



Dr J. Menzies Campbell – as I knew him

Malvin E. Ring*

It is now 28 years since one of the world's greatest dental historians passed away. Dr J. Menzies Campbell died in Glasgow in his eighty-seventh year. I was editor of the *Bulletin of the History of Dentistry*, the official publication of the American Academy of the History of Dentistry (now the *Journal*), for 22 years and during that time I had occasion to carry on a correspondence with him. I was tremendously impressed with his accomplishments and with his numerous books and articles relating to the history of the profession we both shared and loved. It was after obtaining his LDS from the Royal Faculty (now College) of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow in 1911 that Menzies Campbell, wishing to learn American methods of practice, enrolled at the University of Toronto. Because of his LDS he was accepted as a postgraduate student, and in 1912 was awarded the DDS degree *cum laude* by that institution, as well as by the Royal College of Surgeons of Ontario.

Menzies Campbell was first attracted to the field of dental history because of the influence of Dr G.M. Hermiston, the lecturer at that subject at the University of Toronto, and for the remainder of his life was an ardent devotee of the field. "Dentists as a rule fail to realise their indebtedness to the past," Menzies Campbell once wrote. "How frequently something regarded as strictly modern in its conception has actually been suggested by a visionary who lived in an earlier century." And so, with a collector's flair, he set about learning all he could about his profession's past, collecting along the way old dental instruments, books, paintings, objects of art, documents and many other artefacts pertaining to dental history.

In 1964 he presented his collection of dental pictures, instruments and other artefacts to the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, where they are displayed as the Menzies Campbell collection¹. His personal library was bequeathed to the Royal College of Surgeons of England. His interest in the field led him to help found the Scottish Society for the History Medicine and he was a member of its council from 1950 to 1953. In May, 1950, he delivered, by invitation at Edinburgh University, the first lecture devoted exclusively to the history of dentistry at any Scottish university.

All of these outstanding contributions earned him the plaudits and appreciation of his colleagues worldwide. Of the greatest magnitude is the fact that in 1958 he was the first dentist ever to be awarded an honorary fellowship in the Royal College of Surgeons in England and in 1959 the RCS instituted a triennial lectureship in dental history in his name. He received honours too numerous to mention, including honorary membership of the Canadian Dental Association. By this time he was too ill to travel to Canada to receive the award, so the president of the Canadian Dental Association, Dr Gullet, was authorised to travel to Glasgow to deliver this honour in person to Menzies Campbell.

Our correspondence

Menzies Campbell's health was very poor in his later years and he often was unable to venture outdoors. But this didn't keep him from maintaining a lively correspondence, and I was fortunate to be a steady correspondent of his and the recipient of his annual Christmas greetings cards.

The first letter I received from him was dated December 21, 1968. It arrived not long after I was named editor of the American Academy of the History of Dentistry, and he offered me his congratulations in my new venture. He went on to say that "as you very kindly invite readers to forward items of interest, here is one for what it is worth." The item concerned the fact that on December 5, 1968, he had completed 50 years of continuous Fellowship of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, which had been founded in 1783.

On April 5, 1969, he wrote to me again, this time enclosing a clipping from the *British Dental Journal* telling that the triennial lecture on dental history named in his honour, in May of that year, was being delivered by Miss Jessie Dobson, the Curator of the Hunterian Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons of England. It was quite an honour to have so distinguished a person as a lecturer, and she chose as the title of her lecture "Royal Dentists"; it was very well received.

That July I received a long letter from him disputing what I had written about the flamboyant eighteenth-century London dentist, Martin van Butchell. In his typical self-effacing manner he prefaced his remarks with the statement: "I have just received the June issue of the *Bulletin of the History of Dentistry*. This is a particularly fine number which, as usual, I have read with considerable interest and profit. However, I am regrettably impelled, in the interests of historical accuracy, to query one or two of your statements." And with this he went on to discuss the life of this colourful character who is noted for having the body of his late wife embalmed and placed on display, in a glass case, in his home office "permitting friends, patients and others to view it at specified hours."

The *Newsletter* of our Academy (vol.6, no.3, August, 1973) carried the following item:

"Dr J. Menzies Campbell, one of the world's most distinguished dental historians, has been awarded honorary membership of the Canadian Dental Association in recognition of his inestimable contribution to knowledge through his work in dental history. Since Dr Campbell, now in his eighty-seventh year, was unable to travel to Canada from his home in Glasgow, the citation was delivered to him by Dr D.W. Gullett, himself a noted historian and author of the definitive study of the Canadian dental profession. The citation reads in part that Dr Campbell by his ". . . meticulous research and writings has established where we as a profession came from in order that the future may be delineated. . . . Your contribution is of lasting value and will be utilized by future generations. Men of your calibre are scarce indeed, and the whole dental profession is greatly indebted to you."

This prompted Menzies Campbell to write another letter to me which clearly delineated his devotion to his favourite avocation, as well as the difficulties he was experiencing as a result of his declining health. It deserves reproduction in full.

70 Great George Street
Glasgow, G12 8RV

27:vii:1973

Dear Dr Ring,

I have today received my copy of the August issue of the Academy's Newsletter.

I do feel that it would be most ungracious and unappreciative on my part, were I to fail replying by airmail to thank you, very sincerely, for the superlative manner in which you have reacted to the honour which the Canadian Dental Association recently conferred upon me.

May I say that anything which I have done to promote interest in dental history, I regard as a privilege. Further, let me add, that throughout many years of research and collecting, I always regarded myself as merely a custodian of everything that I discovered or acquired. Consequently, I gifted my library of early books, MSS, etc. to the Royal College of Surgeons of England; and my museum of early instruments, paintings and prints etc. to the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, because the former was rich in instruments but poor in books, and the latter vice versa. At both centres everything will be permanently protected against loss, and will be available for reference to present and future dental historians, as well as to interested members of our profession, far better than being in private possession.

In addition, for the same reason, and because of my belief in, and knowledge of, the value of dental history, I have never accepted fees or honoraria for articles or lectures.

I was very fortunate in being able to regard dental history purely as a hobby, particularly as ill-health prevented me from indulging in other expensive pursuits such as smoking, golf or travelling abroad, etc, thus leaving me any alternative but to lead a quiet life. However, my interest in dental history is as keen as ever, and will be to the end of the chapter!!!!

With generous thanks, cordial greetings and kind regards,

Sincerely,

J. Menzies Campbell

P.S. I am purposely writing (not typing) this letter to assure you that, in spite of a nasty coronary thrombosis about four years ago; and during convalescence, I experienced an alarming and totally unexpected loss of power of the entire right side along with the impossibility to speak. Fortunately these symptoms vastly improved in five hours, but I still have bouts of vertigo. I am indeed very fortunate and thankful for everything.

Incidentally, it may interest you to know that I am one of the comparatively few persons in this country who were under a writing-master, while at school. If this letter prove legible to you, credit must be awarded to him!!

This was the last letter I was to receive from him. His health failed rapidly, so that he was unable to leave his bed and was bereft of speech. Soon after his death in June, 1974, I received a letter from his widow, Dr Margaret Menzies Campbell, notifying me of the passing of her beloved husband. The world had lost one of its great scholars, and dentistry had lost one of the greatest chroniclers of its history.

* * *

*Dr Malvin E. Ring, DDS, MLS, FACD

¹ As described by Dr Paul Geissler, curator of the Menzies Campbell Dental Museum at the RCSEd., in the October, 2001 issue of the newsletter, in a shortened version of the Menzies Campbell lecture given in Glasgow that month.