

Obituary

SIR JOSEPH BARCROFT, C.B.E., M.A., D.Sc.,
Hon. M.D., Hon. F.R.C.O.G., F.R.S.

The Nutrition Society is mourning the loss of its Chairman, Sir Joseph Barcroft, who died suddenly from a heart attack in Cambridge on 21 March. Surely no Society ever had a more devoted, energetic and conscientious Chairman—but Barcroft was more than this, for in the Chair (as out of it) he would be at the same time both wise and witty; and he combined an inflexible integrity and high purpose with tact and with a gay, happy charm; and much learning with simplicity and humility; and he was rich in human sympathy and understanding.

Only those who served with him as Honorary Officers, or on the Council, can know the full extent of the generous and unselfish work he did for the Society. He had been active in its interests from the start, having been one of the signatories of the 'manifesto' which led to its foundation, and having taken the Chair at its first discussion, at the inaugural scientific meeting in Cambridge on 18 October 1941. He consented to join the Committee in 1942, became Chairman of the English Group in 1944, and since 1945 had been Chairman of the Society. The Council were to have nominated him as President for the Session 1947-8, under the new constitution.

No effort was too much for Barcroft in furthering the Society's interests. At the age of 74 he would take it as a matter of course to be expected, say, to travel north to attend a meeting of the Scottish Group, or, if the need arose, to be asked at a moment's notice to write half a dozen letters 'at a high level', or to make some necessary personal contacts with people in exalted places.

On the occasion of the Post-war Conference of European Nutritionists in 1946, it was Barcroft who, with unflagging interest and zest, received the foreign delegates at the inaugural conversazione, who took the Chair at the first scientific session, who accompanied the visitors on their tour of the principal research centres of the British Isles, who was the guest of honour at the farewell banquet, and who took his full share in all the preliminary negotiations and planning—and this was all done with an unvarying grace, good humour, and evident relish and enjoyment. Many men of half his age would have found much that the Chairman was able to accomplish, and in his stride, almost beyond their physical endurance, and sometimes beyond their forbearance.

It was no unusual occurrence for the Honorary Secretary of the Society to be brought to the telephone at 9 o'clock in the morning, sometimes several times in a week, to hear from Sir Joseph that he had (as usual) already arrived by that time at his office and would like to spend the first hour or so of the day—or more if need be—attending to the matters of The Nutrition Society. I recall that on one occasion—when we were arranging the British tour for the foreign delegates—after he had spent over an hour dictating letters to the heads of British Institutes—he remarked blithely: 'Well, you see, we still have all the rest of the day for the things that really matter.' Five p.m.

might very well bring (as it did on this occasion) another telephone request to put in yet a further consultation at his laboratory before he left for the day.

I was once privileged, a year or two back, to serve on a certain Government Commission, of which Sir Joseph was Chairman. Its work involved much journeying. While the younger members were still leisurely breakfasting at a station hotel, the septuagenarian, Barcroft—with his combination of kind thoughtfulness and of abundant energy—might be seen already in the adjoining station checking the time-table and the connexions, and assuring himself that our seats had been reserved and that all was in order. Then, returning to the hotel, he would shepherd us to our places. In the work of this group, as in all his activities, it was a delight to see how, by his friendliness and good humour, he put subordinates and beginners at their ease, and drew out the best in everyone.

It was perhaps typical of Barcroft, and of his work for our Society, that, two days before he so suddenly died, he had spent the afternoon in the office of the outgoing Secretary, discussing the arrangements for forthcoming Committee meetings and other activities, and extending a welcome to the incoming Secretary. One thing is certain: the success of the Society has been in large measure due to his unstinted and unflinching devotion.

Barcroft's lasting fame as a physiologist is secure in his contributions, which had already in his lifetime become classics. These deal, as every medical student is aware, with the oxygen-carrying capacity of the blood, with the distribution of the blood between depots and circulation, and with foetal physiology. All were characterized by a freshness of attack, and a refusal to be lost in technicalities, or jargon. His scientific writings were distinguished by their lucidity, breadth and common sense.

