

Surgeon Vice-Admiral Sir James Watt

(19 August 1914 – 28 December 2009)

KBE 1975; QHS 1969-1977; C. St. J 1972; MB BS Durham 1938;
MS Durham 1949; MD Newcastle 1978; D Ch. Hon (Newcastle) 1978;
FRCS and MRCS Eng. 1955; FRCS Ed. Hon 1976; FRCP London 1975.

James Watt, who rose to become Medical Director General of the Royal Navy for which he was knighted, died peacefully on 28 December 2009 at the age of 95 having suffered a minor stroke some ten days previously. During his long and distinguished career he was a delightful, scholarly contributor to the Travelling Surgical Society, with which he first travelled as a guest on the Travelling Surgical Club's visit to Heidelberg in May 1965 when he was a Surgeon-Commander. In 1968 with the TSC James Watt visited Barcelona in May, and Cardiff in October, then attended the home visit to Edinburgh in 1969; that year, as a recently promoted Surgeon Rear Admiral, he became the first Dean of Naval Medicine and founder of the Institute of Naval Medicine based at Alverstoke, Gosport. By 1972 he had been promoted Surgeon Vice Admiral and became Medical Director General (Naval), a post he held with distinction until 1977, being knighted in 1975.

James Watt was born in Morpeth, Northumberland, on 19 August 1914. His parents were Sarah and Thomas Watt, a teacher and businessman respectively, the latter distantly related to the engineer James Watt. A great grandfather married a descendant of John Knox of Edinburgh and an uncle was a director of Eastman Kodak, USA, being responsible for early development in colour photography. He himself attended King Edward VI Grammar School in Morpeth and was awarded the Governor's Prize in two successive years for 'Declamation', perhaps an augur for future lecturing.

Qualifying in 1938 from Durham University, James was house surgeon at Ashington Hospital then Resident Medical Officer at the Princess Mary Maternity Hospital in Newcastle, returning as Surgical Registrar at the Royal Victoria Hospital in 1947 after war service in the Royal Navy which he began as a member of the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve. He served from January 1941 to September 1942 as a Surgeon Lieutenant Commander on the cruiser HMS Emerald in the Far East until the fall of Singapore. His next posting was on North Atlantic Convoys aboard the destroyer HMS Roxborough which had many casualties during one of the worst storms in living memory.

After a short respite in February 1944 on HMS Asbury at the Royal Navy base in New Jersey, USA, James returned to the Far East aboard the aircraft carrier HMS Arbiter from 1944 to 1947, during which time he was mentioned in despatches. Returning to the Royal Navy in 1949 after two years in Newcastle he served on HM Hospital Ship Maine during the Korean War, and later as Surgical Specialist to the Royal Naval Hospital in Hong Kong from 1953 to 1955, the year in which he obtained the FRCS (England). The next year he became Consultant in Surgery to RN Hospital, Plymouth, then Malta (1961) and Haslar (1963) before being appointed the first joint Professor of Naval Surgery to the Royal College of Surgeons of England and RN Hospital Haslar

(1965–1969). He was made Dean of Naval Medicine and Medical Officer in charge of the Institute of Naval Medicine from 1969 to 1972, and then Director General (Naval) from 1972-1977. During his career he published widely on subjects as diverse as burns, cancer chemotherapy, peptic ulceration and hyperbaric oxygen therapy. He was a member of the British Society for Surgery of the Hand, the International Society for Burns Injuries and a Corresponding Member of the Surgical Research Society from 1966-77.

Showing an early interest in the history of medicine, many articles and lectures followed in this field and involved much painstaking research, his scholarship being evident to the TSS on various occasions. These included a biography of 'James Ramsay (1733-1789) – A Naval Pioneer', whom he described as a Naval Surgeon, Naval Chaplain and Morning Star of the Anti-Slavery Movement, in his guest lecture to the TSS in 1992 at RNH Haslar. In 1995 he came to Israel with the TSS, which he addressed on 'Mediaeval pilgrims and Crusaders and their bequests to surgery' in a presentation both erudite and humorous. He supported many other associations and societies, including the Association of Surgeons of Great Britain and Ireland and the Medical Society of London, becoming a member of the latter's council from 1976 and its President in 1980/81. He gave the Lettsomian Lectures in 1979.

James Watt was made an Honorary Freeman of the Worshipful Company of Barbers in 1978. He delivered the prestigious Thomas Vicary Lecture at the Royal College of Surgeons of England in 1974. A Fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine, he was President (its 91st) during the active rebuilding programme (1982-1984), and was made an Honorary Fellow in 1998 for his many major contributions.

His administrative flair and commitment were recognised in several spheres, including the Environmental Medicine Research Committee, and he was a Governor of Epsom College from 2000, becoming its Vice President. From 1983 he was Vice-President of the Society for Nautical Research and in 1996 he was President of the Smeatonian Society of History at the University of Calgary where he had been made an Honorary Member in 1978. His eclectic interests resulted in over one hundred publications on surgery, burns and history, especially of nautical medicine. He edited and contributed to four books including 'Starving Sailors' (1981) and 'Talking Health' (1988), and wrote five articles in the 'Dictionary of National Biography' and three chapters in a two volume book 'Meta Incognita - a Discourse on Discovery' which won the Canadian Prize for Maritime History in 2000. He served on the Editorial Board of the British Journal of Surgery from 1966-77.

Researches on Nelson took him on regular trips to libraries in Paris and culminated in a lecture to The Worshipful Company of Barbers in 2005, on "Surgery at the Battle of Trafalgar: British and French Experiences" - surely a major undertaking for a man approaching his ninetieth year, celebrated in due style by the Section of History of the Royal Society of Medicine. The published version entitled "Surgery at Trafalgar" makes fascinating reading in *The Mariner's Mirror* of May 2005 (*Volume 91 Number 2, pages 266-283*).

Over the years James Watt has been Visiting Professor in History to the University of Calgary (1985), Visiting Fellow Australian National University in Canberra (1986) and Foundation Lecturer to the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (1990). His historical contributions earned him election as a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries.

Throughout his long, full life James Watt was an active practising Christian, supporting not only local Church activities but also the Council of Reference of the Christian Medical Fellowship. Heavily involved with Christian activities in the Royal Navy, he was a founder member of the Naval Christian Fellowship which has been extended to navies throughout the world, a lasting blessing to naval personnel and their families. His private devotional life remained paramount in his daily living. He was President of the Royal Naval Lay Readers Society (1974-83), the Institute of Religion and Medicine (1989-91), and ECHO International Health Services (1983-2003). He was Vice-President of the Churches Council of Healing from 1987 and a Trustee of the Marylebone Centre Trust. His writings included 'What is wrong with Christian Healing?' (1993), and also 'The Church, Medicine and the New Age' (1995). He thought that the United Kingdom perhaps needed a Wesleyan revival. His many friends throughout the world crossed denominations, and he was widely admired by many Jewish thinkers.

A lifelong bachelor, his relaxation came from music and walking, though age took its toll on the latter. He showed a keen interest in tennis and rugby. From his long-time home at Wimbledon, James 'retired' to live on the Stockbridge Road in Winchester. Having found this too hilly for walking with his failing heart, in 2009 he moved to a flat in Otterbourne, also in Hampshire. He became unwell before Christmas 2009 and was admitted to hospital with a minor stroke from which he made an initial recovery but died some ten days later on 28 December. He will be remembered fondly not merely for his high achievements but also as a self-effacing somewhat ascetic scholar who devoted his life to his chosen commitments.

Alan Green
Tim Williams