

Obituary

Sir Harry Platt

Sir Harry Platt, the doyen of world orthopaedics, died on 20 December 1986 soon after his one hundredth birthday. He was Emeritus Professor of Orthopaedic Surgery in the University of Manchester, Past President of the College of Surgeons of England, Honorary President of the International Federation of Surgical Colleges, member d'Honneur of SICOT and one of the most outstanding personalities of the surgical world in this century.

His early life was dominated by a tuberculous infection of the knee, which prevented him from going to school and left a permanently stiff joint. Inability to play games allowed him to concentrate on intellectual activities, literature, languages, American history and especially music. He came under the magical spell of Sir Robert Jones in Liverpool, initially as a young patient and later as a pupil and disciple. The passion of his childhood was music. After a summer of indecision, and partly influenced by Robert Jones, he opted for medicine and qualified from the University of Manchester with honours and a Gold Medal in 1909. A decisive period in his training came just before the first World War when he spent a year in the Massachusetts General Hospital and the Children's Hospital in Boston. He was inspired by the enormous vitality of the Boston School and later became a fervent ambassador of good will between England and the United States. During the First World War, he was the surgeon in charge of the Military Hospital in Manchester and performed outstanding work on peripheral nerve injuries, which led to an MD with a gold medal.

Captain H. Platt was present at the inaugural dinner at the founding of the British orthopaedic



Association in London in 1917, and was appointed the first secretary.

After the first world war, his influence rapidly became wider and his international reputation led to the award of an honorary Fellowship of the American College of Surgeons in 1934 when he was still only 48, the first of many honours and distinctions at home and abroad.

With Nobby Clarke, later Sir Henry Osmond Clarke, he created a new department of orthopaedic surgery at the Manchester Royal Infirmary which rapidly developed an international reputa-

tion. In 1939, he became the first Professor of Orthopaedic Surgery at Manchester University, contributing particularly on tumours of bone, dislocations of the shoulder, nerve injuries and hip problems in childhood.

Sir Harry was involved with SICOT from its earliest days. He was not a member of the founding group which met in the Hotel Crillon in Paris in October 1929, but was nominated as the English delegate to the first meeting of the organisation held in Paris in 1930. In 1933, he was secretary of the Congress at its meeting in London and continued to be involved closely with its affairs until the second world war. Many European surgeons became his life-long friends. He was a member of the committee of eight who met in Brussels in 1946 to revive the association. At the first post-war meeting of SICOT in Brussels in October 1946, he was elected Vice-President and fulfilled this role in an exciting meeting in Amsterdam in 1948. He was then elected President and held this office for the next two triennia. At the meeting in Bern in 1954, he was presented with the first Presidential badge by Brian McFarland, then President of the British Orthopaedic Association, on behalf of the British members of SICOT. At the opening session of this meeting, Sir Harry was admitted to the Honorary Doctorate in Medicine of the University of Bern and was described as "that most remarkable pupil of Sir Robert Jones, a master surgeon and a perfect organiser."

He was elected to the Council of the Royal College of Surgeons in 1940 and served until 1958. He was the first orthopaedic surgeon to become President of the College (1954–1957). His Presidency was marked by an expansive vision of the needs and potentialities of surgery at a time of rapid growth in specialisation. He worked tirelessly for the unity of surgery, both at home and abroad and did much to establish the College as a body representative of the whole of surgery in England and Wales.

He was co-founder of the International Federation of Surgical Colleges. The first meeting took

place in Stockholm and Sir Harry became its first President.

As a chief, he had a remarkable, almost uncanny, capacity to lead, inspire and direct his juniors. With all his worldly honours and accomplishments, he still loved to create an aura, in his own words, of "divine discontent" and constantly strove himself for perfection. He was famous for his fiery temper, especially in the operating theatre, his dislike of humbug and his fearless integrity which produced outspoken comments. He had, in those days, a reserved manner which made it difficult to get to know him well, yet behind the exterior, he was a kindly, caring man who loved to reminisce, obtaining infinite satisfaction from listening, understanding and advising his pupils on the problems of the day. He became a life-long counsellor whose judgement was profoundly respected.

After retirement from his Chair in 1951, he became an informed travelling statesman. He had close personal contacts and friends in orthopaedics throughout the world, and retained his legendary memory, energy, intellectual curiosity and productivity. Sir Harry wrote some 50 further articles after retirement. In later years he became deaf and somewhat infirm, but he attended the SICOT meeting in London in 1984 and held court with great gusto at the reception which followed the opening ceremony.

In October 1986, surgeons from around the world gathered in Manchester to honour the occasion of his one hundredth birthday. He insisted, although seated in a wheelchair, on shaking hands with the entire company of over three hundred before the dinner, after which he spoke for twenty five minutes without notes with customary clarity.

A surgeon, teacher, author, musician, and philosopher, Sir Harry Platt was the elder statesman of British surgery. He was a very great man whose influence on surgery and orthopaedics in particular was world wide.

A. H. C. Ratliff