

## SIR ALASTAIR ROBERT CURRIE

BSc, MB, ChB(Glas), Dr hc(Edin), HonLLD(Glas), HonDSc(Aberd, Birm), FRCP, FRCPE, FRCPG, FRCSE, FRCPath

Alastair Currie was born on the Island of Islay on the 8th October 1921 and died on the 12th of January 1994.

He greatly appreciated his education at Port Ellen School and Bowmore High School in Islay and later at the High School in Glasgow. He was a student of the University of Glasgow, graduating with the degrees of BSc, MB, ChB in 1944. After House Officer appointments he was selected for specialist training in Pathology at the University Department of Pathology, Glasgow Royal Infirmary, where, apart from a period of national service with the Royal Army Medical Corps, mainly in Austria, he remained as lecturer and senior lecturer until 1959.

He enjoyed his connection with the services and subsequently joined the Territorial Army later becoming Lt Col in command of a field ambulance.

In Glasgow Alastair Currie was heavily involved in both undergraduate and postgraduate teaching. Generations of students and specialist trainees in pathology and various clinical disciplines remember his clarity and wit with affection. In collaboration with Dr (later Professor Sir) Thomas Symington he studied the functional interactions between the adenohypophysis and the adrenal cortex in human disease to become recognised as an authority on anterior pituitary physiology and pathology. He showed a strong ability to adopt novel technologies as they became available (he was one of the first in the UK to use fluorescent antibody techniques) and to apply the most appropriate methods for solving current problems. This was quite remarkable in a pathologist when the tradition of light microscopy of a formalin-fixed tissue was all pervading.

It was at this stage of his career that he wrote the first definitive account of the pathology of the lesions of familial multiple primary spontaneously-healing squamous carcinoma with Dr J Ferguson Smith, who had recognised this condition in a number of Glasgow pedigrees. He showed great insight in appreciating that regression of malignant neoplasms involved some form of cell 'drop-out', this many years before his later work on apoptosis.

In 1959, Alastair Currie was invited to head the Division of Pathology at the Imperial Cancer Research Fund Laboratories in Lincoln's Inn Fields. During his short sojourn in England he developed models for endocrine dependent and spontaneously regressing neoplasms that proved invaluable in his later career. He also showed a strong aptitude for strategic planning of research and its laboratory infrastructure, characteristics of his later career. However, he sorely missed the contact with young people gained from undergraduate teaching.

In 1962 Alastair Currie was appointed Regius Professor of Pathology at the University of Aberdeen. He immediately set about transforming that Department by recruitment of active younger pathologists and scientists with a strong interest in research, re-equipping the laboratories so that the innovative research methods then being developed in the field of pure biomedical science could speedily be applied to problems in human medicine. During this time he showed an enviable ability to recruit promising young graduates onto his staff, fostering their abilities by insisting on strict and constructive supervision of their early training in methodology and in the principles of scientific investigation. He was active in the re-organisation of the undergraduate curriculum and emphasised the importance of pathology as a 'bridge' between basic biomedical science and clinical medicine. Ahead of his time he introduced televised clinical pathological conferences to which he contributed with panache, always emphasising the central position of the scientific method in the diagnosis and management of patients. He recognised the value of the intercalated degree, encouraging his more able students to become acquainted with the excitement of medical research. The Aberdeen BMedBioI in Pathology justly became a popular option, and many of his honours students later made important contributions to academic medicine throughout the UK.

Alastair Currie took an active and imaginative interest in all of the topics of research being investigated by all the members of the academic staff in his department in Aberdeen, but his personal interest remained firmly in the field of cancer research. It was his work on the endocrine responsiveness in experimentally-induced mammary tumours which further prepared his mind for the importance of the observation made by Dr (later Professor) John Kerr, a visiting pathologist from Brisbane, of a very high incidence of 'pyknotic nuclei' in rodent ulcers (a human neoplasm that grows slowly despite having a high mitotic rate) and in cancers regressing after radiotherapy. This work, which was developed in close co-operation with Dr (later Professor) Andrew Wyllie, evolved the hypothesis that the nuclear fragments were a manifestation of programmed cell 'drop-out'. Following consultation with Professor James Cormack (Humanities Aberdeen), they named this process 'apoptosis'.

During his period in Aberdeen, Alastair Currie became involved increasingly in the administration and strategic planning of medical research, and the provision of medical services within the National Health Service. He was a member of the Medical Research Council, the Zuckermann Committee and Chairman of the Standing Advisory Committee on Laboratory Services for SHHD, and also served as a member of Council of the Royal College of Pathologists.

In 1972 he was invited to the Chair of Pathology in the University of Edinburgh, where he remained until his retirement in 1986. This was his most fruitful period. Characteristically he re-organised and re-vitalised the department, recruiting a number of academic staff talented in teaching, diagnosis and research. To each he provided the support necessary for their career development. The Department in Edinburgh became an international centre of excellence, and a model for others to follow in the UK and abroad.

Despite the indifference of the scientific community to appreciate the importance of apoptosis, he wisely continued to support Andrew Wyllie in his further investigation of the pathogenesis of this phenomenon. It is now clear that apoptosis, together with cell proliferation, are co-determinants of the size of the cell population and so control the growth and regression of a neoplasm, processes central to embryonic development. With the hunt for the controlling gene, apoptosis as a critical biological phenomenon has now gained international acceptance.

