Valediction to Basil William Sholto Mackenzie, 2nd Baron Amulree, first President of the Society for the Study of Medical Ethics

Adding life to years

I

The title, *Adding Life to Years*, means more to us now than the book. For that was what Sholto was doing, up to the time of his death at the age of 83: adding life to years, to his and to ours. We lived rather better when we were with him than we might have lived without him. It is our awareness of a common benefit, isn't it, which has brought us here today: from Lancing and Caius, perhaps; from University College Hospital; from what he knew and served as the Ministry of Health; from the British Geriatric Society; from the British Red Cross Society, from the Associations of Welfare Officers and Occupational Therapists; from the Royal Hospital and Home for Incurables; from St Christopher's Hospice and the Society for the Study of Medical Ethics; from the Liberal Party and the House of Lords.

It is not so much his distinction, the offices which he held in all these bodies, which matter to us; it is the *life* which he added to them, the character which he imprinted on them, the manner in which he treated us who worked with him in them – these are what matter now.

Sholto was an endearing man. He made us (as G M Hopkins would have said) the dearer, worth more than we knew. He saw the best in us, and brought it out. If he saw the worst, his reticence made us see it more clearly for ourselves. He saw in the Friendly Societies, he said, 'a remarkable instance of the kindness and enterprise inherent in the human race' – and that was a fine profession of faith in 1951, when the Cold War followed so closely upon a world war. Committed Presbyterian as he was, he could yet admire a good bishop when he saw one – a real prelate, I mean, like Mortimer of Exeter, in whom he saw an intellectual honesty like his own, and a will to go behind the cant to the things that matter. When he had junior doctors to train in the care of the chronic sick he bred up a generation of pioneers, by his initiative, his enthusiasm, and the unfailing support he gave them. When a young cleric*, a stranger to him, went to him in 1963 with an idea – no more – for enhancing ethical sensibility in medical training, Sholto embraced the

idea and the man; for twenty years he backed the London Medical Group and its offshoots with his personal reputation, in a covenant which held firm into his last conscious death-bed conversations. Life, a life-enhancing quality, outstripped his years.

II

Sholto was a peer by accident, the happy accident of birth. He was a Liberal by conviction, giving his allegiance where his father had not. He was a physician by profession. And if I say that it was his profession which stamped the quality upon his work as a Liberal peer, I do not mean that he used his political place to urge professional advantage. I mean that he brought to that place all the qualities of a sensitive and dedicated doctor. He spoke of what he knew about and cared about. He brought *knowledge* from his clinical experience, especially in the medical and social care of the elderly, and from all his professional and charitable commitments. He brought *caring*, in the conviction that clinical medicine requires for its exercise, a social, environmental and economic context, *part* of which it was the duty of government, responsive to political pressure, to provide. He brought *respect*, the projection of a courteous mind: respect for the House and its customs; for the seriousness of the issues in debate; for opinions and convictions not his own. Everybody liked him: and what more simple or more true could be said than that.

As a physician he became the father of modern geriatric medicine. His early training at University College Hospital, and his service in the Ministry of Health, gave him that wide experience in general medicine which is a necessary foundation for geriatric practice.

His responsibility for the health of shelter-dwellers in the blitz, and of public assistance institutions widened his social awareness. His study of the management of cancer patients in 1939, and his membership of the National Radium Commission prepared him for his later interest in terminal care. He brought historical depth to his practice in an excellent chapter on monastic infirmaries – based on the Infirmarers' rolls of Westminster Abbey – for a volume

*Prebendary Edward Shotter, now Director of the Institute of Medical Ethics.

on the evolution of hospitals in Britain. Behind his training of geriatricians, and the founding of the first Chair in his old hospital, lay a philosophy which linked doctors, patients, their homes, their neighbours and their statutory and voluntary social supports in one community of interest, grounded in humane purpose and mutual respect. This was unfolded in *Adding Life to Years*, a blueprint for the total care of elderly people, written for the National Council for Social Service. Geriatricians reading it, 33 years later, may still find in it tasks which only their continuance as a distinct specialty in medicine might enable them to discharge. Here are three quotations, characteristic of the man:

‘It is not enough to prolong life – it must be ensured that the extra years will not be clouded with anxiety, difficulty, and boredom’.

‘Morally there is no justification for imposing on one section of the people a form of existence that another thinks good for them, without first discovering whether such a change is likely to be acceptable’.

And here are his criteria for a good geriatrician:

‘A liking for old people, a sense of the ridiculous, and a great deal of patience, coupled with a good knowledge of general medicine and of the social services, are the criteria for the work’.

Whose portrait does he sketch here, but his own?

III

How well our language serves us, on such a day as this! We know of *civic* virtues, a *Civil* Service, and the *City* man: and we know *urbanity*. Sholto was an *urbane* man, a man at home in Town. He cared deeply for the dignity of London’s monuments and public buildings, ancient and modern; for its parks and commons, its

galleries and collected art. When the House debated the arts, he was there, and down to speak. In his London home, the curtains drawn, the world shut out, with his pictures, his ceramics, his music, his generous table-fellowship and conversation, he was the host whom one never forgets: urbanity and humanity were met in one.

IV

In those once lethal but now decaying isotopes of dogma which Calvinism once deposited in the Scottish Church as in my own, Sholto was well enough instructed to be detached and sceptical. Whether he were justified by faith or works would not have troubled him, nor need it trouble us. Yet he knew where *the glory* lay, and where we should look for it. He would take a modest pleasure in having so many friends about him here: but of the glory he would take none. Modesty, diffidence, under whatever name, is a cardinal theological virtue. St Paul wrote somewhere of the divine glory reflected in the face of Jesus Christ; and we see flickers of it, sometimes, in the faces of good men. We recall the tall, stooping figure, the enquiring, attentive, and always kindly eyes; the long smile; the stammer, as heart and mind outran the bridled tongue; the fidelity of the man to what and to whom he believed in. There were grace reflected and glory too. For these let us thank God.

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