

OBITUARY

JOHN DAVID HENRY WIDDESS (1906-1982)

John David Henry Widdess, physician, historian, man of letters, bibliophile and kindly mentor to aspiring historians, died at St. Michael's Hospital, Dun Laoghaire, on Sunday, May 2nd, 1982 in his seventy-seventh year.

Jack Widdess was born in Limerick in 1906 and educated at Wesley College. He studied medicine at the Royal College of Surgeons in Dublin where he qualified L.R.C.P. & S.I. in 1931, and was appointed immediately assistant to Professor W. J. E. Jessop, in the Physiology Department of the College. Two years later he became Biochemist to the Richmond Hospital. In 1938 he was awarded a Moderatorship in Natural Science by University College, Dublin and in the same year was appointed Lecturer in Biology at the College of Surgeons. Shortly afterwards, he became Assistant Pathologist to the Richmond Hospital and Pathologist and Biochemist to the Rotunda Hospital. In 1940 he was appointed Librarian to the Royal College of Surgeons, and in 1960 became Professor of Biology, a post that he occupied until his retirement in 1973. He received his Litt.D. from University College, Dublin for published work on Irish Medical History in 1964. A year later he was appointed Honorary Librarian to the Worth Library at Dr. Steevens' Hospital, and in 1968 he became Honorary Librarian to the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland and Editor of the *Journal of the Royal College of Surgeons* which, under his guidance, became the *Journal of the Irish Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons* two years later. In 1970 he was conferred with the Honorary Fellowship of the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland, and this was followed by the Honorary Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, on the occasion of the Inauguration of the Department of the History of Medicine in 1975. He wrote the histories of four medical institutes — *The Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland and its Medical School* was first published in 1949 and a revised edition was published in 1967, and *A History of the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland* appeared in 1963. For the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Charitable Infirmary in 1968, he edited *The Charitable Infirmary, Jervis Street, Dublin, 1718-1968*, and in 1972 he wrote *The Richmond, Whitworth and Hardwicke Hospitals: St. Laurence's, Dublin 1772-1972*, to commemorate that institute's bicentenary. He published a large number of papers on the history of Irish medicine and gave many addresses on the subject to learned bodies in Ireland and Britain, and in 1970 he went on a lecture tour to the United States. Professor Widdess retired in 1973 to 'Puint na Teint' in Sneem, Co. Kerry where he became a member of the Kerry Archaeological and Historical Society, and local representative for An Taisce.

These bare historical facts are but an indication of Jack Widdess's achievements; they do little, however, to convey the immense scholarship that leaves for posterity an invaluable record of the progress and development of medicine in this country. Shortly before his death, he gave his approval for the cover design for the revised

History of the Royal College of Surgeons which he had spent the last five years preparing for the bicentenary of the College in 1984. When the history of that college comes to be rewritten again in the course of time, future historiographers will acknowledge with gratitude their debt to Widdess's diligent research but, in fact, anyone in search of historical data, be it the professional historian or those merely seeking anecdotal or biographical detail to illustrate a lecture, will find Widdess's works essential reading. It is sad to record that he was not permitted the time to write the definitive histories of St. Laurence's Hospital and the Charitable Infirmary as both institutes come towards the end of a prestigious independence prior to their dissolution in the new hospital at Beaumont.

Widdess's writings leave behind a permanent record of his scholarship, but he will be missed greatly as a personal repository of historical fact. To phone him in Sneem in search of an elusive detail called for time and patience — for Jack would not be rushed when it came to announcing on the past — but the rewards were considerable. "Yes", he might remark, "try the Surgeon General's Report, I think there is something on him there", or on another occasion "It would be worth looking in Elmes' Catalogue in the National Library where you should find an eighteenth century print listed". These leads rarely failed.

