Andrews, Edinburgh, Liverpool, London, and Manchester. His advice was also sought on many occasions by various departments, administrative bodies, hospital committees and the like; and for a number of years he was a member of the Board of Governors of the Royal Samaritan Hospital, Glasgow.

Even the statement that he retired in 1934 requires modification, for during the second world war he did his bit by acting as Medical

Superintendent of the Kent and Canterbury Hospital.

More than once I have heard Munro Kerr say that although he earned his living chiefly from his gynaecological practice, midwifery was his first love. Certainly it is as an obstetrician that he will be remembered. Perhaps this would have been so in any circumstances, but it is highly probable that the conditions prevailing in Glasgow when he entered the speciality played a large part in focusing his attention on obstetric problems. In these days, as a result of nearly a century of overcrowding, slumdom, poverty and malnutrition, rickets was prevalent throughout the city, and as there was no other maternity hospital in the town, all the worst cases had to be dealt with in the Royal Maternity Hospital. Just how common and severe pelvic contraction was at that period can be judged from the fact that during the twenty years 1889 to 1908, one in every thirty deliveries in the Hospital had to be effected by craniotomy on account of disproportion. At the same time, of course, the Hospital received all kinds of other obstetrical complications from Glasgow and the surrounding counties.

It was in this hard school of concentrated abnormalities that Munro Kerr acquired his enormous clinical experience, and on that experience he based his textbook of *Operative Midwifery*, first published under that title in 1908. He submitted it as the thesis for the Doctorate of Medicine at the University and it gained him the degree "with high commendation". In a wider field it earned him fame throughout the world.

His second masterpiece *Maternal Mortality and Morbidity* was published in 1933 when he was nearing the end of his active professional career. With the accumulated wisdom and judgment of a lifetime he reviewed the whole subject, directed attention to the "avoidable causes" and the means of eliminating them, and put forward a workable plan for a national maternity service. The mere compilation of the facts represents a staggering amount of work. Its value was immense, and was suitably recognized by the British Medical Association which awarded it the Katherine Bishop Harman Prize in 1934.

His third great achievement was his successful advocacy of the Lower Segment Caesarean Section; he was the first in Britain to appreciate the superiority of the new technique and to urge its adoption. It is only just—and Munro Kerr would have insisted—that the name of his friend and collaborator, Eardley Holland, should be linked with his in this connexion.

Apart from these outstanding contributions he published a large number of papers on a wide range of subjects—so many in fact that I have known him to be taken completely by surprise on hearing a speaker quote from one of his articles that he could not remember having written.

He was highly successful in another matter which is apt to be overlooked, viz. he stimulated experts in other branches of medicine to apply their specialized skill and knowledge to obstetrical and gynaecological problems. It was at his instigation that Professor Teacher took up the study of chorionepithelioma, became consultant pathologist to the Maternity Hospital, and eventually wrote a textbook on obstetrical and gynaecological pathology. Similarly he induced Professor Noël Paton to investigate the physiology of pregnancy and to publish his results in a volume entitled *The Physiology of the Continuity of Life*. Unfortunately he failed to persuade one of the pioneer radiologists in Glasgow to undertake X-ray pelvimetry—at least it seemed unfortunate at the time, but perhaps in the long run it is just as well, for the apparatus then available could not possibly have given good results and failure at that stage might have prejudiced and delayed future developments.

In one capacity or another Munro Kerr was a teacher for approximately forty years, and for over twenty of them he was a Professor. So far as broad general principles are concerned he organized his department well, but it must be confessed that in matters of detail he was apt to bungle. As a rule, however, he wisely left these things to his assistants. Perhaps it is because they supplemented each other so well in this respect that he and James Hendry made such a splendid team.

He was an excellent teacher of postgraduates, but his lectures to undergraduates were more

inspiring than instructive. It may be that this was intentional—at any rate it is certain that he did not like to see students slavishly writing down every word he said. With the object of discouraging this practice he published a paper-backed book of “Lecture Notes” containing only headings, important terms or phrases, brief notes and comments. These were printed on alternate pages leaving the opposite page blank so that the student could jot down such additional information as he chose. Rather surprisingly the scheme did not work well in practice (and was soon abandoned) largely because Munro Kerr found it irksome to approach each subject in the same way and to follow the same sequence term after term.

Again with a view to helping the student he produced in collaboration with some of his colleagues in Edinburgh and Glasgow a *Combined Textbook of Obstetrics and Gynaecology*. This book has passed through several editions and is at present edited by his former assistant Dugald Baird.

It was, however, as a clinical teacher in the wards, labour room and theatre that Munro Kerr excelled. He loved to demonstrate and discuss cases, and I remember how a smile would break over his face and his whole expression light up when in the presence of a class of students his examination of a patient revealed something of interest. On such occasions he forgot the clock—nurses would go off in relays for meals and come back again—while all unconscious of the hour Munro Kerr discussed, described, questioned, quoted other authorities, recalled similar cases and, without knowing it, put the whole audience under his spell.

