

History of Canadian Anaesthesia

Walter Muir 1880-1957



Walter Lawson Muir was born in Truro, Nova Scotia in 1880. He attended King's Collegiate School and King's College in Windsor, Nova Scotia, where he graduated Bachelor of Arts in 1903. His grandfather, Samuel Allan Muir, was a pioneer general practitioner in Truro, Nova Scotia. His father, Dr. William Muir, followed in the practice and he, himself, studied medicine at McGill where he graduated in 1907. He interned at the Montreal General and the Montreal Maternity Hospitals before joining the family practice in Truro in 1910. At the outbreak of the First World War, he joined the Canadian Army Expeditionary Force serving overseas as battalion Medical Officer. After the war he returned to Halifax to the practice of anaesthesia and was soon on the staff of the Camp Hill Army Hospital, the Victoria General Hospital and the Halifax Infirmary. At this time, anaesthesia was only just beginning to be recognized as a specialty and very few anaesthetists in Canada were able to make a living exclusively in the specialty.

As the most prominent anaesthetist in Halifax and indeed in Nova Scotia, he served in 1921-22 as a member of the Executive Committee of the Canadian Society of Anaesthetists, which had been founded in 1920. He was elected President in 1924, following Dr. Samuel Johnston of Toronto, the first President, Dr. Charles LaRoque of Montreal, and Dr. William Webster of Winnipeg. Walter Muir made some pertinent observations in his presidential address (*Anesth Analg* 1924; 3: 203-7). His claim for a "first" in Nova Scotia is hardly likely to be challenged. He recounted the story of Mr. J.B.D. Fraser, chemist of Pictou, Nova Scotia, who made his own chloroform and administered it to his wife in childbirth on 22 March, 1848. Chloroform had already been used in Halifax at the "Poor Asylum" according to the "Presbyterian Witness" of 5 February, 1848.

He went on to observe - "To us, who are accustomed to using United States ether and Scottish chloroform ... it behooves us to see that those (anaesthetic agents) brought into the country are of the very highest purity. There is often noticeable difference in potency of ether, especially, and to a less degree of chloroform ... two samples of

the same manufacturer's product varying greatly. Would it not be possible to have established what one might call a Central Bureau of Standards to which could be sent for examination and report samples of anaesthetic agents which appeared to be possessed of some questionable ingredients?"

Walter Muir went on to stress the teaching of anaesthesia, in a sentence which reminds us of the elementary state of the specialty. "Let us bear in mind that in all probability one of the first calls a young graduate receives will be to administer an anaesthetic for one of his older colleagues."

Walter Muir was a popular figure in social and medical circles in Nova Scotia, a keen churchman and member of the Board of Governors of King's College, now removed to Halifax. He represented the best of what we now call the "old school" of anaesthetists, at that time one of the few dedicated to the teaching and recognition of anaesthesia as an independent specialty. His name deserves an honourable place in the history of the development of anaesthesia in Canada.

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