OBITUARY

PRIESTLEY SMITH, LL.D., F.R.C.S.,
Emeritus Professor of Ophthalmology in the
University of Birmingham

The Birmingham Medical School lost one of its most distinguished members when Professor Priestley Smith died on April 30, in his eighty-eighth year. He was the son of Mr. Brooke Smith of Birmingham and was born on October 29, 1845. During his early youth he served an apprenticeship in mechanical engineering, and for four years pursued this avocation. This training was of undoubted value to him in after years, for the skill which he displayed in contriving appliances for his researches was always noteworthy. Fortunately for humanity, he decided at the age of twenty-one to abandon engineering and to apply his talents to the study of medicine. His student days were spent at the Sydenham College and at the Queen’s Hospital, Birmingham, and at the latter institution he was dresser to that famous surgeon Mr. Samuel Gamgee. His studies were interrupted in 1870, by the outbreak of the Franco-German war: in this campaign he volunteered for hospital work and was appointed a dresser, under the Red Cross, to a field hospital in Cologne, serving in that capacity until the termination of hostilities. Returning to Birmingham he completed his medical studies and in 1871 obtained the M.R.C.S. diploma. The scientific possibilities of ophthalmology then so appealed to him that from that time onwards he devoted himself to this branch of medicine. His first appointment was as house-surgeon to the Birmingham and Midland Eye Hospital, where he stayed for two years: he then spent some months as clinical assistant at Moorfields, and was evidently so well thought of that in 1874, a comparatively short time after qualifying, he was appointed Ophthalmic Surgeon to the Queen’s Hospital, Birmingham, a post which he held for thirty years. He then began that assiduous and intensive research into clinical and scientific ophthalmology which continued to absorb his interest until the commencement of his last illness, and brought him world-wide fame. It is difficult to convey to those who did not know him intimately, the immense interest and wonderful concentration he applied to his work. He possessed that lucid, logical type of brain which enabled him to sort out essentials and discard unproved ideas. By accurate and constant experiments, he would only accept facts which he could prove to his own satisfaction. His teaching exemplified his clear judgment and was always
PRIESTLEY SMITH (1845–1933)

reproduced from a photo of the portrait by Harold Speed
practical and to the point. When he became lecturer in ophthalmology to the Queen's Faculty of Medicine in 1895, and later in 1900 Professor of the subject, his course of lectures was always regarded as one of the most valuable in the medical school. He carried out an enormous amount of experimental research in the most brilliant manner, and this was undertaken without a thought of self-interest or advertisement, but purely in a scientific spirit. But the value of his contributions to ophthalmology could not fail but bring to him those honours which were afterwards so liberally bestowed on him. An episode which bears witness to his modest and retiring disposition, occurred on his retirement from the active staff of the Queen's Hospital. On that occasion several of his former hospital residents, considering that the usual, somewhat formal ceremony of the Hospital General Committee, was scarcely adequate to honour the illustrious officer they were losing, arranged a dinner and presentation, shared in by all his former house-surgeons. This was naturally a very enthusiastic gathering, and many were the eulogistic speeches uttered, but Mr. Priestley Smith besought us not to allow any of the proceedings to appear in the Press. This we consented to, much to our regret, as we wished the public fully to appreciate how distinguished was their fellow-townsmen.

Amongst the numerous distinctions conferred on him were the following:—

In 1878—The Jacksonian Prize of the Royal College of Surgeons of England, for his treatise on the "Causes, Symptoms, Pathology and Treatment of Glaucoma."

1881—He founded the Ophthalmic Review, of which Karl Grossmann and himself were the first editors.

1887—Vice-President of the Section of Ophthalmology at the annual meeting of the British Medical Association.

1888—At Heidelberg he opened the discussion on the "Aetiology and Treatment of Glaucoma."

1889—He was appointed Erasmus Wilson Lecturer at the Royal College of Surgeons.

1890—He received the Middlemore Prize of the British Medical Association.

1892—He was President of the Section of Ophthalmology at the annual meeting of the British Medical Association.