To a lesser extent, something of the sort used to happen in the discussions following a paper at a medical society, or when in the course of one of his own communications he pushed aside his manuscript and spoke, as Novak said of himself, “out of the fulness of his heart”. In these circumstances his manner became completely informal, sometimes a little dramatic, but always fascinating.

It should be noted in passing that he was also a good listener—and I was always impressed by the close attention he paid to the most

amateurish paper by the veriest beginner and by the encouraging comments he made at its conclusion.

Many people to whom he is known only by name must have wondered what manner of man Munro Kerr was as an individual, and no doubt some have tried to picture him from the portrait which hangs in the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. This was painted by Simon Elwes in 1953 and is almost a photographic likeness of Munro Kerr as he was then (apart from the hands, which are all wrong). The studio photograph here reproduced gives a truer impression of my old Chief as I like to remember him, taken as it was when he was in his prime.

He was tall, slim, and erect; graceful in carriage and in his movements; perfectly dressed and well groomed always, tending sometimes to a degree of foppishness particularly when he sported a monocle, as he often did. His features were handsome; his expression alert, confident and eager. Even when standing still he gave the impression of pent-up energy. He had charming manners, and conversed easily on all subjects, his speech altering from an impassioned flow to a lazy drawl according to the topic in question. His natural courtesy belonged to a former age, and indeed when addressing ladies he often adopted what would be regarded at the present day as exaggerated gallantry. He enjoyed good food and choice wine; was an excellent host and a delightful guest. His views were catholic, he was free from bigotry—a citizen of the world and at home anywhere. Without condescension he would talk to a junior as to an equal, and I shall never forget how one morning when I was a very new house-surgeon he invited me to tell him exactly what I thought about a particular patient. "Tell me freely what is in your mind, for some of your ideas are better than mine, just as some of mine are better than yours."

Another likeable characteristic was his readiness to acknowledge that even a junior assistant might know more about some particular problem than he himself did. Similarly he was always willing to admit a mistake. For instance on one occasion, seeing me make an unusually high incision he called out, "What's wrong with

the patient's gall-bladder?"—to the great delight of the students who burst into roars of laughter. But a few minutes later when it became evident that the incision was not in the least too high, in the very special circumstances, he turned to the class, "Gentlemen, the laugh is on me. I was wrong. Dr. Hewitt was right. Remember this lesson in surgery as long as you live."

One of his great assets was a retentive memory, an example of which is available to everybody in the opening paragraph of his William Meredith Fletcher Shaw Memorial Lecture. "In a low-ceilinged lumber room on the top flat of the Old Glasgow Maternity Hospital—cleared of bedsteads and hospital junk and improvised as an operating theatre—I was introduced to the problem of contracted pelvis and witnessed my first Caesarean Section. This was in 1889, while I was a senior undergraduate. The patient was a rachitic dwarf with all the characteristic features . . . She shuffled into the simple operating theatre crowded to capacity by doctors—for word had gone round that Murdoch Cameron was going to perform a Caesarean section." Across the gulf of sixty years he recalls the scene as clearly as if the event had happened the week before. Few papers in medical literature can have such a striking beginning, enhanced as it is by language of almost biblical simplicity.

His recreations included reading, travel, sailing and golf. With his command of French and German he was one of the best read medical men of his day. He was a keen golfer, and when President of one of the golf clubs in Glasgow he presented a trophy for annual competition. Much to his delight the recently deceased R. A. Lennie, one of his successors in the Regius Chair, won this prize some years ago. For his own part Munro Kerr was not so accomplished, but he used to say that "There are two things I can always lay to my credit—I have never hurried a woman in labour, and I have always played as much golf as I could."

He had, of course, the pleasure of his family life. He married in 1899 a daughter of August Johanson of Gothenburgh. His wife died in 1957 but he is survived by his son and three daughters.

It is pleasing to record that his faculties,

mental alertness and capacity for enjoyment remained virtually unimpaired to the end. In reply to a note of congratulation on his ninetieth birthday he sent me, almost by return, a four-page closely-written letter full of news including his appreciation of "My Fair Lady"—and all written in script which was more or less copper-plate.

He was never awarded any official title or decoration, but in addition to the professional honours already mentioned he received the Honorary Degree of LL.D. of Glasgow University, the Honorary Fellowship of the

American Gynaecological Society, and of the Royal Academy of Medicine of Ireland. One distinction which he particularly appreciated was his unanimous nomination as first recipient of the Blair Bell Medal by the Royal Society of Medicine. Similarly the Glasgow Obstetrical and Gynaecological Society invited him to be the first William Hunter Memorial Lecturer—an invitation which he accepted although he was then in his eighty-eighth year.

It will be a long time before we see his like again.

JOHN HEWITT