Pressure on doctors to keep up with technology can be a pain, but it’s nothing new. For John Macintyre, it was not just a pleasure but an all consuming passion.

Macintyre had an astonishingly inventive mind, making some of the earliest sound recordings of the great singers and actors of the late Victorian era. He had humble origins, born the son of a tailor in Glasgow’s High Street in 1857. He became an apprentice “sparkie” (electrician), but an aunt’s bequest enabled him to study medicine. After graduating in 1882 he gained experience in London, Paris, and Vienna.

These twin interests shaped his early career in gaslit Glasgow. As consulting medical electrician, he literally brought electric light to the wards of the Royal Infirmary. He also worked as an ear, nose, and throat specialist, acquiring a house and consulting rooms in Bath Street. By 1893 his private practice was thriving: his opinion was eagerly sought by superstars such as Dame Nellie Melba, Sir Henry Irving, Luisa Tetrazzini, Charles and Fanny Manners, and the Polish musician Ignacy Paderewski.

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Macintyre made his own recording studio, using a phonograph to capture patients’ voices and performances on wax cylinders (possibly the first recordings of Paderewski, early in his musical career). His wide circle of friends included the scientists Lords Kelvin and Blythswood, who came to play with his newfangled acquisition: a kinematograph from the United States. His wide circle of friends included the scientists Lords Kelvin and Blythswood, who came to play with his newfangled acquisition: a kinematograph from the United States. This led to Macintyre’s finest hour. In November 1895 Wilhelm Röntgen discovered x rays at his laboratory in Würzburg, Germany, and he wrote to leading British physicists for help—including Kelvin, who enlisted Macintyre’s support. Amid international excitement about the potential of x rays, Macintyre was inspired.

Ever practical, Macintyre had by March 1896 secured agreement to establish the world’s first x ray department for patients at Glasgow Royal Infirmary. He has been credited with producing the first x ray photographs and the first x ray motion picture, shown first in Glasgow and then at the Royal Society in London. Celebrity patients continued to arrive and sometimes got an x ray photo of their hand as a souvenir (although Macintyre knew of the dangers of radiation exposure). Joseph Conrad visited in September 1898 seeking passage on a ship, months before publishing Heart of Darkness. The journalist and fellow novelist Neil Munro joined them for dinner, listening to Macintyre’s celebrity recordings before drinking and telling stories into the small hours.

Conrad later recounted: “McIntyre [sic] is a scientific swell who talks art, knows artists of all kinds, looks after their throats, you know. He has given himself a lot of trouble in my interest . . . “What we wanted (apparently) was more whisky. We got it. Mrs McIntyre went to bed. At one o’clock Munro and I went out into the street . . . We foregathered very much indeed and I believe Munro didn’t get home till five in the morning.” Conrad later wrote to Macintyre inviting him to visit him in England, “if bohemianism in a farm house does not look dangerous to you.”

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Macintyre’s achievements—as an ENT specialist and a pioneer of radiology—were widely recognised in his lifetime in the United Kingdom and overseas. He was president of the British Laryngological, Rhinological and Otological Association in 1893 and 1900. His death in 1928 triggered much mourning, but his longer term legacy is mixed. Although Glasgow University has a John Macintyre building, this is named after another doctor.

Macintyre’s unique wax recordings were kept in an attic, only to melt in the scorching summer of 1976. Very few films survive from the 19th century, but his x ray movie is one of them [https://movingimage.nls.uk/film/0520], alongside a fragment, preserved by the New York Museum of Modern Art, of the earliest surviving cinema advert [http://bit.ly/29iOIFX]—for Dewar’s whisky.
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