

LORD HUNTER OF NEWINGTON  
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HonLLB(Dund, Birm, Liv), HonDSc(Aston)

Robert Brockie Hunter, a distinguished Professor of Therapeutics and university administrator, leader and motivator of medical research, who became Principal and Vice Chancellor of Birmingham University was born on 14th July 1915 and died on March 24th 1994.

A product of George Watson's College, he graduated in medicine from Edinburgh University in 1938, and having joined the Royal Army Medical Corps, soon found himself posted to France at the outbreak of the Second World War. With the German breakthrough in 1940, he managed to escape with his unit at St Nazaire.

After a short spell on leave, he was then posted overseas to join the 8th Army in North Africa, but returned home again before 'D-Day' in 1944 to become personal physician to General (later Field Marshall) Montgomery at the outset of the North European Campaign.

It is to Robert Hunter's credit that unlike Lord Moran, physician to Mr Churchill during the war, he adhered to the Hippocratic oath, and sought not to benefit, despite his privileged position, by telling us about Monty, that complex enigmatic figure whose psychological profile so fascinated and yet seemed to defy real depth of analysis by his biographers. Sharing his pleasure one day of fishing on Crombie Reservoir, I ventured, 'Bob, were you in that group of Top Brass who accompanied Monty on a visit to the 108 Military Hospital in Brussels?'. This occasion was in the nature of a morale boost to casualties following the Battle of the Bulge, when the Germans made a daring final thrust towards Antwerp in the severe winter of 1944/45. 'Yes' said Bob. 'I remember it very well. Your Ward was largely occupied, not by soldiers with war wounds, but by frost-bite, suggesting to Monty an apparent lack of preparedness for warfare in severe winter conditions; Monty, was not amused!'

Returning to Edinburgh after the War, Hunter was appointed Lecturer in Therapeutics under Sir Derek Dunlop, and was Assistant Director of the Postgraduate Board of Medicine under Sir Alexander Biggam. Applying for a Commonwealth (Harkness) Fellowship to study in America, he had to appear for interview before Sir James Irvine, soon to retire as Principal of St Andrews University. Irvine could see in this young man the qualities and potential to help restore the academic vigour of certain elements of the Medical Faculty in Dundee, then part of St Andrews University. He recommended Hunter for the Fellowship and invited him to return and apply for the vacant Chair of Materia Medica to which he succeeded at the early age of 33.

To those of us who joined the Army with the minimum of clinical experience and without any higher Postgraduate qualification, service in the RAMC (perhaps more than the other two Services) was not conducive to study nor to obtaining further and varied clinical experience. I am sure Hunter would have been the first to agree that this was a serious professional handicap to him as it was to those of us similarly placed throughout the War.

Aware, perhaps, of such professional defects, he may have remembered certain of Montgomery's precepts, when in his early years, lecturing to Army student officers, he used to enunciate and repeat the four cardinal principles and philosophy for the preparation and conduct of War:

*Morale means everything.  
Foster the will to win.  
Simplify everything.  
And above all, choose a good team  
of subordinates and trust them.*

Hunter did just that. He was adept at discerning profitable lines of research and the general 'thrust' required. He was successful in obtaining generous 'outside' funding, but above all, he seemed to possess or develop that intuitive sense of choosing and recruiting young able 'subordinates' with the requisite potential to undertake and pursue his research and clinical objectives. On his appointment in 1948, he resolved to build a research-based department consisting of science graduates, keen to collaborate with clinicians with himself as the self-styled 'Research Administrator'. In this, he foresaw and anticipated the need for what is now the established place of Clinical Pharmacology. Hunter also deserves credit for introducing Pharmacology in 1954 as an Honours BSc option in pure science at a time when only Oxford and Edinburgh provided degrees in Pharmacology.

Very soon, this hybrid department, combining both science and clinical medicine, began to bear fruit in abundance.

His pharmacological colleagues made the histamine measurements needed for J F Riley's discovery of mast cells as the main storage site in the body for histamine. They carried out work on the distribution of noradrenaline in animals and assessed its content in adrenal medullary tumours and in human embryos, thereby establishing the importance of the Organs of Zuckerkandl as its main source at birth. Assessments were made of adrenal cortical and thyroid inhibitors and of the metopirone test in thyroid disease and in hypophysectomised patients.

The clinicians who trained in his wards made original discoveries in bleeding disorders, thyroid disorders, skeletal muscle disease and in the use of sulphonylurea drugs in diabetic patients.