1898—He delivered the Bowman Lecture, on convergent strabismus.

1901—He became an honorary Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of England, and also had conferred on him by the Birmingham University the degrees M.Sc. M.B. B.Ch.
In 1901—the Royal and Imperial Society of Vienna made him an honorary member, an unusual honour to be conferred on a foreigner.

1904—He received the Nettleship Gold Medal, the first of the series.

1905—He became President of the Ophthalmological Society.

1906—The honorary Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons of Ireland was conferred on him.

1914-1916—President of the Section of Ophthalmology, Royal Society of Medicine.

1916—On his retirement from active practice the University of Birmingham conferred the honorary degree of LL.D.

1927—The Lucian Howe Medal was awarded him by the American Ophthalmological Society and was personally presented to him at Birmingham by Dr. Wilder, of Chicago, a very high honour, only previously bestowed on three occasions.

1928—He was presented with his portrait, a very life-like oil painting by Harold Speed. The presentation took place at the Queen’s Hospital and Mr. Priestley Smith generously offered to the Governors of the Hospital the gift of the portrait, which offer was accepted and the picture now hangs in the Hospital Board-room.

1932—The Gullstrand Gold Medal of the Swedish Medical Society.

In addition to his numerous publications be contributed to Norris and Oliver’s “System of Diseases of the Eye,” the Section on Glaucoma.

This long list of honours which fell to him, demonstrates the high opinion in which he was held by widely separated centres of medical science, and is not the least in excess of his deserts. His long life was devoted to his work, and even until within a few months of his death, he continued to experiment and seek new discoveries in the science of ophthalmology.

As regards his personal character, I can speak from intimate knowledge after many years of association with him: he was a man of the greatest integrity who never swerved from his ideals of honour and justice. His love of truth pervaded not only his medical work but also his mode of life in general, to an unusual extent. His life was of inestimable value to the science of ophthalmology and equally so as an example of upright and honourable conduct.

Wilfrid Allport.
Mr. J. B. Lawford writes:

Priestley Smith's professional reputation is assured and no words of mine can add to its lustre: his scientific work and attainments are known and highly esteemed by ophthalmologists all over the world.

For many years I have had the privilege of a close and intimate friendship with Priestley Smith, and in these few lines I desire to pay homage to his memory, more from the personal than from the professional aspect, though I share to the full the admiration and appreciation of all his colleagues towards his life-work.

Priestley Smith was one of nature's favoured sons. With an enviable intellectual heredity, he possessed an array of talent such as is seldom met with in one individual. He had a good knowledge of music, was an accomplished water-colour artist, and his expert and rapid drawing of diagrams on a blackboard was a delight to his audiences. He was also a good linguist. His inventive faculty was highly developed and had he continued his career as an engineer would almost certainly have led to important results. His oratorical powers will be remembered by many, and his services on platforms were in frequent demand. Whatever his theme, professional or otherwise, he was a fluent and singularly attractive speaker.

Withal Priestley Smith was a modest and unassuming man, of great personal charm; singularly open-minded and candid. His intellect, to employ an exceptional but descriptive term, was broad and rapid; by reason of a well-balanced mind his opinions on almost any subject were sound and trustworthy, and when necessary were maintained with dignity and firmness.

For many years he struggled cheerfully against a troublesome physical disability which interfered with the use of his hands, first the right, then the left. Here his inventive genius helped him and he produced various mechanical devices, which for a time enabled him to carry on sketching and other pursuits in which he delighted.

It is now no secret that many years ago the suggestion was made that Priestley Smith should come to London, but he turned it down without hesitation. He was a loyal and devoted citizen of Birmingham, and in addition to his professional relations there, took a keen and practical interest in all that pertained to the advancement of the city and the improvement of its amenities.

With the aid of a secretary he continued his interest in ophthalmological matters and his work thereon until a few weeks before his death, and when I saw him last, some months ago, he questioned me about recent work and literature with the mental zest of a young man.

In his death British Ophthalmology has lost one of its finest and most erudite representatives.