OBITUARY NOTICE

Scott Thomson
30 September 1909—9 March 1992

Scott Thomson, Emeritus Professor of Medical Microbiology at the University of Wales College of Medicine, died on 9 March 1992.

Thomas Scotland (Scott) Thomson was born at Leven, Fife, on 30 Sept. 1909. He was educated at Dunfermline High School where he achieved the coveted title of Dux in 1928; shortly afterwards, he became a medical student at the University of Edinburgh and qualified MB ChB in 1933. Scott then spent a year in general practice in Leeds but in the following year he was appointed RMO at the City of Edinburgh Infectious Diseases Hospital and in the same year he was awarded the Crichton Research Fellowship and appointed Assistant Lecturer in Bacteriology at the University of Edinburgh. Subsequently, he became a Lecturer and then obtained the senior post as Lewis Cameron Lecturer in Bacteriology in 1938. Two years later, he was appointed Bacteriologist to the County Council of Dumfriesshire and Pathologist to the Dumfries and Galloway Royal Infirmary.

It is worth reflecting on the immense impact that infectious diseases made on life in the 1930s. Scott used to recall the disillusionment he experienced in his formative years as a clinical student; during ward rounds conducted by senior physicians, who demonstrated brilliantly the multitude of physical signs in patients suffering from severe chest infections, he used to ask expectantly about treatment but was always brushed off with “Oh, perhaps a little Mist. Soda. Chlor. Co. or possibly Mist. Gent. Alk.” Thus, he realised early in his career the great imbalance between the expertise in diagnostic skills and the paucity of any form of effective treatment, a view that was reinforced by a year in general practice. Scott felt, therefore, that the only way to resolve this profound disillusionment was to make laboratory medicine his career. During his years as a member of the Bacteriology Department of Edinburgh University, his research work led to the publication of numerous papers. Some of these related to streptococcal diseases and included attempts at therapeutic intervention and extensive epidemiological studies; Scott studied mathematics and statistics when he was in post at the University and was thus able to apply this knowledge most effectively. A number of his publications on Natural Immunity—mostly concerning natural antibodies and complement—formed the basis of his Edinburgh MD for which he was awarded the Gold Medal and he was also awarded the Gunning Prize in Bacteriology for one section of these works. Scott’s career was thus firmly based in laboratory medicine; however, he never lost touch with the clinical component of his work—his joint publications on

rheumatic fever included topics such as changing heart murmurs in this disease. He obtained the MRCP Ed. in 1940.

World War II was responsible for the second phase of Scott’s career. He joined the RAMC and then, as Major Thomson, was Pathologist to various military hospitals until 1943 when he was appointed by the War Office to be the bacteriologist to the Penicillin Research Team, the core of which was the Control Unit consisting of a surgeon, a pathologist and technicians. A strategy was agreed with the MRC Penicillin Committee to concentrate most of the penicillin in one area of the main battle activity, which at the time (September 1943) was Italy. The object was to obtain the maximum amount of information on the performance of this new drug in the field. Scott arrived with his fellow members of the Unit at Bari in December 1943 and subsequently moved to western

Italy, to near Monte Cassino; he was responsible for all of the world's supply of penicillin during these months! The work continued to 1945 and gave rise to a number of publications which together give a classical account of the use of the first-ever antibiotic in thousands of cases of battle trauma. In some of these publications, the relative importance of the many factors influencing wound infection was evaluated with the aid of statistical methodology.

After the war, Scott was appointed Director of the Regional Public Health Laboratory, Cardiff. With his pre-war academic background at Edinburgh, he very soon became involved in the teaching of bacteriology at what was then the Welsh National School of Medicine and was Honorary Consultant Bacteriologist to the United Cardiff Hospitals. In recognition of his services to the medical school, the University of Wales created a part-time Chair of Bacteriology. Scott occupied this honorary Chair until 1970 when he relinquished the PHLS directorship and became full-time Professor of Medical Microbiology, at just about the time when the medical school moved to the new University Hospital of Wales at Heath Park. He retired in September 1974.