Many of these pharmacologists and clinicians went on to hold senior academic appointments in other centres.

His arrival in Dundee coincided with a period of rapid change and expansion before the final partition of St Andrews and the establishment of Dundee as a separate University. Staff and student numbers increased in all Faculties. Appointed Dean of the Medical Faculty and later of the Postgraduate Medical Committee, Hunter saw his role and appointment, not as a chore and hindrance, but an exciting challenge for change and progress. In this he was fortunate in having the valuable support and understanding of the Principal (later Sir) Malcolm Knox, who had the difficult task of maintaining a balance between the two halves of the University (of St Andrews).

The new Dental School and Hospital building was nearing completion. The first new Post-war Teaching Hospital of 800 beds was given permission to be built at Ninewells. In cost, size and complexity, this was an undertaking entirely new to the civil servants, to the University as indeed to the architects and contractors. With appropriate assistance Hunter seemed to revel and enjoy this maëlstrom of change, without seemingly neglecting his own staff and department.

Indeed, he maintained high morale amongst his 'subordinates' finding extra funding where necessary, supporting individual research and encouraging individuals to seek, with his assistance, temporary attachments to American research centres which would enhance their own work and career prospects.

Another practice, relatively rare at that time was to arrange to hold in Dundee medical conferences on a theme relevant to some aspect of his departmental research and to which he would invite world leaders on the very frontiers of similar studies.

Soon, other colleagues, impressed by these Hunterian methods of inter-communication, were encouraged to do likewise. No wonder a GMC official visitor would report on 'this progressive Medical School' while in 1956, the medical sub committee of the UGC regarded 'the Medical School as outstanding'.

There was no doubt but that Hunter played a pivotal role in those days in the Dundee Medical School. However, his undoubted flair for administration and organisation soon led increasingly to his appointment, often as Chairman, to important National and Governmental Committees e.g., Clinical Research Board, Medical Research Council 1960/64; General Medical Council 1962/68; Ministry of Health Committee on Safety of Drugs 1963/68; Clinical Trials Committee, University Grants Committee 1964/68; (Chairman, Medical Sub Committee 1966/68); Enquiry into Dental Education 1977/80; Chairman, Working Party on Medical Administration in the NHS Independent Scientific Committee on Smoking and Health 1973/80; House of Lords Committee on Science and Technology 1983/87; Chairman, Review Committee on Public Health, and much else, reflecting the range and variety of his interests. He was elected a Fellow of the RSE in 1964.

Appointed Vice-Chancellor and Principal of Birmingham University in 1968, Hunter fulfilled this uncommitted and impartial role with great wisdom and leadership, steering the University through a difficult period in its history. However, two events which evoked great public interest did not mar his successful tenure as Principal.

The first occurred when his arrival coincided with the high point of student unrest throughout British Universities, when, (not in protest against anything he had done) he was locked out of his office by demonstrating activists. Indiscipline of this order, he had never experienced in Dundee and certainly not in the Army. None-the-less in his own inimitable way, quietly, with good humour but authoritatively, he set up an external Committee under the Chairmanship of the Rt Hon Jo Grimond MP to advise the University about ways and means of improving relations. The report was successful in establishing peace and calm, by recommending certain more democratic but largely superficial changes in the organisation and government of the University.

The second event occurred when, in a world almost free of the scourge, the death from smallpox of a laboratory worker in the medical school gave rise to largely unfounded accusations of departmental negligence. Again with great tact and judgement he successfully repudiated these allegations, and his handling of the case helped greatly to restore morale in a deeply demoralised medical school.

Invited to be visiting Professor at Adelaide and McGill Universities, he was awarded the Purdue Frederick Medical Achievement Award in 1958. He was invited to accept Honorary Degrees of LLD from Dundee, Birmingham and Liverpool Universities and that of DSc of Aston.

Tall, with a slight stoop and handsome, Hunter was a rather private person, somewhat aloof, who did not easily engage in small talk or gossip. He once confided to a departmental colleague that he was essentially a very shy person. This shyness and the single minded pursuit of his ambitions, constrained his sociability and limited his friendships.

His wife, Kathleen, whom he married in 1940, provided the support and companionship he needed during this long varied career of service. There are three sons, two of whom have followed their father into medicine, one a Veterinary Surgeon while the daughter married into the medical profession.

I am grateful to several colleagues who knew or worked with Hunter and to *The Times* for excerpts about his later years at Birmingham.

ALEX MAIR