

Dr. John Stewart

DAVID L. MacINTOSH, B.A., B.Sc., '39

JOHNS Stewart was born on the 3rd day of July, 1848, at Black River, St. George's Channel, a village on the scenic Island of Cape Breton. His father, the Rev. Murdoch Stewart, a pioneer minister of the Presbyterian Church and a Scotsman, was a man of great ability, a graduate of Aberdeen with distinction in mathematics and classics. His mother was also from Scotland.

Although John attended the country school at Black River for several years, his early education was obtained chiefly in his home, where his father instructed not only his own family of ten but also other children of the community. Here, under the influence and teaching of his scholarly father, John obtained a thorough foundation in the classics and in English literature. He studied also mathematics, but this subject did not at that time hold the same interest for him. Religious teaching was combined with secular in that home and religious duty was not neglected. The influence and teaching of his pious parents moulded into his life deep religious belief and moral rectitude. The rugged beauty of his native island awakened in him a delight in nature. He grew tall and strong, and took a keen delight in sport, but he liked most of all to walk in the open country, studying the birds and searching out the flora.

In 1862 he went to Truro to continue his education, attending first the Model School and later the Normal College. In 1866 he returned to his home in Black River to teach in the country school, and the following year he was appointed to the teaching staff of the Sydney Academy.

In the late fall of 1868, not yet having decided upon his profession, John Stewart, now twenty years of age, went to Scotland to undertake the care of a farm for an aunt. During the three years spent there, he used much of his spare time studying. He read many of the masterpieces of English literature, and also the whole of Aeneid—for pleasure. After spending one year in Arts at Edinburgh under such noted teachers as Blackie in Greek, Sellers in Latin, and Masson in English Literature, he returned to Nova Scotia to enter the Dalhousie Medical School, which had been established four years previously in 1868. At Dalhousie he and his brother were instrumental in setting on foot a Dalhousie Athletic Association.

In 1874 he returned to Edinburgh to complete his medical course. It was not without a feeling of regret that he turned from the study of the purely scientific subjects. When Stewart entered the Medical School at Edinburgh, Joseph Lister was Professor of Surgery, and, in his wards of the hospital, his recent discovery of the value of antisepsis in surgery was being applied. Although the system was being used in other hospitals, notably in Germany, by surgeons who had visited Lister's wards, the converts to the new doctrine were still few. Most surgeons were either

openly hostile or indifferent. The value of the new system had yet to be demonstrated to an incredulous world. Stewart, however, was soon convinced. His letters to his Cape Breton home were increasingly filled with enthusiasm for his new "Master", and there Lister's name was a household word long before success had made it familiar to all. Stewart was associated with Lister successively as dresser, clerk, and house-surgeon.

There was a remarkable similarity in the lives of these two men. Both guided their lives by religious principle; both were kindly and generous, and sympathetic to the needs of their patients; both were scholarly; both delighted in natural scenery and in the study of natural history and botany; both were friendly. It is not surprising, therefore, that their association developed into a deep and understanding friendship. Stewart was one of the few men to whom Lister ever revealed anything of his inner life.

The years that Stewart spent with Lister were the most eventful ones in the lives of both. Surgery was awakening to the realization that a new day had dawned. That was, perhaps, the most important period of the whole history of Medicine. The descriptions which Dr. Stewart afterwards wrote of that period are both accurate and well written. He was master of a distinguished style which reflected his thorough familiarity with the classics and English literature. The following account of the now-historic year in London with Lister is taken largely from his own writings.

In 1877, when Lister was elected to the Chair of Clinical Surgery at King's Hospital, London, Dr. Stewart, who had just graduated with the degree of M.B., C.M., from Edinburgh, accompanied him; as did Mr. (later Sir) Watson Cheyne and two juniors who had not yet completed their medical studies—Dr. Henry Dobie and Dr. James Altham. These men had been trained by Lister in the use of antiseptic methods in the wards at Edinburgh, and were indispensable to him in demonstrating these methods to the London surgeons, who were still, with few exceptions, openly hostile or indifferent. The inaugural lecture on bacteriology, a nameless science at that time, was well received, many leading scientific men as well as surgeons being present. But the succeeding days were discouraging.

"Whatever Lister's own thoughts may have been," Dr. Stewart later wrote, "the next few weeks were to us of his staff the abomination of desolation. There seemed to be a colossal apathy, an inconceivable indifference to the light which to our minds shone so brightly; a monstrous inertia to the force of new ideas.

