

NOEL FARNIE ROBERTSON
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The partnership between the University of Edinburgh and the East of Scotland College of Agriculture, which was the Edinburgh School of Agriculture, was inherited from Sir Stephen Watson, but it was Noel Robertson who made it. Noel was shy, diffident and self-effacing, but he was fierce and resolute about his Edinburgh School of Agriculture. He created a seamless operation in which University and College staff worked together, shared resources, and gained an international reputation for agricultural research, education and advisory work. He ensured that both University and College staff contributed to all three sectors. His early years as Principal of the Edinburgh School of Agriculture were blessed with funds and he used them to good effect by both expanding and re-focusing the organisation. The School was raised from its foundations in giving (literally) local advice to farmers, undertaking demonstration and development work at the Bush, and educating the rural community's sons (and an increasing proportion of its daughters), to become a renowned centre of scientific experimentation, research-rich learning, and technology transfer (before that term found contemporary use). Noel made imaginative appointments in the early 70s and gave his protégés the space and the resources in which to prosper. New chairs were founded in animal production and crop production, and later in agricultural resource management. New staff (exemplified by Frank Elsley) were appointed with research as their remit. The National Diploma in Agriculture was converted to the Higher National Diploma, and the University Degree incorporated into the Biology curriculum and given a new intellectual base.

Born at Dundalk in Ireland in 1923, Noel Robertson was educated first at Trinity Academy in Edinburgh, and then at Edinburgh University from where he graduated with first class honours in 1944, having won the Turner Prize and the Sir David Baxter Scholarship along the way. He went on to Trinity College, Cambridge to continue his studies in plant pathology and there took the Diploma in Agriculture. He began his serious studies of plant viruses with Kenneth Smith at Cambridge, and then joined Frederick Bawden at Rothamsted. Noel then travelled to the United States to study tree viruses and his report of this work was awarded the Gunning Victoria Jubilee Prize by the University of Edinburgh. In 1946 he worked with Peter Posnette at the Cacao Research Institute in Ghana investigating diseases of the chocolate plant, following which he returned to Cambridge as a Lecturer and began research, first with mycorrhiza of *Pinus sylvestris*. He soon moved on to the work for which he perhaps became most renowned: the unravelling of a deep understanding of *Fusarium oryzae* and then struggling, with considerable success, to understand the pathogenicity of the potato blight organism *Phytophthora infestans*, which had for so many years wreaked havoc in the European potato crop.

Noel was a star at Cambridge and was appointed (young) as Professor of Botany at Hull in 1959. He was first a botanist, next an agriculturalist, and would have as readily filled the Regius Chair of Botany at Edinburgh as that of the Professor of Agriculture and Rural Economy to which he came in 1969. He brought scholarship and wisdom to the School. He was a kindly man, and he did not relish the difficult times which engulfed his later years as Principal of the College when the first funding crisis required retrenchment, austerity and staff losses. He abhorred the idea that the Advisory Services should be paid for. He was horrified at the developing concepts of payment for education and the loss of research independence and disinterest as a result of withdrawals of Government funding. Noel had to cope with financial crisis at a time when there was no history or experience of dealing with funding cutbacks and with rapid change. The learning curve was especially painful to a man so sensitive to others. He prided himself as having been largely successful in ameliorating the worst of the cuts by imaginative (and sometimes bold) staff disposition.

When he retired in 1983, Noel left a collegiate community happy with itself and attracting the attention of the world as epitomising the "Scottish System" - the integration of higher education, research and advisory services within one organisation. He was an organiser, a conciliator, and a visionary. Above all he was wise and he gave his counsel gently. He served on many committees and governing bodies as a member and as Chairman (including the Edinburgh Centre of Rural Economy, the Macaulay Land Use Research Institute, the Scottish Crops Research Institute, the Plant Breeding Institute and the Joint Consultative Organisation for Agricultural Research), and thereby influenced the UK agricultural research and education community at large. He was much respected in the University and rose to become Dean of the Faculty in 1974, a position he enjoyed for a shorter time than he deserved due to the pressures of work as College Principal. He was elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1969 and was Vice-President of the Society from 1980 to 1983. He was awarded a CBE in 1978 for his services to agriculture.

Service came naturally to Noel and he did not, I think, look forward to his retirement. But he would say latterly that he was pleased to have avoided the traumas of the late 80s, and he was able at least to enjoy some years of a fulfilling retirement on the banks of the Tweed at Walkerburn. Those he appointed and those he inherited at the Edinburgh School of Agriculture, and those with whom he worked and whom he influenced, will remember Noel with great fondness for they have much to thank him for.

Noel died on 2 July following a troublesome period with his heart, which he bore with his usual fortitude and patience. He is survived by his wife, Doreen, and their four children.

COLIN T WHITTEMORE