Sir George Thomas Beatson

D C Smith

Division of Surgery, The Victoria Infirmary, Glasgow G42 9TY, UK

Given his family background, it is somewhat surprising that Beatson ever entered the medical profession. His family origins were around the town of Campbeltown at the southern end of the Kintyre peninsula on the west coast of Scotland. His father, George Stewart Beatson, was Surgeon General to the Indian Army and his mother was the daughter of an officer in the Ceylon Rifles. His father came from a family with sea-going traditions. Despite this strong connection with the military and the sea, George Beatson eventually decided to follow in his father's medical footsteps.

Beatson was born in 1848 at Trincomalee in Ceylon while his father was on a tour of duty. He returned to the United Kingdom for his education at King William’s College on the Isle of Man. After becoming head boy in 1866 he proceeded to Clare College, Cambridge, qualifying with a BA in 1871. It is suspected, but not confirmed, that the reason he spent 5 years at Cambridge, instead of the customary 3, was because he was attending some of the medical classes at the small medical school within the University of Cambridge.

He returned to Scotland in 1871 to undertake medical studies at the University of Edinburgh, where he graduated MB CM in 1874. The young Dr Beatson served as a house surgeon with Lord Lister and he seems to have come under his spell in a major way. Lister’s contribution to surgery, in addition to the introduction of antisepsis, seems to have been to encourage those around him to think for themselves about how they might address some of the clinical problems which they encountered.

For the next 4 years little is known of what Beatson did or where he worked, but in his seminal article, which appeared in 1896 on oophorectomy and breast cancer, he points out that his interest in this subject was aroused during a prolonged stay on a country estate as a medical attendant to a member of the Scottish aristocracy suffering from serious mental illness. During this time he was apparently able to observe some of the changes in the physiology and anatomy of sheep during and after lambing. Nothing is known of where these important observations took place and Beatson reappears in official medical circles in 1878 when he moved to Glasgow, where he engaged in general practice in the west end of the city. His early training with Lister, however, meant that his liking for surgery did not lie fallow for very long and shortly afterwards he joined the staff of the Western Infirmary in Glasgow as an assistant surgeon, subsequently a dispensary surgeon working with the holder of the Regius Chair, Professor Sir George McLeod.

In 1887 the Glasgow Cancer and Skin Institution had been opened at 409 St Vincent Street by a Dr Hugh Murray. This subsequently moved to a new site in Hill Street in 1890 and was renamed ‘The Glasgow Cancer Hospital’ - one of the earliest of such institutions in the country. Although apparently trained as a surgeon, Dr Murray had gradually come to the view that surgery would have a diminishing place in the treatment of cancer.

When George Beatson joined the staff of The Cancer Hospital a few years later the scene was set for a major confrontation between the two. Beatson held strongly to the view that surgery had a major part to play in treating cancer, which was even then a major cause of mortality and morbidity in the city of Glasgow.

Eventually Beatson emerged as the winner and Dr Murray left the staff of The Cancer Hospital. Beatson at this stage of his career seems to have developed all the attributes of a military man - giving orders, expecting them to be carried out without dissent and drawing up plans of campaign for whatever task he undertook. With him at the helm, The Cancer Hospital developed and expanded twice, with what was almost a complete rebuilding in the early years of the twentieth century. Several of Scotland’s
premier titled families appear regularly on the list of patrons of the hospital.

In 1896 Beatson published his article entitled ‘On the treatment of inoperable cases of carcinoma of the mamma - suggestions for a new method of treatment, with illustrative cases’. During the course of this article Beatson recalls his observations of lactation in sheep after lambing. He noted the significant changes which took place in the ovary during lactation and for the first time postulated a non-nervous connection between two organs, with one organ seeming to control the other. However, he incorrectly associated the changes in the pregnant breast with the pathological changes that take place when it is affected by malignancy. It was this serendipitous postulate that encouraged him to investigate ovarian removal in women with locally advanced breast cancer. In fact the hospital records show that while he was investigating the procedure Beatson carried out ovarian removal on six patients, but his original article only reports on three. The other three, who remained anonymous, did not fare particularly well.

Despite the initial success in some of his cases, the effect was short lived and the theatre book from The Glasgow Cancer Hospital shows that he never again performed this procedure to any great extent. It was left to others outwith Glasgow to assess it on a larger scale.

Beatson was a man of seemingly boundless energy. His military background seems to have come out in his desire to develop a substantial force of medical volunteers in the west of Scotland - the fore-runner of the Royal Army Medical Corps. He was also responsible for forging the Scottish Branch of the Red Cross in a form that functioned almost independently of the British Red Cross.

During the First World War the Scottish branch had a formidable track record in providing fleets of ambulances, which were transported to France, a fully equipped hospital ship and thousands of beds in various requisitioned buildings throughout Scotland to provide for the needs of the war-wounded. At the same time Beatson realised there was a need for an association of lay people to provide first aid and was heavily involved in the development of the St Andrews Ambulance Association in Scotland.

After he retired from the staff of the Western Infirmary in Glasgow he continued his work at The Glasgow Cancer Hospital and seems to have been a dominating figure in its continued expansion after the First World War. For his work in all these spheres he was knighted twice: KCB in 1907 and KBE in 1918! He was also honoured with the Legion of Honour and the Crown of Belgium at the end of the First World War.

Beatson’s name is remembered in Glasgow through the Beatson Oncology Centre, which is now the main regional cancer centre for the west of Scotland, and the Beatson Institute for Cancer Research, which is the name given to the main cancer research laboratory within the University of Glasgow. They were originally part of The Glasgow Cancer Hospital, which was renamed The Royal Beatson Memorial Hospital after the Second World War. The laboratories were transferred to a new green-field site in the 1970s.

Beatson will perhaps continue to be remembered as a ‘healer of women’ as a result of his work on oophorectomy, but a global view of his career makes it clear that he was also a ‘leader of men’. He remained unmarried and when he died in February 1933 his ashes were buried in his mother’s grave on the Isle of Man.