Portraits from Memory

14—Professor William John Tulloch (1887-1966)

JAMES HOWIE

All who knew him agreed that Tulloch was a character. But what kind of character? Some said he was eccentric, pervers, or argumentative. In a way, he was all three at various times. But I prefer different adjectives: downright, memorable, challenging, enthusiastic, and, most certainly, although perhaps surprisingly, charitable. He was, as he once said to me, a devout but not fanatical Roman Catholic, and his religious faith was an important part of him. As a professor and head of a department he was pre-eminently a purveyor and a creator of enthusiasm. His trainees were and are keenly sought after because of their effectiveness as microbiologists and as epidemiologists. His contributions to microbiology, many of them in conjunction with his best known assistant, James Craigie, covered diverse topics, such as methods of subtyping bacteria; early diagnosis of smallpox by a variety of methods; tetanus; cholera; diphtheria; and cerebrospinal meningitis.

Spontaneous instruction

Despite all this he was not as well known as he deserved to be. He did not attend meetings of the Pathological Society, with many of whose senior members he did not readily see eye to eye, often complaining that they thought of bacteriology as only a minor branch of "their pathology" whereas it was a whole science of its own, with far reaching implications for immunology, genetics, and the whole of preventive medicine and public health—matters well beyond the capacity of mere morbid anatomists to take in their stride. His style of presentation and writing, moreover, were not those that were favoured at Pathological Society meetings or welcomed by the editor of its journal, of which—unlike most people—Tulloch had no high opinion.

Tulloch played his part as an active microbiologist in the 1914-18 war and as an adviser of the Scottish Home and Health Department in the 1939-45 war. He was also a good and very generous examiner, often turning a viva into something more like a tutorial and always ready to pass a borderline candidate if at all possible. So, although less well known outside his immediate circle than other contemporary professors of bacteriology, he was no recluse. His teaching of students by what he called "lecturettes" was a mixture of a small amount of straight lecturing, with an abundance of demonstration, practical work, personal reminiscence, and viva. These events seemed to take place spontaneously. Although they often lasted two or even three hours, they were never dull, and they certainly produced enthusiasm and good recruits for microbiology.

Remarks from the chair

When the Society for General Microbiology was formed, soon after the end of the second world war, Tulloch was one of its early and keen supporters. In the meeting of that society at St Andrews in the autumn of 1947 he was the very active chairman of one particular session. At the end of every communication, none of which was shortened by the chairman, although many could well have been, Tulloch would be up on his feet, summarising very well what he took to be the speaker's message, and calling for a "vigorous and lively discussion." I well recall that I made a brief, unexciting communication on factors that influenced the formation and non-formation of anthrax spores. I regarded it as no more than an obvious and self-evident statement. I expected no discussion. But, thanks entirely to Tulloch, the discussion was both lively and useful. I thanked him afterwards but he waved the matter aside: "That's what chairmen are supposed to do, but usually do not do it." About a year later I was in Dundee and called on him, with a colleague, mainly as a matter of courtesy. He welcomed my call and asked where I was now working. When I named the Rowett Research Institute, he exploded with wrath, denouncing that institute's works and above all its direction. Until he paused for breath I was unable to explain that the direction of the institute had been entirely changed for one whole year before I joined it.

"Well done," he said, "I really thought better of you than I could have done if you had joined the place as I judged it." He then insisted on taking me to lunch with him at the college club. "Sit there," he ordered, "in that famous historic chair." I knew that I had to ask what made the chair so famous. It was the chair, Tulloch said, in which the great zoology professor, D'Arcy Thomson, FRS, made his famous pronouncement: "My life as a professor has ceased to be that of a gentleman!" The occasion and cause of the pronouncement: when the university of St Andrews introduced teaching during the summer term.

Those days have gone—probably for ever. Things had to change, of course. Privileges could be and were abused; dead wood had to be cut out. Yet those conditions were what made it possible for such as D'Arcy Thomson and Tulloch in their different ways to make most valuable contributions of a kind which will probably not be repeated under present conditions and without which academic life and the community will certainly be poorer.