

Sir John McMichael

Cardiologist



John McMichael was born in Gatehouse of Fleet on 25th July 1904, the fifth child of James and Margaret (nee Sproat) McMichael. He attended Girthon primary school in Gatehouse, where the headmaster was William Learmonth, whose son James (later Sir James) was to become a famous surgeon, who operated on King George VI.

William Learmonth encouraged John to continue his studies at Kirkcudbright Academy where he became Dux. He then won scholarships to Edinburgh University to study Medicine, gaining several prizes and qualified in 1927. Unable to afford to apply for an unpaid residency post at Edinburgh Royal Infirmary his initial junior hospital appointments were in England. He returned to Edinburgh in 1929 moving to Aberdeen in 1930.

In 1932 he came to London, supported by a Beit Memorial Fellowship, to work at University College Hospital, starting his interest in cardiology. He returned to Edinburgh in 1934. In 1938 he joined the Postgraduate Medical School (PGMS) in Hammersmith Hospital, London. He ran the PGMS during the war years, carrying out important research on blood loss, shock and hepatitis. He became its head and Professor of Medicine 1946, retiring in 1966.

He continued for a few years in management of research and medical education, particularly at the Wellcome Trust. He was famous for his research on heart disease. He was the first in the UK to pass a tube from a vein in the arm into the heart so that the movement and pressure of the blood could be measured and x-rayed. This bold step led to much better understanding of how the heart worked and made possible the development of open heart surgery. It is a routine procedure today.

He also made important discoveries in the treatment of high blood pressure, spurred on by the severe disease in his wife Sybil. Most impressively, he built the Postgraduate Medical School into the leading medical academic centre in the UK and Commonwealth and trained many of the later leaders in medicine in the world. He was much admired internationally and won many honours and honorary degrees, most notably Fellowship of the Royal Society in 1957 and a knighthood in 1965.

He was an excellent and caring doctor but robust and forceful in his opinions; he was often but not always right! He was a much-loved leader in British medical science and his influence is still felt. His career and life spanned an extraordinary period of medical advance from an era where diabetes, bacterial infections, diphtheria, tuberculosis and high blood pressure could be rapidly fatal, to the high technology medicine we know today. He played a significant part in shaping those advances.

He was married three times, first to a fellow medical student Joan Macpherson (marriage dissolved), then Sybil Blake (died 1965) and then Sheila Howarth who outlived him. He had two sons by each of his first two marriages. Although based in London, and widely travelled, he was always faithful to his Scottish origins and was proud of his roots in Galloway. He was a frequent visitor to Gatehouse where he owned a holiday home. He loved nothing more than a wee dram with one of his many cousins there, or a round of golf on the lovely nine-hole course. After his death in 1992, his ashes were scattered in 'the most beautiful place in the world', the Isle Mouth at Borgue.

We are indebted to Sir John's son Peter for the above photograph and short biography of his father (April 2014).