Professor Ian Aird: a renowned teacher of surgery

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the tragic death of Professor Ian Aird, at the early age of 57 years. At the time he was probably the best known teacher of surgery in this country.

The years immediately following the Second World War saw London crowded with postgraduate surgical students; young men returning from years overseas in the armed forces medical services and graduates from all parts of the Commonwealth, especially Australasia, as well as recently qualified UK trainees (including myself, who passed the Primary Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons (FRCS) in 1949 and the Final FRCS in 1951). Our teaching hero at that time was undoubtedly Ian Aird, and his textbook was our compulsory reading.

Ian Aird was born in Edinburgh in 1905; his father was a successful tailor. After attending George Watson's College, he studied at Edinburgh University and qualified in medicine in 1928. Two years later he obtained his Edinburgh FRCS and gained his Master of Surgery in 1935. Aird visited the surgical clinics of Vienna, Paris and Rome – aided by a facility for foreign languages – then a Rockefeller scholarship took him to St. Louis to work with Evarts Graham, the first surgeon to perform a successful pneumonectomy for cancer (the patient, a doctor, outlived the surgeon).

In 1935, Aird was appointed surgeon to the Royal Hospital for Sick Children, Edinburgh and also assistant surgeon at the Royal Infirmary. Here he rapidly established a spectacular reputation as a postgraduate surgical teacher and coach for the higher examinations.

On the outbreak of the second World War in 1939, Aird joined the Royal Army Medical Corps. He was posted to North Africa as a surgical specialist and was selected as surgeon to one of the pioneer units being formed in 1941. These 'mobile surgical units' were made up of a surgeon, assistant surgeon, anaesthetist, orderlies and drivers, with equipment packed into a couple of lorries, that could be attached to forward medical units in times of battle. At one time of fierce fighting, Aird's unit was overrun by the enemy. He continued operating on friend and foe alike and managed to escape back to the British lines. Aird was twice mentioned in dispatches and was promoted to lieutenant-colonel.

Like so many other service men in the North African war zone, subjected to severe heat combined with water depletion, Aird developed urinary calculi (a special hospital was established in Alexandria to deal with the epidemic). He returned to Scotland and, in 1944, became assistant to Professor James Learmonth as well as assistant director of the Wilkie Surgical Research laboratory in Edinburgh, one of the few experimental surgical departments in the UK.

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1946 was Aird's great opportunity. He was appointed Professor of Surgery at the Postgraduate Medical School, Hammersmith on the retirement of the first incumbent, George Grey Turner. Grey Turner, like the majority of surgical professors in this country at the time, was a brilliant clinical teacher and operative surgeon, but had little interest in the laboratory. Indeed, no laboratory facilities whatsoever then existed on the surgical unit at Hammersmith.

Aird brought three attributes: a unique understanding of current surgical publications, a mastery of surgical teaching, both using the written and spoken word, and a clear vision of the use of experimental methods in the advancement of surgery. In those days of austerity in the immediate post-war period, it was difficult to establish laboratories and animal facilities, but Aird encouraged his young staff in experimental investigations, particularly in the fields of open heart surgery and organ transplantation.

Aird's lecture notes were well known from his Edinburgh days; apparently pirated typed copies would pass from hand to hand for a substantial financial consideration. In 1949, his massive textbook Companion in Surgical Studies, based on his lecture notes, was published and became a best seller throughout the English speaking world – I still have my copy. Each section was a masterly essay and the reader hardly noticed that the book contained not a single illustration. The book was reprinted the following year and a second edition was published in 1957. Now Aird relented and this edition contained two illustrations. Aird had to agree that a picture showing the surgery of cleft lip, and another of cleft palate was better than a good deal of text.

In 1953, Aird was referred baby girl conjoined twins from Kano in Nigeria. At operation, they were found to be joined by a common liver, that was divided during surgery. All seemed to have gone well, but postoperatively one of the twins arrested and could not be resuscitated. The case attracted enormous press publicity – Hammersmith was invaded by photographers – in the days when 'advertising' of any form whatsoever was frowned upon by the profession as a whole and by the General Medical Council in particular. Aird was deeply upset by the notoriety he unwittingly achieved by this operation, which tended to obscure his more important work.

Towards the end, his heavy work load and depression took their toll. Aird complained of joint pains, insomnia and sinusitis; he worried that his intellect might be weakening. One Monday morning, the resident surgical officer, anxious that his chief had not appeared, went to the professor's flat at Hammersmith. He ignored the 'Do not disturb' note on the door, and found Aird propped up in his bed, his glasses on, two open bibles on his lap and a glass with sediment on the bed-side table. A note, addressed to the Hammersmith coroner, read: 'I have taken a fairly substantial dose of barbiturates. I have never taken drugs before in my life' – a tragic end to the life of a brilliant teacher. BJHM

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