Obituary
Joan Margaret Ross

Joan Margaret Ross was a well known figure at all gatherings of pathologists. She was born on 28 May 1889 and died on 31 May 1964. She played a major role in the teaching of the proper routine to be carried out in post-mortem examinations; this she did at a time when many such examinations were commonly done in a perfunctory fashion.

Joan Ross was always proud that she was a Scot; she enjoyed many of the national pastimes of which she knew a great deal; in addition she loved the music of the bagpipes and the folk tunes of her country; in fact she would burst into song, and even a Scottish dance, if sufficiently provoked.

She attended St. Leonard’s School, St. Andrews, followed by Girton College, Cambridge, where she obtained a second class natural sciences tripos in 1913. She then taught science and games for two years at Sherborne School for Girls but decided that she must embark on a new career, so became a student once more as St. Mary’s Hospital, London. She qualified in 1918. At this time women were ineligible for Cambridge degrees so she graduated M.B. Lond. in 1922. After holding various house appointments she worked in the Department of Pathology with Professor E. H. Kettle. This part of her career was a turning point, for she then decided that her interest lay in pathology, particularly in morbid anatomy and histopathology. Undoubtedly her great regard for Professor E. H. Kettle and his work were the main influence which led to this choice, but her admiration for the Scottish pathologists, Robert Muir and Matthew J. Stewart, was also a factor. In 1927 she obtained the M.D. London for a thesis on lymphadenoma. In the same year she was appointed Reader in Pathology in the University of London at the Royal Free Hospital where she was in charge of the Department of Morbid Anatomy and Histology. Perhaps one of the happiest periods of her career was while she was working in this hospital with Professor Hadfield; she hoped to succeed to the Chair of Pathology when he went to Bristol but this wish was unfulfilled. For a time she felt unfairly treated but soon decided that her work and teaching made up for this disappointment. The Royal Free Hospital at this time admitted only women students, many of whom were overawed by her masculine appearance and deep voice; nevertheless the intelligent ones interested in pathology found her sympathetic and ready to spend much time in explaining difficult and involved principles of disease processes as well as demonstrating her arguments with slides. She gave short shrift to the lazy and dull students, being too forthright herself to use soft words.

At the outbreak of war Joan was transferred, together with most of her department and the Royal Free students, to Hill End Hospital, St. Albans, where she continued to teach until 1944 when she was appointed by the Medical Research Council to organize the collection of pathological specimens from all theatres of war. These specimens included all sorts of injuries due to weapons of war, also examples of deficiency and infective diseases which occurred in prisoners in the notorious Belsen internment camp. She also obtained a number of wax models showing the results of various noxious substances on the human eye. These models were the result of experiments carried out in Germany. Joan visited the Italian front during the last months of the war in order to help with her classification and interpretation of the injuries in her collection. The collection is now in the Royal College of Surgeons of England and in 1946 she was awarded the John Hunter medal and triennial prize of the College.

In 1953 she was appointed consultant pathologist to the Department of Microbiology at the Ministry of Supply at Porton, a post which she held until 1957 when she retired to live in Castle Douglas, Kirkcudbrightshire, with her brother.

Joan Ross was a remarkable person with a manly appearance about which she told many tales. When she was wearing her long gown and demonstrating necropsies one waited for some new student to address her as ‘Sir’, much to the amusement of everyone present. She was
exceptionally observant and this certainly contributed to her memory of detailed histological structure which was so helpful to her friends who asked for help with difficult sections.

She was never happier than when watching the movements of all sorts of creatures, as she wandered round the countryside, occasionally smoking a pipe if no one was around. She disliked towns and preferred to live in the country, preferably in her beloved Scotland. She loved young creatures and bred sealyhams for many years. Children were devoted to her and she was always happy when telling them of the habits of wild animals and birds.

Joan was usually to be seen at meetings of the different pathological societies where in the evenings she would be surrounded by her many friends arguing happily with a pint in her hand. Many will miss her for she helped in so many ways even to the extent of assisting impetuous students. She had great family feeling and one rarely visited her without finding some brother or sister, nephew or niece who had turned up for a bed for the night or longer. I believe that she might feel that her own contribution to pathology was the influence she had on her two nephews both of whom have become pathologists. Perhaps we would not agree for, as well as her original work on tumours, radiation, and reticulosis, probably the most important contributions were her collection of war injuries and her book on post-mortem appearances which for many years was the standby of all medical students; in fact it ran to five editions.

Joan Ross was a staunch friend and a wise teacher.

JOAN TAYLOR

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