During the third phase of his career, Scott developed and expanded the Cardiff Regional PHL; the UK Tuberculosis Reference Laboratory was affiliated to the Cardiff laboratory which also became one of the four designated diagnostic laboratories for smallpox—incidentally handling an outbreak of this (now eradicated) disease in S. Wales. He was an enthusiastic participant in the numerous PHLS group surveys, using his above average knowledge of statistics to good effect. However, he contributed particularly to the study of intestinal infectious diseases and his research included investigations into the enteric fevers using a quantitative approach to bacteriological examination; a large number of publications followed from this work. Perhaps his most important contribution to this field was his work on infantile gastroenteritis, a cause of considerable infant mortality in the 1950s. From duodenal intubation on a series of infants with this disease, Scott found that massive infection occurred without apparent tissue damage. This led him to study the mechanism of water and ion transport across membranes, work which was supported by a MRC grant; the finding of the extreme sensitivity of Na^+ movement to pCO_2 was presented at the 3rd International Congress of Clinical Pathology.

I first met Scott Thomson early in 1965 when he came into the laboratory at St Mary's Hospital, London, which I was sharing with Geoff Colman and Bill Noble. He introduced himself and then asked "why are you not applying for my Senior Lectureship". I did; and thus began an association which lasted through the final decade of Scott's career and beyond. He was a very warm, generous and human person with an almost puckish sense of humour. An example of this was his description of one of the short cases in his Membership examination in 1940 where a

very elderly examiner pressed him about the treatment of a patient with Bell's Palsy; Scott refused to be drawn but he wondered if it would be worth telling the old "so and so" he would apply a leech but thought better of this piece of facetiousness, when suddenly the examiner hammered on the table and asked "young man, have ye no heard of a leech?". He was also a man acquainted with great personal sorrow. He was devastated when multiple sclerosis was diagnosed in his wife and much of his very active life was then caught up in coping with this sad situation; his two daughters were very young when this happened. He continued, nevertheless, to be an effective PHLS Director and University Professor. Medical Microbiology then had begun to expand rapidly and he turned his creative energies to building up the Department and encouraging those junior to himself to achieve high standards in teaching, in examining, in service bacteriology and in research, thus earning for the Department a national reputation. Scott belonged very much to the generation of "Olympian" senior doctors; they are the target of a great deal of criticism today but, on the other hand, they had the outstanding virtue of personal integrity. Scott had this virtue to the full and at the same time was very popular with staff and students alike. He is survived by his wife, Dorothy, and by his two daughters, one a dentist and the other an architect, and by five grandchildren who brought him great joy.

T. D. BROGAN

I am pleased to be allowed to add a few reminiscences of my one time chief to those of my colleague Tom Brogan.

Professor Scott Thomson was known as 'Scottie' far beyond the circle of his immediate friends. It was an accolade to a man whose concerns and sympathies went far beyond his direct responsibilities. Whether they were students under pressure or academics, often far away, his humanity was in evidence, though probably not to those who were to benefit from it. "Do you know so and so", he once asked me about a very able medical scientist. I did, and he told me that he thought it wrong that so able a person had been overlooked in the Distinction Awards. Scottie gave me the task of drafting a biographical note for his use at a meeting in London. His pleasure was immense, when he was able to tell me that he had succeeded in "putting things right". There are many other examples of his generous intervention. Beyond his compassion, which had its origin in his vocation as a doctor, Scottie had broad sympathies derived from his understanding of the history of Europe, about which he often spoke. This interest in history informed his lively teaching of medical microbiology within the framework of infectious diseases, with which his career had begun.

Scott Thomson's early work was seminal and is not forgotten in several areas of bacteriology but in later years his personal difficulties diverted his attention from the bench and the welfare of his family became a pre-occupation. He then said often that he did not

understand the “real science” of modern microbiology. Scottie believed it—he was incapable of cant or pretence. Those privileged to work in the environment of the department he ably created in the early 1960s, knew better and often sought his advice and benefited from his scientific insights.

Scott Thomson was one of the leaders of the Welsh National School of Medicine of his day. His achievements are his monuments and amongst these one of the most enduring will be the affection in which he was held.

M. SUSSMAN