



Obituary

Lord Walton of Detchant

John Nicholas Walton was born in Rowlands Gill, County Durham on the 16th September 1922 and, as Lord Walton of Detchant, died on the 21st April 2016 at Belford, Northumberland, the distance between the two is about 50 miles. In that 50 mile journey, and those 93 years, John fulfilled a remarkable lifetime of achievement, travelled the world and achieved legendary status in the field of neurology.

From grammar school in Spennymoor, County Durham John entered Durham University Medical School in Newcastle upon Tyne in 1941 and qualified in 1945 after the shortened wartime course with First Class Honours and Distinctions in all the professional examinations. As a student his academic success was recognised by the award of four undergraduate prizes and his political skills by his appointment as President of the Medical Sub-Council of the Student Representative Council and Treasurer of the British Medical Students' Association. After qualifying he married his childhood sweetheart, Betty Harrison, and served as House Physician to Professor F J Nattrass and Professor Sir James Spence.

In 1947 he began National Service but fractured an arm before posting and was able to return home for the birth of his first daughter before serving as Embarkation Medical Officer in Glasgow and Southampton. He was Second in Command of the Hospital Ships, *Oxfordshire* and *el Nil* in the evacuation of British troops from Haifa in 1948. He joined the Territorial Army, reaching the rank of Colonel and being awarded the Territorial Decoration.

When he returned to Newcastle he worked as medical registrar for Dr. Henry Miller, obtaining the MRCP in January 1950 and an MD in June 1952 with a thesis on sub-arachnoid haemorrhage. He was impressed by Sir James Spence and intended to become a paediatrician but in 1951 was appointed research assistant to Professor F J Nattrass and began studying muscle disease which was to become his life's work. In 1953 he worked with Professor Raymond Adams at the Massachusetts General Hospital and they produced a monograph on polymyositis. In 1954 he worked in the Neurological Research Unit of the National Hospital, Queen Square with Dr. E A Carmichael and published, with Professor Nattrass, the seminal paper in Brain which reclassified muscle diseases. He continued a political role as Chairman of the Registrars' Group Committee of Members of the Royal College of Physicians.

John became consultant neurologist to Newcastle General Hospital in 1958 and the following year co-founded the Muscular Dystrophy Group, now MDUK, with Nattrass and the businessman Joseph Patrick; he subsequently involved the film star and director Lord Attenborough as fundraiser. During the 1960s he opened the Muscular Dystrophy Laboratory at NGH and in 1968 was awarded a personal chair. In 1971 he followed Sir George Smart as Dean of Medicine. During the 1970s he served on the Council of the MRC and was a member of the Clinical Research and Systems Boards. He was awarded a Doctor of Science by the University of Newcastle in 1972 and in 1980 became

an Honorary Freeman of Newcastle on Tyne. In 1979 he received a Knighthood and in October 1983 he succeeded Sir Richard Doll as the Warden of Green College in Oxford, a post which he held for six years, during which he served as honorary consultant neurologist to the Oxford Health Authority.

During the 1980s he served as President of the British Medical Association, President of the General Medical Council, President of the Association for the Study of Medical Education, President of the Royal Society of Medicine and President of the Association of British Neurologists. He was also a member of Council of the Royal College of Physicians throughout the decade.

In 1989 he received a Life Peerage as Lord Walton of Detchant and spent the last 27 years speaking with great authority on matters medical, ethical and educational in the Upper House. His involvement ranged from the Human Embryology and Fertilisation Bill through discussions on the End of Life Bill and one of his last major roles was with the Mitochondrial Donation Bill which gives hope in the future for families affected by mitochondrial disease. He moved the key Walton Amendment on regulations to permit stem cell research and in 2008 produced the Walton Report on muscle wasting conditions and the provision of services. On the 11th March 2016 he spoke briefly in a supplementary question on the junior doctors' dispute and on the assessment of disability, and then went into the library of the House of Lords, where he suffered two tonic clonic convulsions. He was investigated in London then returned at his insistence to the Royal Victoria Infirmary in Newcastle. He was allowed home to Belford on the 27th March and, though no longer able to drive, remained independent and was driven regularly to Bamburgh Golf Club until the day before his passing.

Lord Walton's contribution to muscle disease and medical research has been recognised by the many honorary degrees, memberships and fellowships which he has been awarded throughout the UK and around the world. In 1989 he was elected as fifth President of the World Federation of Neurology, he served two terms and led the federation through the decade of the Brain, bringing the World Congress to London for one of its most successful meetings in 2001. In 1991 he gave an impassioned speech at Charite Hospital in Berlin to ask the European Neurological Societies to extend membership to countries from the former Eastern bloc, and to form a single society. The former was achieved rapidly but he had to wait more than twenty years to witness the first meeting of the European Academy of Neurology in 2015. He was greatly influenced by the writings and teaching of William Osler, gave both Osler and Harveian Orations at the College of Physicians and was awarded honorary membership of many Osler Societies around the world. He emulated his hero in adapting modern scientific processes to the study of muscle disease without eschewing the essentials of clinical practice.

His role in education is demonstrated most clearly in his writings. Apart from his monographs on sub-arachnoid haemorrhage and polymyositis he wrote one of the most successful textbooks for students and junior doctors *Essentials of Neurology* which ran to six editions. He edited and largely authored the definitive book *Disorders of Voluntary Muscle*, edited a series of monographs termed *Major Problems in Neurology* and

co-edited *Skeletal Muscle Pathology*. He wrote an *Introduction to Clinical Neuroscience* and was senior editor of the *Oxford Companion to Medicine*. He also served as editor-in-chief of the Journal of Neurological Sciences from 1966 to 1977 and held the same role in Current Opinion in Neurology and Neurosurgery. In 1966 after the death of Lord Brain he was invited by Lady Brain to take authorship of *Brain's Clinical Neurology* and continued it as a single author volume from the 6th Edition to the 9th then recognised the need for multi-authorship in the 10th edition. In the current 11th Edition Lord Walton has been replaced by 24 authors.

Very few British neurologists have had a career which can be compared to John Walton; the only previous clinical neurologist to have achieved a Peerage was Lord Brain and the only other British President of the World Federation of Neurology was MacDonald Critchley though the current President Raad Shakir, who is a protégé of John's and worked in the North-East on returning to the UK in 1990, has now taken on that role.

Despite all his honours John was most proud of his role as a physician and asked that the reading from *Ecclesiasticus, Chapter 38*, which begins "Honour a physician..." should be read at his Memorial Service.

He had a lifelong love of music and despite the loss of his wife in 2002 and the advent of deafness he regularly attended the Royal Northern

Sinfonia and opera in Newcastle. With Lady Walton he performed many duets of the *Lambton Worm* and the *Blaydon Races* at meetings in the Upper House and around the world and he retained the ability to recount a story in a Geordie accent. He will be remembered for his generosity and the way in which he was willing to spend time, give advice and direction and provide resources and funding for young clinicians and scientists. John was indefatigable in his work for charities using his contacts to approach patrons and philanthropists and to host meetings for tours, receptions and dinners in the Upper House. He was very proud of the fact that in the Robing Room his peg, marked "Walton, Lord of Detchant", was next to one marked "Wales, Prince of".

John's wife, Betty, died in 2002; he is survived by his two daughters and a son; all three live within those 50 miles of Belford.

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