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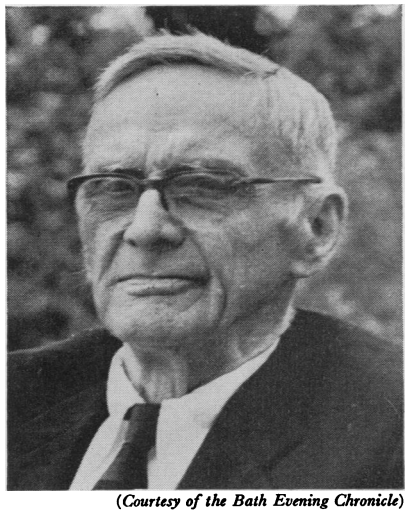
Obituary

John Burdon-Cooper, 1878–1968

With the death of Burdon-Cooper yet another of the great figures of the older generation of ophthalmologists has gone. John Cooper was born in Washington, Durham, in 1878. After his early schooling in Gateshead, he entered the Durham College of Science in 1893 at the early age of 15 years. Here he took a science degree in chemistry at the age of 18, being awarded the Cochran Medal, and then for a short period worked as a chemist at Middlesbrough before returning to the University as assistant to the Professor of Chemistry, Sir Peter Bedson. As we all know, this early training and interest in chemistry was a major influence in his subsequent medical work. During this period he was cared for by and owed much to his grandfather, James Burdon, an official of the Washington Chemical Co., a debt which he later recognized by taking the name of Burdon-Cooper.



(*Courtesy of the Bath Evening Chronicle*)

Financed largely by his work in chemistry, he registered as a medical student in 1898 and qualified in 1902, later proceeding to the degree of M.D. and becoming F.R.C.S. (Edin.).

A major turning point in his ophthalmological career was reached when he joined Ernest Maddox in Bournemouth in 1903, with whom he worked as assistant for 3 years; in 1904 he married Mrs. Maddox's sister. This friendship and relationship added to the great mutual interests between them. In 1906 he started practice in Bath, which throughout his life remained his professional home; here he was appointed surgeon at the Bath Eye Hospital and added greatly to its reputation. It is interesting that in 1910 he was one of the few (with Ernest Maddox) who took the first D.O. (Oxon.). In Oxford he lectured for 3 years after 1918 on physiological optics, and in 1921 he gave the Doyne Memorial Lecture on the aetiology of cataract. Burdon-Cooper made many important contributions to ophthalmology, most of them stimulating and many of them provocative, but he will always be remembered for his work on the biochemistry of the cataractous lens which earned him international fame. He found a considerable number of trace-elements in the normal lens (iron, zinc, copper, manganese, strontium, lead, silver, boron, and silicon), but his main work published between 1914 and 1933 concerned the chemical changes and particularly the deposition of inorganic materials in crystalline or other forms in the cataractous lens. His last paper, written in 1961, and delivered at the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Bath Eye Hospital, is full of delightful anecdotes.

While his main interest was always his professional work and Bath his professional home, his personal interests from early days lay in the countryside, first in the Lake District and later in Scotland where he built in 1924 and enjoyed until 1958 a country house near Comrie in Perthshire. A keen musician, he always claimed that his piano assisted his surgical dexterity. He enjoyed a game of bowls, read Latin and Greek fluently, built elaborate mechanical models as a hobby, one of them (with Maddox) being a model of the mid-brain made of hat-pins, the heads being the nuclei and the shafts the tracts; he was an excellent conversationalist and a delightful companion.

His second wife, Muriel, who had assisted him in his professional work for many years and has survived him, gave happiness and contentment to his retirement at Combe Down, Bath.