

Obituary

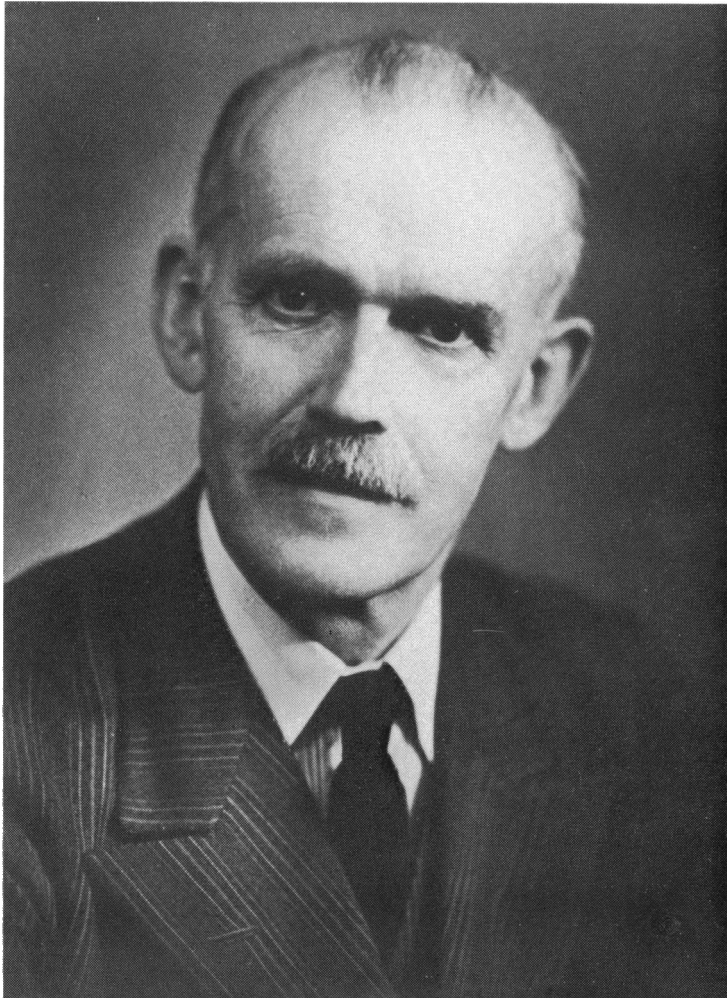
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OBITUARY

DOUGLAS JAMES GUTHRIE, M.D., D.LITT., F.R.C.S.E., F.R.C.P.E., F.R.S.E.
8 September 1885 – 8 June 1975

Douglas Guthrie was within three months of his ninetieth birthday when he died in Edinburgh on 8 June after a long illness. His name is well known to the present generation as the author of a successful and popular *History of medicine*, but when he retired in 1945 at the age of sixty he had already made significant contributions to his own specialty—the study and treatment of disorders of the ear, nose and throat—and the first edition of his *History* was already in the bookshops. His object in writing it had been to interest medical students and young doctors, but it achieved a far wider success with the general reader and so gave him the stimulus and the opportunity to develop his second career.

He was born at Dysart, Fife, where his father, the Reverend William Guthrie, was a Minister of the United Free Church, and educated at Kirkcaldy High School and the Royal High School, Edinburgh. He graduated with honours in the Faculty of Medicine at Edinburgh in 1907 and was awarded the McCosh Travelling Scholarship which enabled him to continue his studies in Berlin, Hamburg, Jena, Vienna and Paris, where he served as a clinical assistant in the Hôpital Louis. While building up a general practice at Lanark he proceeded to his M.D. in 1909 and the Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh in 1913. During the first world war he served for two years with the R.A.M.C. and was then appointed commandant of a hospital for officers of the Royal Flying Corps. At the end of the war he decided to specialize in laryngology and otology and became a lecturer in the "extra-mural" school of the Royal Colleges at Edinburgh as well as Ear and Throat Surgeon to the



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Royal Hospital for Sick Children in Edinburgh. It was there that he found the material for his original work on speech disorders reported in a book which he wrote with George Seth in 1935. He was responsible for starting special training courses for speech therapists in Edinburgh and for making their help readily available to needy children.

Despite his very active professional life, he had always followed with interest the lectures of his friend John Comrie on the history of medicine and when he retired from his clinical work in 1945 he took over Comrie's lectureship at the university and held the post for eleven years. This proved to be one of the most successful and productive periods of his long life.

On Sunday, 14 October 1945, the *Observer*, a leading British newspaper with a great literary following, published a review of Guthrie's *History* extending to nearly 3,000 words. The author was George Bernard Shaw and of course it was highly controversial, being an up-to-date supplement to the preface to the *Doctor's dilemma*. Despite the controversy, Shaw admitted that "Dr. Guthrie's job of packing it into 400 pages is learnedly and readably done, amusingly and instructively illustrated", and concluded by declaring that "it is unique and well worth its price". (In those days Nelsons were able to publish such a book for no more than £1.50.) It became a best-seller and was many times reprinted before a new edition was published in 1959. It was translated into German, Spanish and Italian, and its author was soon in great demand as a lecturer abroad. He made lecture tours in India and South America which were sponsored by the British Council and in the United States he gave the Clendening Lectures at Kansas in 1954 and was Visiting Professor in the University of California in 1961.

Among his many essays, lectures and brief articles, some of which were published as a collection with the title *Janus in the doorway* (1964), are many well-written discussions of themes which are difficult to find anywhere else. For him scholarship was a very serious matter and he wrote nothing without careful preparation.

At home his achievement was recognized by his election as honorary President of the Scottish Society of the History of Medicine, which he had founded in 1948, President of the Section of the History of Medicine of the Royal Society of Medicine (1956), President of the British Society of the History of Medicine (1965), and Honorary Fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine (1967), while his own university awarded him the honorary D.Litt. Guthrie accepted all these honours gratefully and modestly, and sometimes expressed himself "amazed" that he and his work should be so highly regarded. He carried out the duties of every office with dignity and scrupulous zeal, and as long as health permitted he attended every meeting of the societies in which he played so prominent a part. Always kindly and generous, he endowed lectures in the history of medicine at each of the Royal Colleges of Edinburgh and the handsome presidential badge of the British Society (see *Med. Hist.*, October 1967, frontispiece) was a gift in remembrance of his own term of office.

In his personal life he always gave an impression of serene and unruffled calm. His first wife died in 1950 and his second wife, whom he married in 1953, survives him.

NÖEL POYNTER