

Professor Ronald Haxton Girdwood
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Ronald Haxton Girdwood, who died on 25 April 2006 in his 90th year, achieved much during his career in Academic Medicine. A graduate of Edinburgh University Medical School in 1939, he was Professor of Therapeutics at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh (1962–82), Dean of the Faculty of Medicine (1975–79), and President of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh (1982–85). An unassuming, modest and gentle man, he nonetheless had a dogged determination to succeed. In his autobiography, *Travels with a Stethoscope* (1991), he describes the moment, standing alone in the doorway of the Chemistry Department, when it occurred to him to attempt to graduate with Honours.

He was born on 19th March 1917 in Arbroath, the only child of Thomas Girdwood, a pharmacist, and Elizabeth Haxton. The family moved to Edinburgh and Girdwood was educated at Daniel Stewart's College. Despite frequent illness, his academic performance gained him entry to medical school in 1934. His father had died during the previous year and the family finances at once became strained. The award of a Carnegie Scholarship of £50 per year enabled him to complete the medical course. Carnegie could not have wished his wealth better invested. He had a glittering undergraduate career and was awarded an Honours degree and the William Leslie Gold Medal, and was named Ettles Scholar as the most distinguished graduate of his year. His first apprenticeship was with Professor (later Sir) Stanley Davidson in the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh, but his civilian career was then interrupted by World War II

His medical military service was distinguished and mainly in India. He enjoyed his service in India, for he met Mary Williams from Cornwall, a Sister in the Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service, whom he married in 1945, and he was able to undertake research into the epidemics of anaemia, sore tongue, weight loss and diarrhoea affecting the British and Indian troops and civilian Indians. This was tropical sprue and he demonstrated the megaloblastic anaemia ultimately found to be due to folate deficiency.

His interest in the megaloblastic anaemias was pursued on his return to Edinburgh and during a Rockefeller Research Fellowship at Ann Arbor and a visiting lectureship at Yale in the USA. Although he never emphasised his contribution to medical science, he was held in the highest regard by haematologists and he lectured in the most distinguished company. His academic excellence is reflected in his M.D., for which he was awarded a Gold Medal in 1954, the award of the Cullen Prize by the College in 1970, and his admission to the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1978. He published extensively and contributed to many books, including Davidson's *Principles and Practice of Medicine*, the first medical textbook to sell more than a million copies.

Girdwood succeeded Sir Derrick Dunlop as Professor of Therapeutics and, not surprisingly, his research was displaced by administrative duties in which he delighted at the same time as complaining of the number of committees on which he had to serve! He travelled extensively and delighted in relating the many near misses and disasters this occasioned. His staff anticipated hearing about these after every trip, and they were never disappointed. His most memorable must have been the knock at the door by an Indian servant on his wedding night to be told that there had been a murder in the adjoining room!

Ronald Girdwood was one of the last of a generation of doctors who could be caring clinicians, teachers teaching by example, and investigators able to translate clinical problems to the laboratory and make discoveries that were immediately of practical diagnostic or therapeutic

importance. Moreover, his caring extended beyond his patients to his staff. Staff members will remember flowers arriving at the maternity hospital when a new family member was born.

Girdwood took a lifelong interest in the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh (RCPE) and became its President in 1982. His Presidency saw the building of the Queen Mother Conference Centre at the College and the establishment of the "Chronicle", forerunner of the modern Journal of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh. In 1986 he was appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) for services to medicine.

In retirement he continued for some time as Chairman of the Scottish National Blood Transfusion Association. He never lost his interest in the College, and he found time to write his autobiography. His colleagues are grateful for his many contributions to Edinburgh medicine.

Ronald Girdwood is survived by his wife Mary, son Richard, a lawyer, daughter Diana, a doctor, and 5 grandchildren.

Contributed by A Toft and N Finlayson

Professor Ronald Haxton Girdwood. Born 19 March 1917. Elected FRSE 1978. Died 25 April 2006.