Joseph Barcroft was born in 1872 in County Down. His family were Quakers who had settled in Ireland in the seventeenth century, and he remained attached to that community throughout his life and retained their high ideals and simple ways. He graduated at Cambridge in 1896, having won a first class in both Parts I and II of the Natural Sciences Tripos. After teaching for a time at the Leys School, Cambridge (at which he had been for a time a pupil), he returned to the Department of Physiology, and was Reader there under Prof. J. N. Langley, until he succeeded him as Professor in 1926. After his retirement from the latter post in 1937, he became the first Director of the new Unit of Animal Physiology, also at Cambridge, under the Agricultural Research Council.

His distinctions included the Fellowship of the Royal Society (1910), the Royal Medal (1922) and the Baly Medal (1920). He had received various honorary degrees, was a corresponding member of numerous foreign academies, and had been Fullerian Professor at the Royal Institution (1923–6), Dunham lecturer at Harvard (1929), and President of the Physiological Section of the British Association (1920). Both in the first and second World Wars, he had worked on problems of gas warfare, and was a member of the Army Medical Directorate Consultative Committee. Not himself medically qualified, he was proud to have been elected an honorary fellow of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists—a tribute to his researches on foetal physiology.

Barcroft's interest in the science of nutrition arose not only from the catholicity of his physiological outlook, but also more directly from the fact that since 1937 he had been Chairman of the Food Investigation Board, and hence intimately concerned in their activities relating to such matters as the processing of food and the conservation of its nutritive value.

Barcroft married, in 1903, Mary A. Ball, daughter of the late Sir Robert Ball, the celebrated astronomer. One of their sons is Henry Barcroft, Professor of Physiology at Queen's University, Belfast.

LESLIE J. HARRIS

SIR FREDERICK GOWLAND HOPKINS, O.M., M.A., M.B., D.Sc.,
Hon. Sc.D., Hon. LL.D., Hon. D.Sc., F.R.C.P., F.R.S.

By the death of Sir Frederick Hopkins, which occurred in Cambridge on 16 May in his 86th year, Nutritional Science lost one of its great pioneers, and its *doyen*. He had long been recognized as the leading biochemist of his time; he was also greatly beloved as a man.

In discussing his life's work in another place,* I wrote that Hopkins's scientific renown was based on his explorations into at least four or five different avenues of biochemistry: lactic acid in muscle activity; the discovery of the amino-acid tryptophan, and the demonstration of its 'specific biological value'; his classical experiments on the need for accessory factors in normal diets (by which he is best known to the man in the street); and his isolation of the cell-catalyst, glutathione (which will perhaps prove scientifically the most significant of all his contributions). As he once himself half-humorously said, the scientist who wishes to become famous should first discern where the next important advance is likely to come, and should then take care to be the first to start work there himself! But what, with typical modesty, he refrained from acknowledging was his own uncanny instinct in scenting a trail and his rare experimental skill in following it up. He certainly started many a scientific hunt, from which great treasures have come, and are still coming. One reason perhaps was in his mode of approach. As an American pupil of his once remarked: 'The other lecturers in this University talk to you about the dope which is already known; "Hoppy" points out what we still don't know and still need to know.' The latter approach, in any lecture delivered by 'Hoppy' (the name by which he was always affectionately known, and was glad to be addressed), in his own inimitable way, could be the more invigorating of the two.

But 'Hoppy' himself would probably have been most proud to know that, in the eyes of his fellow workers, his greatest contributions were those which would not appear in *Who's Who* or the official records: that he had inspired and encouraged generations of younger men, so many of whom are now to be numbered among the most eminent leaders in the world of medical and scientific learning—it would be invidious even to begin enumerating them; he would be glad, too, that it was appre-

* *The Lancet*, 24 May 1947. This obituary is, by permission, largely based on the Biographical Memoir contributed by the writer to that journal.