Portraits from Memory

18—Sir Dugald Baird (1899-1986)

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When I went to Glasgow in October 1932 I was fortunate in being invited to attend meetings of the X club and soon afterwards to become a member of it. The club had the objective of bringing together people with research projects in hand, whether they worked in laboratories or on the wards. Two rules were made known to me: you must give a paper if asked to do so and you must never miss a meeting.

Something new and special

The membership of this stimulating club included a wide range of people, from the great Sir Robert Muir down to fledglings like myself. One of the members I best recall was Dugald Baird. It was unusual and refreshing to find an obstetrician-gynaecologist interested in research projects and able to hold his own with the most ambitious of the research scientists. Dugald Baird not only worked on pyelitis in pregnancy but made notable contributions to understanding its problems despite having been discouraged from taking up the subject. Moreover, no matter what topic was being discussed there was always sooner or later a shrewd comment or question from Baird, which often opened up new lines of thought. It was quite clear that the leaders of scientific medicine in Glasgow regarded Baird as something new and special in obstetrics and gynaecology. It was no surprise when in 1937 he was appointed regius professor of midwifery in the University of Aberdeen. In congratulating him on his appointment to my home university, I said: "You'll find that the facilities are fairly basic and that the Aberdonians are a tough lot."

"Yes," he replied, "I know well that the facilities are even less than basic; and that the Aberdonians are a tough lot who don't welcome change. But I'm not a weakling."

Indeed, he was not a weakling. Happily the Aberdeen joint hospital scheme was still being planned, and, much to their surprise, the Aberdonians found themselves being coaxed and pressed into making the new maternity hospital a much more substantial building and organisation than they had ever dreamt of or considered necessary.

But in Dugald Baird Aberdeen had recruited an exceptional obstetrician. It greatly surprised the Aberdonians that his interest in private practice was marginal, although he did not ignore its usefulness and possibilities. His main preoccupation was to make academic obstetrics and gynaecology something that encompassed all the problems of human reproductive biology. This was to be not merely the safe delivery of a live baby by an uninjured mother, but the creation of a population of healthy, well fed women in a state of physical and mental fitness to make them not only mothers but good, fit, happy mothers. They must be cared for and prepared for motherhood from their earliest years so that child bearing was relieved of many of its worst problems by the creation of a race of

tall, healthy, happy women. Baird spared no effort in seeking to create an environment in Aberdeen in which the art and craft of midwifery was fully and expertly practised but was only one part of a sound physiological whole.

Baird sought help to this end wherever it could be found. Boyd-Orr of the Rowett Research Institute had much to contribute from his surveys of the nutritional status of the population of Aberdeen, including especially women of child bearing age. Well supported by Dr Isabella Leitch, one of Boyd-Orr's most energetic and enthusiastic collaborators, and by Dr Angus

Thomson, Baird launched purposeful advances in the nutrition and care of what he often referred to as "my working mothers." The second world war, so far from hindering these projects, created a climate in which such progressive sociology was welcomed and pushed ahead. Baird was one of the most energetic pushers, and he was magnificently supported by his wife, Dr May Tennent, who had herself seen much of the consequences of social deprivation in Glasgow. Together the Bairs made a powerful team. As the tough Aberdonians found, Baird was no weakling. In due course the Medical Research Council gave enlightened and welcome support in establishing, under Baird's honorary directorship, the obstetric medicine research unit, which made notable contributions to the clinical and physiological issues involved.

No turning from the right

Baird, the most pleasant, relaxed, and easy mannered professor ever known, was also a formidable opponent—but always a fair one—whether in local politics or on the golf course. He was not often defeated in either of these arenas. The Aberdonians welcomed him, respected him, criticised him, and occasionally tried to change some of his ideas, which were regarded as more radical than those expected from an Aberdeen professor. But Baird was Baird and not one who could be deflected from what he saw as the right. His welcome for the 1967 Abortion Act was both emphatic and effectively argued, but it was not universally supported in Aberdeen. In spite of these reservations—not by any means universally held—the Bairs, Dugald and May, received the freedom of Aberdeen in 1966. It was a right and seemly tribute from his adopted city, the medical reputation of which both Dugald and May had done so much to enhance.

The keynotes of Dugald's character were clear sighted strength and warm compassion for all in need. His devoted personal, uncomplaining, and untiring attention to May in her distressing terminal illness was wholly in keeping with his genuine philosophy of life, and it earned the deep respect of all who knew the facts.

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