Jack Widdess was an excellent historian. He was obsessional, sometimes to the point of annoyance, and yet it was this obdurate attention to detail that makes his historical legacy so valuable. He was not, however, suited to the discipline of verbal communication, which is not to say that he could resist the opportunity to expound on his favourite topic. The time constraints of mere fractions of hours were nothing to him when dealing with centuries of fact, and yet he was able to distil his researches and avoid any tediousness in his writing. His style was lively and entertaining and, without compromising historical accuracy, he was able to blend the humour and sadness of history with a subtlety that was most attractive. He was not a stimulating lecturer in biology, and one suspects that he did not believe in didactic lectures, whereas his demonstrations on the subjects were interesting and memorable. Two students, attempting once to enliven the evening biology lecture, slipped down a small trap-door at the back row and, creeping under the floor boards, interrupted Widdess's dissertation on *Scyliorhinus* with windy sounds and knocks to the intense amusement of their colleagues. Widdess, aware that conditions beneath the floor of his theatre were tolerable for only a short time, moved to the back of the theatre where, in sight of the trap-door, he delivered in lugubrious tones one of his longest lectures on record and inflicted a truly miserable punishment on the pair of miscreants.

He was well suited to the role of biochemist to the Richmond Hospital where he introduced the first autoanalyser, of which he was justifiably proud. He was, in fact, remarkably alert to technological advance and, when he told me lately that he had installed a computer in Sneem, my humorous incredulity gave way to admiration as he explained how he had harnessed

the device for word processing which he saw as an invaluable facility to the writer.

In the 'seventies, Jack was one of a group whose lunch-time conversation in the dining-room of the Old Convent in the Richmond was usually interesting and sometimes memorable. Here the rhythm of *Bongo-Bing* was discussed with the same intensity as the latest production of *The Valkyrie* at Bayreuth, and, while one group expounded on fly fishing in the west of Ireland, another might be heard analysing the semantic ingeniousness of a senior Garda's pronouncement that the city was being overrun, not so much by prostitutes but by "little whooreens". It was in this ambience that Jack could give rein to a capricious and, at times, mischievous humour, often the more remarkable for a bawdiness that emanated from a deceptively saturnine countenance.

Jack, having spent most of his time in the laboratory, was fond of referring to himself as "not being a proper doctor". By this he meant that, in his brief forays into locum general practice in Malahide, he had to adopt a realistic approach to illness. It was his belief, I think, that the human frame was designed to survive even the interference of medical men, be they proper doctors or not, and that when destiny laid its implacable hand on life there was not much that he could do. When, on a beautiful spring day, he was informed that an aged notable had collapsed and that his presence was urgently sought, Jack took the long coast road so best to admire at leisure the sun upon the billows, the coots and the swans, thereby acknowledging that the Creator should not be gainsaid.

Perhaps one of Jack Widdess's greatest achievements was an appreciation of the need for a cultural forum for the students of the College, and towards this end he founded, with the late Joe Lewis, in 1930 the Biological Society of which he was President in 1941 and thereafter a permanent Vice-President. In 1980 he travelled from Sneem to attend the Inaugural Meeting of the Society which he had founded fifty years earlier, and was greeted by a standing ovation from the students and their guests.

Jack Widdess was librarian not only to the Royal College of Surgeons, but also to the Royal College of Physicians, and to the much prized but little known Worth Library at Dr. Steevens' Hospital, and he established the Myles Library in St. Laurence's Hospital. His devotion to the libraries of these institutes was truly great, but he regretted that it had not been in his power to bring the two libraries of the Royal Colleges together to provide for their graduates and fellows a modern library with the facilities so necessary for scientific research and development.

J. D. H. Widdess served the Royal Colleges in Dublin as a member of academic staff, as fellow, as librarian, as editor of the *Journal*, and as historian to both institutes. The Colleges owe much to this unassuming man whose achievements will be appreciated even more by future generations than by his contemporaries. It would seem fitting that a Widdess Scholarship be established to further the study of that subject to which he contributed so much — Medical History in Ireland.

E.O'B.