

# Portraits from Memory

## 16—Muriel Robertson, FRS (1883-1973)

JAMES HOWIE

Muriel, a native of Northern Ireland, was undoubtedly one of Glasgow's most famous biological scientists—that was never disputed. Her work on the transmission of *Trypanosoma gambiense* by

the bite of the tse-tse fly *Glossina palpalis* was a notable piece of research, scientifically as well as economically important, affecting the whole economy of Uganda and the rearing of cattle in tropical Africa. During an early spell in Ceylon she had been much influenced by Castellani, and it was partly owing to him that she undertook her work in Uganda. In later conversation she had little to say about it: "It was so obvious," she said to me once.



Obvious from the start it may well have been to Muriel, for none denied that she was a woman of piercing intellect; but undertaking the investigation that she did required a leap of faith and high courage as well as good perception and resolute dedication. She well deserved the high academic and scientific honours conferred upon her.

### Pressing realities

From 1915 to 1961 Muriel was protozoologist to the Lister Institute, but during the first world war she worked on the problem of gas gangrene—a desperately common and devastating cause of disablement and death of even lightly wounded soldiers. Muriel's interest in the subject never left her, and it motivated much of her thinking and research during the second world war. During my period of service in the pathology department of the War Office (1933-45) I met her often, both at committee meetings in the War Office and at the frequent scientific sessions in London where the subject of war wound infections came under discussion.

During the north Africa campaign (1940-3) the excellent work on early evacuation of the wounded, blood transfusion, expert surgery, and, at last, penicillin for prophylaxis and treatment, induced among those closest to the problem a justified feeling of optimism

that the incidence of gas gangrene as a wound complication could be substantially reduced—if not virtually eliminated, as tetanus had been by the correct use of toxoid. With her abiding interest in the clostridia that cause gas gangrene, Muriel was always on the side of those who worked ever hopefully on the possibility of developing toxoids that might control it. I had worked with clostridia and my interest in these numerous and difficult toxins made me into a potential ally. In this role I came regularly into discussions that included Muriel.

It was always stimulating as well as easy and educative to discuss clostridia with her. We got on well, though I ventured to doubt if toxoids against the gas gangrene clostridia would ever be able to achieve anything so important as what would undoubtedly follow from properly applying the lessons already learnt in north Africa. She was a realist. She wanted to know how sure we were of adequate supplies of penicillin and whether our logistics and the training of those responsible would ensure the correct and early enough use of penicillin. She was right, of course, to emphasise the difficulty of ensuring adequate supplies, sufficient training and good motivation, and the early and correct use of penicillin. It was good to be pressed on the importance of these realities. Happily the problems were faced and the results proved satisfactory.

### Top level talks

One of my last encounters with Muriel came in mid-March 1951, two days after my appointment had been announced as professor of bacteriology at the University of Glasgow. The day before I met Muriel I had been in Edinburgh and had enjoyed a pleasant lunch with a former colleague who had been a professor in Aberdeen during my time there. The next day I was in London on a visit to the Lister institute for a scientific meeting. As I went in, Muriel advanced to greet me.

"How nice to see you again," she said, and continued sharply, "and how is God?"

Being well aware of Muriel's reputation as a sharp, shrewd inquisitor with, as some said, a shrewish tongue, I realised that I had been challenged to a game. So I looked Muriel straight in the eye and replied, "Fine!"

"Indeed," said Muriel, "I am glad to hear that. I presume that we are each referring to the same person."

"I had lunch with him in Edinburgh yesterday," I answered, relying on a nickname often applied to my friend in his Aberdeen days.

"Ah!" said Muriel, "I think I know whom you mean. That is not the person I have in mind." She looked upwards and pointed her forefinger to the ceiling.

"Muriel!" I said reproachfully, "I am surprised that a faithful Presbyterian as you are should come so dangerously near to blasphemy."

"Not a bit of it," she replied. "Do not Scottish professors still commune with him daily?"

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