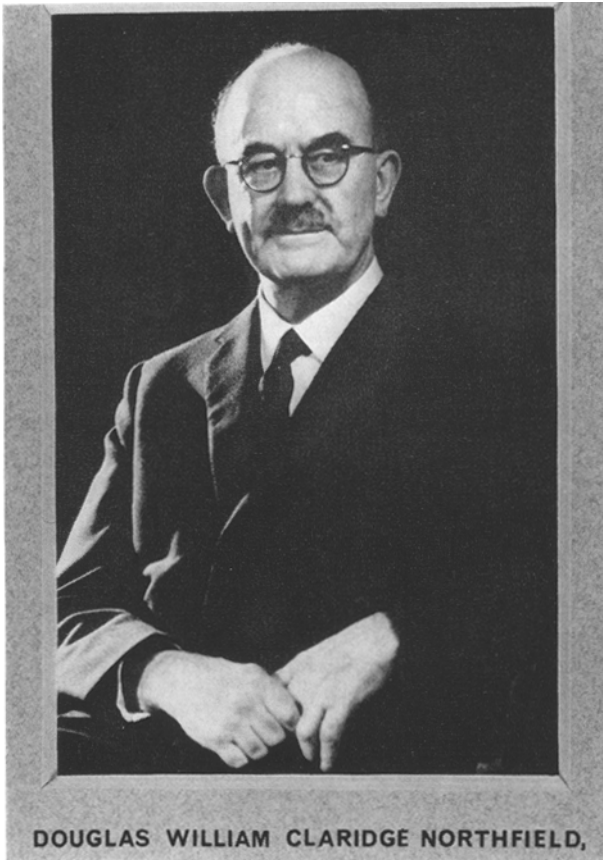


Obituary

D. W. C. Northfield



Mr. D. W. C. Northfield, surgeon in charge of the Neurosurgical Department, the London Hospital from 1938 to 1967 died on 18th July 1976

He was born in 1902, and entered the Dental School at Guy's Hospital in 1918, winning prizes in anatomy and physiology before

graduating in 1923. Immediately he set about qualifying in medicine, and took the conjoint examination of the Royal Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons in 1925. It must have been clear to him that he needed the degree of Master of Surgery to further his career, for in 1930 he took, as a preliminary, the M.B., B.S. London, winning the Gold Medal, and in 1931 the M.S. He had obtained the F.R.C.S. England in 1928.

He was surgical registrar and tutor in anatomy at Guy's Hospital, and had been appointed to a consultant post at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital for Children, Hackney, when in 1934 he abandoned general surgery to become neurosurgical house surgeon to Hugh Cairns at the London. From this lowly post he rose rapidly to become first assistant in the department in which were men who later became leading neurosurgeons in Europe and the Commonwealth. When Cairns left to become Nuffield Professor of Surgery at Oxford, Northfield, after an interval, was appointed to take charge at the London. He was a single-handed neurosurgeon to start with, and he remained inclined to remain so for the rest of his career. In November 1939 the department was moved to an Emergency Medical Services hospital at Chase Farm, Enfield. With a first assistant and a house surgeon who were conscripted, and inexperienced nursing staff he set up a neurosurgical unit there. Conditions were rigorous, for much elective neurosurgery occupied the days and emergencies the nights. There was little clerical or secretarial assistance, but in spite of these problems accurate and detailed notes were kept. No decline in standards was permitted, despite the pressure of work.

During the Allied invasion of Normandy, Northfield headed a unit for the reception of casualties on the south coast of England. At the end of the war he returned to the London and, although the department became a two-man unit and expanded greatly in size, it was always divided between two hospitals, and Northfield ran his own part very much as an individual. He continued to be extremely active in clinical neurosurgery until his retirement, and from then until his terminal illness his interest showed no signs of flagging.

Northfield was a figure somewhat apart in British neurosurgery, for he was a man of strong and independent character whose standards and ideals were not easy for others to attain. Perhaps because of this he showed throughout his career a preference for working in a relatively small unit with a small team, so that everything could be done according to his wishes. He had not the least suggestion in his personality of that obsessiveness and love of elaborate ritual for its own sake which is thought by many outsiders to be a characteristic

of neurosurgeons. His ideals could be seen simply to be that each patient should have the best possible consideration and treatment and that nothing should allow the standards of these to fall. Nor had he any store of egotism or self-importance. He took his work with great seriousness and was certainly aware of his own high skill, but he was a genuinely modest man and was assertive only when the requirements of the patients or the hospital and his responsibilities towards these required it. Then his comments could be devastating. He was deeply ingrained with the habit of making his own decisions on all matters and he did so always in a systematic and grave fashion, marshalling all the evidence carefully and reviewing it with the clear critical intelligence which was one of his powerful characteristics. His opinion was much sought in clinical matters and in wider fields of administration and policy, but his independence of mind probably acted as a handicap to him in committee work, for he was not a man for the habitual use of compromise.

His international reputation was based not only on his intellect and character and clinical powers but to an important degree on his operative skill. He could have had few rivals in this, for he had a delicacy of touch which appealed even to an inexperienced house surgeon, a capacity for planning and carrying through an extensive and difficult operation without apparently encountering difficulties and checks, and a remarkable balance of judgement which allowed him to choose with almost unerring skill when to be radical and when conservative. The whole field of neurosurgery interested him and he was always receptive of new ideas and techniques. He took a special interest in the surgery of epilepsy in the latter portion of his career and, when it was current, psychosurgery. During the 1940's he did a large series of splanchnic ectomies for hypertension. He was at his best in difficult tumour work, and excelled with acoustic nerve tumours, basal meningiomas, and pituitary tumours.

Many important positions and honours were awarded him. He was Secretary and later President of the Society of British Neurological Surgeons, and President of the Section of Neurology of the Royal Society of Medicine. He was acknowledged in the United States of America by corresponding Membership of the American Association of Neurological Surgeons and the American Neurological Society. In 1966 he was elected a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, an indication of the regard in which he was held in medical as well as surgical circles in Britain.

Perhaps his greatest achievement was the indelible impression, a permanent influence, one might say, in many cases, on a generation of junior medical officers at the London who passed through his

department, saw his dedication, and carried the impression of this with them in their later careers. Many subsequently entered some branch of the neurological sciences.

As a man Douglas Northfield was of reserved and somewhat stern external aspect but those who got to know him and were rewarded with his friendship found in him an extraordinary warmth, affection, and loyalty, and even people who were not close to him could recognize the kindness and consideration with which he dealt with patients. For them nothing was too much trouble. He was devoted to his wife, whom he nursed for some years in her terminal illness, and to his family. His death has removed a great surgeon and a good man from British neurosurgery.

T. T. King (London)