While in Edinburgh Alastair Currie was actively sought for his administrative skills and scientific judgement. During a second term on the Medical Research Council he was an outstanding chairman of the Cell Biology and Disorders Board and of the Joint MRC/CRC Committee for the Cancer Research Institute. He became increasingly involved in the work of the Cancer Research Campaign, serving on its Council and chairing its Scientific Committee. He was also chairman of the UK Co-ordinating Committee on Cancer Research.

Abroad his scientific judgement was recognised through his appointment to the Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research and the Awards Assembly of the General Motors Cancer Research Foundation when he was chairman of its Charles F Kettering Selection Committee. At home he served on many national bodies, including membership of the Chief Scientist Committee of SHHD (chairman of its Biomedical Research Committee), chairman of the Board of Governors of the Beatson and Paterson Institutes for Cancer Research, and member of the Board of Governors of the Inveresk Research Foundation. His academic excellence was

recognised world-wide by visiting professorships; and at home by the award of honorary degrees from the Universities of Birmingham, Aberdeen, Glasgow and Edinburgh, the latter an exceptional honour for a member of its academic staff. He was created Knight Bachelor in 1979.

After his formal retirement from the Chair in Edinburgh, he continued his association with the Cancer Research Campaign as chairman of its Executive Committee, Honorary Treasurer and finally Vice-President. He was active in his support of and became personally involved with volunteer fund-raisers of the campaign throughout the UK, who highly appreciated his interest and enthusiasm.

Alastair Currie had always been a strong supporter of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. He was elected a Fellow in 1964 and was a member of Council (1980-83). With freedom of time from professional commitments after retirement, he devoted more attention to the affairs of the Society and held the offices of Vice-President (1978-90) and President (1991-93), being the first medical clinician to become President this century.

As Vice-President he was enthusiastic in strengthening the commitment of the Royal Society of Edinburgh to Arts and Letters so that the Society would become more widely representative of all aspects of the academic life of Scotland. As one of those who established the Caledonian Research Foundation from the assets of the Inveresk Research Foundation and as its Deputy Governor, he forged links with the Society enabling it to support biomedical research as an academic strength of our nation.

During his short tenure as President, Alastair Currie made three important contributions to the Society. He strengthened its relationships with the Scottish Office, while maintaining the Society's independence to comment and advise on matters of national importance. He also recognised that it was timeous to review the position of the Society in a rapidly changing world, and his Report *Looking Forward to the Next Decade* became the basis for its planned development. This eventually led to the decision of Council to purchase the adjoining building at 26 George Street to allow for expanded activities. His third contribution to the Society was his enthusiastic support for expansion of its activities in encouraging the interest of young people in science and technology, through applying the Dr James F Heggie Fund to meet the cost of Primary School Mathematics Masterclasses and raising private sponsorship for the delivery of lectures outside the traditional academic centres in Scotland. His final public role as President was to chair the Fellows' Triennial Dinner in the Bute Hall of the University of Glasgow, the first time that it had been held outside Edinburgh.

It is a matter of great regret that his Presidency was curtailed by his terminal illness: but he will long be remembered by Fellows with gratitude for his dedication, fortitude and vision.

The qualities which made Alastair Currie pre-eminent as a proponent of biomedical science in Scotland were complete integrity and honesty of purpose in striving for the highest standards. His loyalty to his staff was absolute, providing them with the facilities required for their work. But he recognised that outstanding people wish first to achieve their own ambitions, and as a result earned their complete loyalty in return. Equally he was aware that people are not all the same, and do not change. His honours classes in Aberdeen and Edinburgh were his particular joy as they allowed him to imprint his own high standards on those who were to follow.

His strong trust in others made him a master of delegation, his acute memory recalling precisely what he had asked them to do, and when he expected that this would be done. This spared him the need to consider unnecessary detail, reserving his own contributions to matters with which he could best deal, but he never failed to bring his own mind to bear on a problem, no matter how tedious, should the need arise. He had great wisdom, never making 'snap' judgements but first listening carefully to what others had to say, advising them to 'sleep on it' rather than come to an inappropriate decision. But once that decision had been reached he persevered without rest until it had been implemented, an attribute which brought him great respect from those administering a service. His skills as a chairman were widely acknowledged - those shown as a chairman of the Scientific Advisory Committee of the Cancer Research Campaign, then a mix of some 40 scientists and clinicians, were quite remarkable.

Alastair Currie will be remembered by colleagues and friends as a kindly, thoughtful and considerate man. He was intensely sensitive to the feelings of others, generous in time to listen to their problems, and in giving encouragement and considered advice. He had a ready wit, a mischievous sense of humour and an infectious laugh. He had a truly remarkable memory for names, faces and details of one's professional and family life, and was able to communicate with ease with people from all classes of society. He bore his honours with dignity, but without pomp.

Although, in his early days, Alastair Currie was a competent golfer and could cast a good fly, his busy life ahead afforded little opportunity to develop these natural abilities. But in his later years he greatly enjoyed his cottage on Loch Fyne, his boat, his books and the magic of the West of Scotland.

A man of such outstanding ability requires support and this he received in full measure from his wife Jeanne, his five children, his brother and sisters and latterly his many grandchildren - all of whom he was immensely proud. They were devastated when their younger daughter died tragically in Australia, but the support of their family and his strong faith as an elder of Greyfriars Tolbooth and Highland Kirk sustained them. It was both of these, and his trust in youth, which allowed him to meet with great dignity his own final challenge from a disease to the understanding of which he had contributed so much.

We mourn his passing, but are grateful for having had the privilege of being accepted as two of his closest friends.

J SWANSON BECK  
A PATRICK FORREST