IN MEMORIAM

ALEXANDER GIBSON

1883-1956

Alexander Gibson of Winnipeg, the Nestor of orthopaedic surgery in Canada, died suddenly in his consulting room on March 29, 1956. He was in his seventy-third year and still in the full flight of his great career. To the moment of his death he seemed in good health and his mental powers were unabated. The day before his death he addressed the Post-Graduate Course at St Boniface Hospital on "The Painful Hip," a problem of life-long interest to him, to the treatment of which he had made several contributions.

The University of Edinburgh has contributed much to the advancement of knowledge in medicine throughout the whole world. She has done this not only by the development of new knowledge, but also by sending forth a constant stream of her alumni to infuse the Edinburgh tradition into the farthest corners of the globe.

No greater ambassador of Edinburgh ever left his Alma Mater than Alexander Gibson, and none of her scholars can have been more successful than he in leaving the imprint of his personality and of his training upon the environment to which he translated himself. He became a great professor in the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Manitoba. He also attracted to Winnipeg his classmates John C. Boileau Grant and William Boyd, who in turn justified his choice by the high distinction of their own careers.

He was a brilliant student. When he graduated from Edinburgh in 1908, M.A., M.B., Ch.B., he was the first student of his year. He was awarded the Ettles Scholarship in general proficiency and the Buchanan Scholarship in gynaecology. Previously, in graduating in Arts, he had been awarded the Vans Dunlop Scholarship in classics. He had also been awarded a Vans Dunlop Scholarship in mathematics, though he was debarred from holding it concurrently with his scholarship in classics. He had an immense capacity for absorbing quickly what he read and an encyclopaedic memory in which he stored what he read or learned. He retained these qualities to the end of his life so that he was a fount of knowledge to his colleagues and students.

After his Edinburgh graduation he was house physician to Sir Thomas Fraser at the Royal Infirmary, after which he held resident surgical appointments in England. He then

returned to Edinburgh as Demonstrator of Anatomy, a post which he held for two years. He obtained the English Fellowship in 1913 at a time when he was Superintendent of the Seamen's Hospital at Greenwich.

In 1913 he was offered and accepted the Chair of Anatomy in the Medical School of the University of Manitoba at Winnipeg. This was the important turning point in his career, for from then on he was identified with the teaching of surgery in Western Canada, first as the Professor of Anatomy and later as a pioneer and leading practitioner of orthopaedic surgery.

The outbreak of war drew him back to Great Britain. In 1915 he obtained leave from the University of Manitoba and returned to England where he joined the R.A.M.C. He was sent to India. In Bombay he suffered a prolonged and nearly fatal attack of dysentery. He was invalided home. He stopped off in Egypt and worked in the hospital at Alexandria for some time before finally reaching England. He was then sent to Salonika with a party of engineers. The Italian transport on which they sailed from Brindisi was torpedoed. He and two companions managed to cling to a piece of wreckage until they were picked up by a minesweeper, barely in time. In England he then did war surgery in Aldershot.

In 1917 the University of Manitoba requested his return to strengthen their greatly depleted faculty. He resumed his work as Professor of Anatomy and at the same time worked as surgeon in the Military Hospital at Tuxedo Park.

In 1918, in order that he might be free to practise orthopaedic surgery he persuaded his University to invite J. C. B. Grant to succeed him as Professor of Anatomy. From 1918 until the day of his death he taught and practised orthopaedic surgery in Winnipeg. He also taught applied anatomy in the Department of Anatomy. Generations of admiring students recall his precise exposition of anatomy as applied to the practice of medicine and surgery. His background of training in anatomy influenced his career in orthopaedic surgery. His operations were carefully planned and precisely performed: models of careful, skilful, atraumatic handling of body tissues. Many of his contributions to orthopaedic literature were the outcome of his anatomical background and training.

He read widely, not only in medical literature but in other fields as well. In consequence his presentations were models of conciseness based upon a full knowledge of all that had ever been written upon the subject and illuminated by his own experience. He contributed original papers. He was the first to advocate the self-locking and self-retaining spinal bone graft now widely used under the designation of H-graft. He called it the fish-tail graft and obtained the graft from the upper end of the tibia rather than from the wing of the ilium, but the original principle was his concept. He was the first to record the fact that the semilunar cartilage of the knee could regenerate. His postero-lateral approach to the hip joint, based upon a sound knowledge of anatomy, has proved a valuable technique for the management of hip problems. He disclaimed originality for this operation on the ground that Kocher had previously used a lateral approach. The fact is that he refined and improved Kocher's approach, making of it an approach through intermuscular planes which made the operation nearly bloodless. More important, he popularised the technique by demonstration and by convincing advocacy of it in orthopaedic literature. He possessed considerable skill in drawing, and many of his papers and lectures were illustrated by himself. In the recent war he was, for a time, in charge of the Canadian Red Cross Orthopaedic Hospital at Hairmyres in Scotland.

His qualities of integrity and sincerity, his capacity for clear thinking and convincing speech, his great fund of knowledge accumulated by study and experience, and his strong sense of duty made him a great citizen as well as a great surgeon. Canada is the better for this son of Scotland who came to us in his youth and with his great and strong character helped to develop a young country. We mourn his loss. The memory of him will live long in our hearts and we shall cherish with pride the friendship we shared.

His devoted wife and comrade, Helen Gibson, survives him.

R. I. H.
W. B. MACK.