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.

John 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 as L.R.C.P.& S.I. in 1931, and was appointed immediately assistant to Professor W. J. E. Jennings, the Physiology Department of the College. Two years later he became Biochemist to the Richmond Hospital. In 1938 he was awarded a Master of Arts in Natural Science by University College, Dublin and in the same year was appointed Lecturer in Biochemistry in 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 Biochemistry, a post which 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 an authoritative publication. He retired in 1972.

As a medical man, Mr. Widdess was a prolific writer. He contributed so much to the study of that subject to which he contributed so much - 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. In fact 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 but a compliment 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 came towards the end of a prestigious independ- ence prior to their dissolution in the new hospital at Beaumont.

Widdess's writings left 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 a moment's 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 was something there", or 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 were fruitful.

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, a distinguished lecturer or writer, 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 dissect his research 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 fond of referring to himself as an "amateur" scientist, and as historian he fitted in perfectly. He had contributed to the history of medical science in this country in the    seventies, to the subject to which he contributed so much - Medical History in Ireland.

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 per- manent Vice-President. It 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 of the Colleges. One owes 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.