"We four unhappy men wandered about, now in the wards of King's, now through older and more famous hospitals, and wondered why men did not open their eyes. In these wards the air was heavy with suppuration, the shining eye and flushed cheek spoke eloquently of surgical fever. We would show them how things should be done! But how? We had no patients. We thought of the crowded hours of glorious work in Edinburgh, where Lister had half a dozen wards with sixty to seventy patients,

and groaned over our two wards with capacity for a couple of dozen, but only empty beds. We remembered with enthusiasm about the introductory lecture of a session in Edinburgh, where the theatre would be crowded with four hundred eager listeners, and our hearts were chilled by the listless air of the twelve or twenty students who lounged in to the lecture at King's. And when cases did come they were curiously unfit."

But happier days soon followed. Attention was drawn to Lister's wards by a "series of successful operations, which demonstrated the value of the new method. An operation for fracture of the patella, a very daring operation in those days, drew severe criticism from "one of the biggest ornaments in London surgery": "Now when this poor fellow dies, it is proper that some one should proceed against that man for malpraxis." The operation was successful. A few days later Lister removed a limb with a large tumour at the upper end of the femur, a case which had been discharged by one of the leading hospitals as inoperable. "I think it was when this case was dressed," Dr. Stewart writes, "and members of the hospital staff and students saw a comfortable and happy patient with no rise of temperature and a normal pulse . . . and the large wound with no trace of inflammation and no pus, that their eyes were opened to the wonder of it all." After these convincing successes, special permission was obtained from the Governors of the hospital to undertake an ovariectomy, an operation considered so dangerous that the staff had been forbidden to perform it. The operation was performed by Dr. Wood of the staff of the hospital, the little ward full of surgeons who watched, "amid a breathless silence and in a veritable Scotch mist of carbolic vapour." The patient made an uneventful recovery.

That year spent in London was a memorable one for Dr. Stewart. No longer could the value of the antiseptic method be disputed or ignored. Indifference and apathy were swept aside, and the new light flooded with its purifying and cleansing rays every corner of the former dark house of surgery. The fame of Lister was immortalized. John Stewart as assistant and personal friend of Lister shares that fame. In the words of Lord Moynihan, "Lister opened the gates for the mercy of mankind". To this Dr. Fraser-Harris fittingly added: "John Stewart helped him to swing back those gates."

"As I look back to that memorable year," Dr. Stewart later wrote, "I feel that I scarcely realized the great advantages and privileges I enjoyed. In the course of my work I met some of the most distinguished surgeons and teachers of the time. To have been introduced to Paget by Lister—is not that a memory to cherish?"

In the fall of the year 1878, one year from the time he came to London, Dr. Stewart returned to Nova Scotia. Though urged by Lister to remain with him, and encouraged by his father to do so, yet he was determined to return to carry out his original intention,—to practise in his native province. But little had Stewart dreamed when he went to Edinburgh, that he was to carry back with him a torch to light a new era in

surgery in his native province. He was the pioneer of antiseptic surgery in Nova Scotia, and among the first pioneers in Canada.

Dr. Stewart's first practice in Nova Scotia was in the town of Pictou. This practice soon spread from the town into the surrounding country and then throughout the province. As a practitioner he rapidly gained the confidence of his colleagues, and more and more was called upon in consultation.

After the large hospitals of Edinburgh and London, practice in a small town without hospital facilities offered many difficulties. But he was thoroughly familiar with his craft. Operations were sometimes performed on the kitchen table, by the light of a kerosene lamp held in none too steady hands, and with a willing but untrained anaesthetist. Always antiseptic technique was used, and always chloroform. In 1914 Dr. Stewart wrote in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*: "I have been giving chloroform and watching its administration for forty years and I have not yet seen a death from chloroform. . . . I believe that chloroform when properly given is the most convenient, most easily manageable, most universally applicable, and safest of anaesthetics." The method he used was the Edinburgh method, "Plenty of air, and plenty of chloroform." He never lost a patient with this anaesthetic.

Dr. Stewart by his kindness and cheerful manner won the hearts of all who came in contact with him. He gave of his services to rich and poor alike, and thought little of worldly honours or pecuniary reward. It was such unselfish service that made him loved and revered throughout the province, and many are the stories which are related by common folk of those early days of his practice.

One such story which has been related to me, illustrates so beautifully and truthfully the character of Dr. Stewart that I wish to insert it here, even though the detail may be wanting in accuracy. The patient, a woman of middle age, had returned to her home from the hospital, because it had been decided there that an operation would be inadvisable. Dr. Stewart, at his own request, was taken to see the patient by her doctor. He decided that an operation held some hope for the woman's life, and obtained her consent to an operation. The condition of the patient did not permit her return to the hospital, so the kitchen was prepared to serve as an operating room. When all was ready, and the anaesthetist was about to apply the chloroform mask, the room was hushed, and Dr. Stewart bowed his head, and prayed in tones that all in the room could hear. How like Lister, who, following his first operation, wrote: "Just before the operation began, I recollected that there was only one Spectator whom it was important to consider . . . and this gave me firmness."

