Robert McWhirter was distinguished for development of modern radiotherapy and treatment of cancer in Scotland, for advances in treatment of breast cancer, and for founding and building up the Department of Radiotherapy in the Western General Hospital, Edinburgh. He was much supported by a loving family, headed by his wife from 1937, Dr Susan MacMurray, their only son Bill and their daughter-in-law and three grandchildren. He was born in Ballantrae, Ayrshire, where his father was the local school master who taught Latin and Greek to his ‘high flyers’ and shorthand and typing to the others. His father ‘held his pupils spellbound’ when talking about Biology, and this passed to his son, who from childhood was interested in the wonders of nature and in checking facts. In 1917 he moved on to Girvan Academy, where there were equally inspiring teachers – five years later he qualified for entrance to Glasgow University. McWhirter became even more interested in Medicine and graduated in 1927 with High Commendation. He had continued to question his teachers. He had been told that congenital pyloric stenosis was commoner in first born children ‘for unknown reasons’. He soon discovered that this applied also to almost all problems of infancy; the simple reason was of course that first born children are always commoner than second!

He had difficulty in clinical examination of the chest and his elder brother enlightened him to the value of chest X-ray films, and thence of radiology. He worked as an assistant in general practice in Prestwick in Ayrshire for four years. He persuaded the practice to install an X-ray unit in their local nursing home and soon became known for his acumen. He made his name from having the temerity to diagnose from its X-ray appearances a cancer in the lung, at that time rare or unknown, and then a ruptured aneurism of the Circle of Willis, to be confirmed by Professor Norman Dott in Edinburgh, and other cases.

By now he had begun to think seriously about studying both radiology and cancer. The two required basic knowledge of anatomy and of pathology. Surgery was then virtually the only treatment available for cancer and therefore he went to Edinburgh for postgraduate studies to obtain the Fellowship Diploma of the Royal College of Surgeons. He next went to Cambridge in 1932 to study for their Diploma of Medical Radiology and Electrology, which was to remain the only Radiology qualification for some time yet. He was taught by another pioneer, Dr A E Barclay, who soon came to know and respect his inquisitive Scottish student. He also listened to Lord Rutherford at the Cavendish Laboratory, a great source of inspiration.

Clinical studies followed for another six months under Norman Finzi and Walter Levitt at St Bartholomew’s Hospital in London. After this he proceeded to the Mayo Clinic in the USA, at Barclay’s suggestion, and found ‘standards there far beyond his experience in Britain’. Ralph Paterson heard of him and invited McWhirter to become a Research Fellow in Manchester, to investigate the bases of radiotherapy. After publishing his important findings he returned to assist Finzi in London. He learnt at this time from Geoffrey Keynes that advanced cases of breast cancer could be well treated by radium implants, and that Keynes had given up radical mastectomy, even though this led to his ostracism by his surgical colleagues.

In 1935 the Edinburgh Medical Faculty decided that they needed better radiology and invited the renowned Barclay to come there. He accepted on condition that he could bring McWhirter to help, only to find after a few months that he would prefer to go back to his research and teaching in Cambridge, his alma mater. Robert McWhirter had already so impressed the Edinburgh staff that they thereupon invited him to take charge of radiology in Edinburgh instead. He at once set about bringing radiology and radiotherapy up to date. The apparatus was antique and dangerous, radiotherapy was described by him as having risks of whole body irradiation and even of electrocution. His predecessor had made it a rule that X-ray reports should not give a diagnosis; he reversed this. His diagnostic and clinical prowess persuaded the surgeons to accept his guidance and to ask him to perform all the radium implants, after he had refused to perform one on a case of alleged lip cancer; McWhirter thought it was a furuncle and biopsy proved him correct.

In 1941 the Edinburgh Royal College of Surgeons awarded their Liston Victoria Jubilee Prize to him jointly with Sir James Learmont. His work at the Royal Infirmary prospered and he delivered a memorable Honyman Gillespie Lecture on ‘Progress in Treatment of Malignant Disease’ in 1941 and another on breast cancer in 1943; he was elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in the following year. He was appointed Professor in 1946 when the new Forbes chair was endowed. He had been specially interested first in cancers of the brain, thyroid, and bone. He then began to study breast cancer, remembering Geoffrey Keynes’ ideas, and soon convinced everyone that the orthodox operation of radical mastectomy could be replaced with benefit by simple mastectomy and radiotherapy. Within a few years his results confirmed this, and many medical visitors came to study his work. In 1948 he was invited to speak on the subject at the Royal Society of Medicine in London to a packed hostile audience prompted by two well known London surgeons. I was then an ex-service medical student and stood at the back of the Hall. It soon became clear that the purpose of the meeting was to refute his methods, which were anathema to many of the London establishment, but he stood his ground and pointed out fallacies in their statistics. Similar results to those of McWhirter were soon to come from others, and radical mastectomy to be given up.

Professor McWhirter was President of the Faculty (predecessor of the Royal College) of Radiologists in 1966–69, having earlier been a hard-working Warden in charge of radiological education. He took a major part in many committees and commissions, and was invited to lecture all over the world. It was at this time that the apocryphal story originated that when he had been asked who looked after his patients when he was away, he was said to have innocently replied: ‘The same folk who do it when I am here, of course!’ He had been accused of many things but never of innocence.

Twenty of his trainees became heads of departments, in England, Scotland, the USA and many of the countries of the Commonwealth. He continued to be a major voice in the controversies encountered in treatment of cancer. He retired in 1970. Although firm and considered in medical discussions he never lost his temper, and was helpful and friendly to both junior and senior colleagues and visitors. His help to new staff coming up from England, to Glasgow as well as to Edinburgh, was much appreciated, he was particularly helpful to me when I came up to Glasgow in 1966. He was interested and expert in photography and bird watching and a regular golfer who went for luncheon every Sunday at his golf club almost to the end.

He was much supported by a loving family, headed by his wife from 1937, Dr Susan MacMurray, their only son Bill and their daughter-in-law and three grandchildren. Robert McWhirter has been a Father of modern Radiotherapy in Scotland, with a world-wide reputation for clear thinking. He is survived by his wife and son.

KEITH E HALNAN