

LIONEL GORDON WHITBY
MA, PhD, MD, FRCP(Lond), FRCP(Ed), FRCPPath.

Born in London on 18 July 1926, Gordon Whitby was nurtured in a distinguished academic family. His father, Sir Lionel Whitby, was Professor of Physics and Master of Downing College, Cambridge. His mother, Ethel, was described by a close family friend, Lord Butterfield of Stechford, as a “formidable lady” in her role as supporter and helpmate to Sir Lionel during their sojourn in Cambridge.

Gordon’s education was exclusive and orthodox: Preparatory School (Sherborne), Eton College, and Cambridge University (King’s College). He read Natural Sciences at Cambridge and obtained a First Class Honours in both parts I and II of the Tripos. He remained as a postgraduate in Cambridge, completed a PhD and prepared for entry into medical school. He graduated MBBS in 1956 from the Middlesex Hospital Medical School. His formal training period in Chemical Pathology began in 1958 during which he spent a year with Dr J Axelrod in the National Institute of Health, Bethesda studying catecholamine metabolism. In 1961 he returned to Cambridge as University Biochemist, working at Addenbrookes Hospital and in 1963, some seven years after graduating, he was appointed the first Professor of Clinical Chemistry at Edinburgh University, a position he enjoyed until retirement in 1991 and from which he made major contributions to Scottish Medicine and Academia.

His sustained contribution to the building of a high quality, academically orientated and internationally recognised clinical chemistry service in Edinburgh was prodigious. He led the campaign, within this specialty, directed towards introducing automation and computer assisted data handling. He promoted the development of many young academics within his department and did much to see them well settled. He took his academic administrative duties seriously and it came as no surprise to many when he was elected Dean of the Faculty of Medicine for the period 1969 – 1972 (only 6 years after arriving in Edinburgh). He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1968. Between 1979 – 1983 he was Vice-Principal of Edinburgh University and, remarkably, gave a further (second) term as Dean of the Medical School in the period 1982 –1986. He was a Curator of Patronage of Edinburgh University for many years. Throughout this period of extraordinary service Gordon Whitby was a promoter and implementer of change. During his spells as Dean and Vice-Principal he demonstrated outstanding administrative talents and skills and clarity of mind. He gave support to sport, music and the arts and served a period as Trustee of the National Library of Scotland.

Gordon Whitby was an unashamed committed Christian and his faith, his love for his wife (Joan) and family and his garden were more important to him than the many accolades he received from the academic world. So it was that his retirement, until it was evident that his wife was not well, was especially pleasurable and fulfilling. His front door was always open for those who wanted a chat, but his allergy to split infinitives, ‘sloppy English’ and confused and improperly worked up ideas did not diminish. He died in Edinburgh on 12 March 2000 and is greatly missed.

JOHN CASH

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