

THOMAS GIBSON
FRCSE, HonFRACS, HonFRCS

Tom Gibson, Emeritus Professor at the University of Strathclyde, pioneer of plastic surgery and bioengineering, died on Saturday 13th February 1993 in the Western Infirmary, Glasgow after a short illness. He was 77.

He was born in Kilbarchan, Scotland, on 24th November, 1915. Following his schooling in Kilbarchan and Paisley Grammar Schools, he received his medical degree with commendation from Glasgow University in 1938 and became a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh in 1941. From 1942 to 1944 he was assistant surgeon in the Medical Research Council's Burns Unit in Glasgow Royal Infirmary. In 1944, he joined the Royal Army Medical Corps as a maxillofacial surgeon; served first in North Europe and lastly as Commanding Officer of No 1 Indian Maxillofacial Unit. After his demobilisation as a Major in 1947, he was appointed Consultant Plastic Surgeon to the West of Scotland Plastic and Oral Surgery Service, based at Glasgow Royal Infirmary. He was Director of the Service based at Canniesburn Hospital, Glasgow from 1970 until his retirement in 1980.

In the early 1960s Tom became co-founder with the undersigned of the Bioengineering Unit at the University of Strathclyde - a department oriented to apply the principles and techniques of engineering to surgery and medicine. The Unit under his inspired guidance grew into the international centre of excellence that it is today. He was appointed Visiting Professor to the Strathclyde Unit in 1970 and the University conferred on him an honorary DSc in 1972.

For some years Tom was a member of the Council of the British Association of Plastic Surgeons, became their President in 1970 and was Editor of their official organ, the *British Journal of Plastic Surgery* from 1969 to 1979. He became a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow in 1955, was their Honorary Librarian and Council member from 1964 to 1974 and became their President from 1976 to 1978.

He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1976, an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons in 1977 and an Honorary Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of England in 1987. In the same year he also added to his many medals and honorary lectureships the coveted Lister Medal, which is awarded by the three Royal Colleges of Surgeons in the United Kingdom.

Tom was extraordinarily gifted in possessing a quality of imagination that allowed him to see connections between apparently unrelated facts and discover order and reason in what to individuals less gifted than he appeared only as disorder and chaos. This capability he demonstrated in early 1942 when in the Burns Unit of Glasgow Royal Infirmary he was the first person to recognise that the rejection of homografts was an antigen-antibody reaction. Upon learning of Gibson's pioneering insight, Peter Medawar, then at Oxford, came to Glasgow specifically to work with him. Their collaboration led to the classic paper 'The fate of skin, homografts in man' (Gibson, T and Medawar, PB, *J Anat London*, 77 : 299, 1943). This paper is quoted in Morton's medical Bibliography with the annotation: "Gibson and Medawar placed the laws of transplantation on a firm scientific basis. A later paper by Medawar, *J Anat (Lond)* 1944 78 76-99 demonstrated that the mechanism of rejection of transplanted tissues is immunological in character".

In 1960 when Medawar received the Nobel Prize for his continued work on the rejection phenomenon, he wrote to Gibson: ". . . and I do want you to know how clearly I understand my deep obligation to you for giving me my first insight into the real problem we were facing and my first understanding of the nature of clinical research".

This collaboration with Medawar was perhaps the first example of Tom's uncanny knack of bringing the best out of people. As Tom's scientific and clinical patient work developed increasing numbers came from world-wide to work with him and to be trained by him. All of them benefited greatly from his creative individuality, the warmth of his personality and his simple humanity.

His many scholarly publications include papers on tissue immunology, burns, lymphoedema, oncology, cleft palate, maxillofacial surgery, the biomechanics of skin and cartilage and many aspects of the history of plastic surgery.

In addition to his serious writings his keen wit also showed in his lighthearted versification. All who came within his sights were fair targets for his good humoured 'leg pulls' in verse. At an international Bioengineering meeting in 1964, Tom gave the after dinner toast in the form of a poem called Engineers. The poem consists of eight stanzas in which he kindly but firmly put engineers in their place. One of the stanzas looks at the increasing range of activity of engineering:

They're infiltrating every sphere
Except perhaps theology
And now we find the engineer
Researching in biology.
There on the operation floor
If you should stop and peer
With surgeons ankle deep in gore
You'll see - an engineer

Before quoting the second stanza, one should explain that there was always good natured banter between medics and engineers in which the engineers used to claim that were they to be given a free hand they could design and build a human being superior to the current model.

This was Tom's response:

The human body's structures are
Infinitely complicate,
And yet you know they're still by far
The simplest to create.
Let love and birth, the soul, the mind
Stay free from racketeers
God grant that never human kind
Are built by engineers!

At the centre of Tom Gibson's existence was his family: his wife Pat, his two sons and two daughters, their spouses and his eleven grandchildren. Alongside them, his colleagues, patients and friends remember Tom with respect, pleasure and affection as the gentle and kindly person that he was.

He is greatly missed.

I am grateful for Professor B Herold Griffith's help in preparing the above.

R M KENEDI