Although his practice kept him very busy, Dr. Stewart found time for physical recreation. He played lacrosse and football, and took long walking tours with friends, visiting many parts of the province on foot. The Pictou Athletic Association was organized as a result of his efforts.

In 1891 he visited England and Scotland, and made his first visit to the continent, spending most of his time in Germany and Switzerland.

He had many friends in Europe, men who had come to London to study at close hand Listerian principles.

In 1894, following another voyage overseas, he moved his home from Pictou to Halifax. Here he practised as a consulting surgeon till the time of his death. During the fifteen years spent in Pictou, and in later years, he travelled a great deal both in Canada and the United States. Wherever he went, he visited hospitals and made new friends. Before 1914, he made four more crossings, visiting both England and the continent.

At the age of sixty-seven years, Dr. Stewart was placed in command of the No. 7 Canadian Stationary Hospital (Dalhousie Unit) C. E. F., which was set on foot in the latter days of 1915, and sailed from Halifax in January, 1916. After six months of training at Shorncliffe in England, they landed in France, and the hospital was for some time located in the city of Havre. Dr. Stewart's ambition for service nearer the front was realized when the hospital was moved up to Arques. The first casualties to be treated here were a group of German prisoners, with whom Dr. Stewart could converse freely in their own language. It was while the hospital was situated here that Dr. Stewart celebrated his sixty-ninth birthday, an occasion to be remembered yet more from the fact that King George V. visited his hospital on that very day.

In the spring of 1918, Dr. Stewart was called back to England to act as consultant surgeon to Canadian Hospitals located there. In 1919, "Mentioned in Despatches", and decorated by the King with the C.B.E., he returned to Canada. Dr. Stewart never forgot the name or services of any member who served on the staff of the No. 7 Stationary Hospital, and this fact was most clearly evident at the time of the annual reunions.

He was made Dean of the Faculty of Medicine of Dalhousie University in 1921, a position which he held till 1932, the year before his death. He was an authority on Medical Education. It was on the suggestion of Dr. Stewart that the Lister Memorial Club of the Canadian Medical Association was founded, and he was chosen to give the First Listerian Oration, which he did at the annual meeting of the Association in Ottawa, 1924. "No more beautiful, nor more poetical, no more loving nor true words in honour of Lister's memory have been penned than those which John Stewart wrote in the introductory paragraphs of the First Listerian Oration." This testimony is from the Fifth Oration, delivered by Dr. Edward Archibald in 1936. "The First Oration," he continues, "being the fruit of intimate service and companionship, will stand always as the most authoritative account in Canada of Lister's life and character. It will stand too as a model of English prose."

Many honours were conferred upon Dr. Stewart. In 1905 he was President of the Canadian Medical Association; from 1906-1916, President of the Provincial Medical Board. He was twice President of the Medical Society of Nova Scotia. In 1925 he was President of the Dominion Medical Council, of which he was a member for many years. On Lister's death in 1912 the memorial article in the *Edinburgh Medical Journal* was written by Dr. Stewart. He was honored with the degree of LL.D., from

McGill in 1910, from Edinburgh in 1913, and from Dalhousie in 1919. At the time of the Lister Centenary in 1927, Edinburgh again honoured him by conferring the Honorary F. R. C. S. That year was also the fiftieth anniversary of his own graduation, and was celebrated by the Pictou County Medical Association and the Nova Scotia Medical Association with dinners and presentations. He was for many years President of the Nova Scotia Branch of the British and Foreign Bible Society, and throughout his life an active member of the Presbyterian Church.

Dr. John Stewart died on December 26th, 1933, after a brief illness and was buried in Pictou.

The recent passing of Dr. Fraser Harris, who was for many years associated with Dalhousie University, and a friend of Dr. Stewart, calls to mind his tribute:

"A fine old Highland gentleman who never said an unkind or a hasty word of anyone, has passed over into the peace that passeth all understanding, and our profession has in consequence lost an atmosphere of sweetness and light."

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To set a standard where the plain is high
Which life's recruits may proudly emulate:
To take those graces that in phrases die
And in heart throbs make them articulate:
To lay one's service where a country's need
Erects her altar, and her incense rises:
To give the poor the best nor deem the meed
Of speechless gratitude the worst of prizes:
To show how real worth may wear the cloak
Of modesty, and it not look amiss:
To be enshrined in hearts of humble folk,
And those of learned guilds—ah, surely this
Is an attainment realized by few,
But manifest, but eminent in you.

ALEXANDER LOUIS FRASER, 1934.

"The basis of medicine is sympathy and the desire to help others, and whatever is done with this end must be called medicine."—From Dr. Payne Quoted in Osler's book.

"The physician must generalize the disease and individualize the patient".—*Hufeland*.