IN MEMORIAM

HAROLD ARTHUR THOMAS FAIRBANK
Kt., D.S.O., O.B.E., M.S.Lond., F.R.C.S.Eng.,

1876–1961

Sir Thomas Fairbank will be remembered as a leader of surgery in Great Britain who shared with Sir Robert Jones, his senior colleague and friend, the pioneering endeavours of the nineteen-twenties by which orthopaedic surgery became recognised and established as one of the major parts of general surgery and medicine. He will be remembered also as Tom, or more affectionately as Uncle Tom, who again shared with Robert Jones the sterling qualities of integrity, sincerity and modesty, with courteous thoughtfulness for juniors such that they became inspired as disciples. Thus each of these leaders achieved the immortality of which we can be certain—the stimulating influence of one life upon the lives of others so that their own contributions to the welfare and happiness of mankind are multiplied and perpetuated.

Thomas Fairbank was a founder member of the British Orthopaedic Association in February 1918, and when he died in February of this year he shared the surviving influence of our founders with only two others, Rocyn Jones and Harry Platt. He was vice-president to Robert Jones throughout the five years of that memorable leadership; then president himself in 1926–27; and thereafter Emeritus Fellow, the first so to be honoured. In 1929 he was a founder member of the International Society of Orthopaedic and Traumatic Surgery,
and later vice-president in Bologna and Rome. He was vice-president of the orthopaedic section of the British Medical Association at its centenary meeting in 1932; president of the orthopaedic section, and of the paediatric section of the Royal Society of Medicine, in later years gaining the rare distinction of honorary fellowship. He was Robert Jones Lecturer in the Royal College of Surgeons of England in 1938, but even more was he inspired by the Lady Jones Lectureship in Liverpool in 1929.

It is through the allegiance of Fairbank to Liverpool and to Robert Jones that I first met him. Then I did not know that he was one of a family of five whose father, a medical practitioner in Windsor, had died when he was young; that he was an Epsom boy who had qualified in the Charing Cross Hospital Medical School; had foregone his earlier destiny to dental surgery; had been a civil surgeon in the Boer War, meeting Lord Roberts, Lord Kitchener, Rudyard Kipling and Conan Doyle; in the first world war had driven mules and ambulances in Salonika—or was it Greece or Macedonia—I did not know. I knew only that he was the great leader of orthopaedic surgery in London, consultant to King’s College Hospital where he had established the first fracture clinic in London, and to the Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children and the Lord Mayor Treloar Orthopaedic Hospital at Alton. What mattered to me was that he was the first external examiner for the Liverpool degree of M.Ch.Orth. and that with Robert Jones he was examining me as one of the first three candidates. Could I ever forget his grumpy kindness when having asked me to do a Stöffels bilateral obturator neurectomy by the abdominal approach he assisted me with a retractor in one hand and a lighted match within the stiff cadaveric abdominal walls with the other?

In later years when I assisted him at Great Ormond Street, and his endeavour was concentrated on trying to solve the problems of congenital dislocation of the hip, could I ever forget the kind growl of his voice that was so tender to children that they knew at once that he could be trusted? In later years when he had the heavy responsibility of directing the orthopaedic organisation of the Emergency Medical Services of Great Britain in the second world war, and I had to compete gently for another orthopaedic service in the Royal Air Force, could there ever have been warmer or more courteous understanding? In days of peace did he not hold the greatest second-opinion private practice ever known by reason not only of his wisdom but his integrity? And as if we were not already bound as disciples, could he have given more stimulus to those of us who were young in creating the British Volume of the Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery than his series of contributions on disorders of bone growth, which had been a life-study and a life-collection, over which he chuckled so happily for so many years after his deafness commanded retirement from active practice, and was then published as a classic with the modest title: Atlas of General Affections of the Skeleton.

One other important contribution he made to surgery has for the moment been dimmed by reason of the development of chemotherapeutic antibiotic drugs. But most surely it will arise again and, just as he learned it from Arbuthnot Lane, we will again learn it from him because sooner or later we will know that the basic protection of surgical cutting can never be antibiosis or antisepsis but only asepsis. His operative technique was superb, and only the angry young men of welfare states will say that non-touch technique as practised by this grand old man is difficult or impossible or unnecessary.

So brief a tribute as this to a great surgeon, kind counsellor and good friend would be unhappy if tribute had not been paid during life, but many of Thomas Fairbank’s colleagues and friends shared the honour of a Festschrift on the occasion of his eightieth birthday in the publication of the British Volume of the Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery in February 1956. All of them, and all of us, bow in homage and treasure our memories of the man whose sincere and happy life is shown in the snapshot chosen for printing today by his son John, now in the orthopaedic service of the Cambridge Hospitals, and Lady Fairbank whose devotion to life was centred in the work of her husband.

R. W.-J.