

## **SINCLAIR IRWIN (1913-2004)**

John Walker Sinclair Irwin was born in 1913 into a Belfast medical family. Like his father, Sir Samuel Irwin, he was passionate about rugby football and played for Queen's University where he studied medicine, qualifying in 1937. He then played for Ulster and from this gained five caps for Ireland as a back row forward, scoring the winning try against a strong English side at Twickenham in February 1939. The England XV was at its finest in the 1930's and included the famous Gadney brothers and Prince Obolensky, an outstanding three quarter with a flowing head of hair that matched his captivating running. Like his father, Sinclair served as President of the Ulster branch of the Irish Rugby Football Union, and later of the Union itself.

After house appointments Sinclair volunteered for the Royal Army Medical Corps in October 1939 and was captured at the fall of France in June 1940 having stayed behind to care for the wounded. On discharge from the Army in 1945 he resumed his medical studies and passed the Edinburgh FRCS in 1947. Appointed Consultant General Surgeon to the Royal Victoria Hospital in 1950 he developed a growing interest in vascular work. Later he was to be involved in the planning of the redeveloped hospital, retiring in 1978 to enjoy his hobbies of gardening and playing golf.

He married Betty Fulton, whose father was Chief Medical Officer to Belfast. Two of their five children became doctors. One of them, Terry Irwin, is of course now himself a member of the Travelling Surgical Society valued both as a colorectal surgeon and for his expert advice on computer technology which in its many forms are now an integral part of our excursions. Indeed, he has developed our excellent web-site ([www.travsurgsoc.com](http://www.travsurgsoc.com)) which has recorded an unexpected number of "hits" and does much to promote and consolidate the TSS, whilst also disseminating detailed information about past and future meetings in secure areas accessible only to TSS members.

Sinclair was invited to attend the visit to Dublin and Belfast in 1954, held "the week before Holy Week". The Report noted at the time that "Air travel is rapidly becoming the principal mode of transport". Members and wives stayed at the Gresham Hotel in Dublin. Mr Mullaly was Chairman, and the President, Sir Clement Price Thomas, then a senior member, was present, together with eight others. All those travelling as guests were elected to membership, including Sinclair Irwin, Brian Truscott of Cambridge and Fred Hanna of Weymouth, and the annual subscription was fixed at one guinea!

Travelling from Dublin to Belfast by train, the party was met by Mr.(later Sir) Ian Fraser. Some well known names featured in the programme of this successful meeting, with papers from a number of distinguished surgeons. The 1954 report ends "While it is not the custom to single out any names for thanks on our tours, it would not be out of place to mention the great kindness and friendliness shown to us by Mr and Mrs Sinclair Irwin, who did everything possible to make our visit to Belfast a happy and memorable one".

Thereafter Sinclair and Betty became regular and popular figures at home and overseas meetings. Sinclair was Chairman at the first visit to Hungary in 1975. On arriving at Budapest airport members and their wives were met by the President of the Hungarian Surgical Society, Dr Janos Stephanics. He assumed that the trip was an income tax fiddle, so no programme of visits had been arranged other than those papers members of "The Club" had prepared to present to our hosts. Sinclair and the then secretary, Adrian Marston, rose to the occasion and rapidly arranged an excellent series of visits. For one group, imbibing brandy with coffee proved an interesting demonstration of "mid morning refreshment", perhaps an early venture into "nutrition in surgery".

One photograph at a dinner for our hosts, showed Sinclair and Betty smiling behind the flags of both nations, as all present were "helped by liberal transfusions of Bull's Blood", as was noted in the account by his friend and contemporary Bernard Williams of the history of the TSS presented in "Travelling Surgical Club - the First Sixty Years - 1924-1984". Sinclair and Betty organised a further home meeting in Belfast in October 1976.

By nature, Sinclair was a quiet man, ending his oration to new students in 1965, as had his father in 1927, by quoting the words of Alexander Pope: "Words are like leaves and where they most abound, much fruit of sense beneath is rarely found". One memorable paper he gave to "The Club" was on the problems of "knee-capping" injuries by the IRA. This was both revealing and an emotional account of the problems he and his colleagues were facing in Belfast and surrounding areas. Of his experiences as a prisoner of war he spoke little, though one glimpse may have slipped out when "The Club" visited Germany, for an excellent meeting in Rinteln and then Berlin. On a social visit members and their wives were crossing from West Berlin to the east of the city. At Checkpoint Charlie, fierce guards looked carefully at passengers and any luggage they had in hand or on luggage racks, as well as scrutinising the outside of the coach, even scanning it underneath. As the Editor of that Report noted, our sally into East Berlin with a tight lipped, narrow-hipped propagandress for a guide was a colourless and chastening affair. She indoctrinated us on the marvellous work done by the Russians to rescue the German people. This "social" visit was made much more tolerable when a soft but unmistakably Northern Irish voice was heard to say "and what's more they raped a lot of women too"!

Sinclair Irwin died on 13 August 2004 at the age of 91, his obituary appearing in the BMJ on 23 November. Our sympathy and affection are extended to the whole family, most particularly his widow Betty and their son Terry and his wife Jenny. The years inevitably take their final toll of senior and much respected members of "The Club", many of whom gave distinguished wartime service in the defence of freedom. We remember them in silence at our Business and Annual General Meetings, in gratitude for the contribution that they and their wives have made to implement the aims of our historic Travelling Surgical Society. Although it was founded in order to enhance the further education of British military surgeons by contact with European counterparts, that original remit has been widened greatly so that now our membership, whilst still including those at the top of the surgical tree in the armed services, consist

mainly of a wide selection of general surgeons from all over the UK, committed to seeing surgery worldwide and at first hand, and to furthering our surgical ideals and knowledge, whilst enjoying friendship and many memories.