ROBERT RUTSON JAMES, 1881–1959

To some of us this Journal is doubtless something to be glanced through and thrown away; equally probably most of us read it and keep it. But to one person it was one of the few big things in the world that mattered. Robert Rutson James, in the 25 years during which he was an editor (1924–48), loved the preparation of each page of it, caring for its welfare as if it were his own child and maintaining its reputation with unfailing industry and infinite meticulousness.

James died—quietly as he had lived—at his home in Woodbridge on September 28, 1959, one week before his 78th birthday. He was born and bred in a West-country parsonage, a background which has produced many of this nation’s best men and women. His childhood experiences in observing parental management of village folk and their problems contributed much to his humanity, his constant and sensitive consideration for the feelings of others, his abounding patience and kindness. His early life was saddened by ill-health and the tragedy of many losses in his family.

Educated at Winchester College he was an admirable example of “manners maketh man”. From Winchester he went to St. George’s Hospital and qualified in 1905; in 1906 he gained the F.R.C.S. In 1907 he worked at Moorfields Eye Hospital under William Lang and Sir John Parsons and at the Royal Westminster Ophthalmic Hospital under Brewerton and MacMullen. He was appointed to the consulting staff of St. George’s at the early age of 28, and he became dean of the medical school (1918–22) and also its treasurer (1926–31).

His courtesy, always so genuine, was constant to whomsoever he addressed: in hospital practice the rough navvy, the bewildered old lady, or the apprehensive child received the same careful and kindly attention. A nervous student applying for admission to the medical school would at once be put at his ease and after being conducted round the hospital would go away feeling that he had been treated with the respect due to a distinguished visitor. With characteristic generosity after he had resigned from the hospital he gave a considerable sum of money to be applied by his successors in the deanship for the benefit of students of the school who might get into financial difficulties.

As an eye surgeon Rutson James was meticulous, and in clinical work his powers of observation were acute, shrewd, and accurate at a time when the instrumental aids to the minute examination of the eye were simple and less elaborate than they are to-day. Shy, hypersensitive, and retiring, he preferred to have a small, private practice of devoted patients. It was the inevitable stresses of surgical work which caused him to retire prematurely from his hospital appointment and practice to seek a happy retreat among his books.

He was an erudite scholar who maintained throughout his life a love of classical literature, history, and archaeology, spending much time in antiquarian research. Apart from his ophthalmological papers he was the author of several historical works each showing the evidence of wide research—The School of Anatomy adjoining St. George’s Hospital, 1830–1863 (1933), Studies in the History of Ophthalmology prior to 1800 A.D. (1933), and Medical Practitioners in the Diocese of London, 1529–1735 (1935). In addition to the editorship of this Journal, he was editor of the Transactions of the Ophthalmological Society of the United Kingdom from 1939 to 1945. He was secretary of the society (1918–21) and Bowman librarian (1927) and was accorded the rare distinction of being elected an honorary member (1936). His writings were in impeccable English and his annotations charged with whimsical wit. As a proof-corrector he had no peer, even up to the time of his death.

He was an admirable doctor, a perfect gentleman, a generous and lovable friend. His wife died in March of this year and our sympathy is extended to his only daughter who survives him.