

ROY BROWN STRATHDEE O.B.E., T.D., D.L., M.A., B.Sc., L.L.D.(ABERD) PH.D.(CANTAB),  
F.R.I.C., F.R.S.E.



**Honorary Doctor of Science Presented to R.B. Strathdee. Aberdeen University News 1975.**

At Graduation Ceremonies on 10 and 11 July 1975 two presentations were made for the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Science, one for the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Divinity and five for the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Laws. Professor Smith presented Dr. Roy B Strathdee thus:

Roy Brown Strathdee, a member of the Teaching Staff of the Department of Chemistry in the University from 1927 till his retirement as Reader in that Department in 1966.

'Nothing astonishes men so much as common sense and plain dealing.' Although Emerson wrote this about Art, I submit that it is even more applicable to Roy Brown Strathdee who has devoted much of his life to the service of this University.

Born in Aberdeen and schooled at Robert Gordon's College, where he was the McLellan Prizeman in Mathematics, in 1914 he matriculated in the Arts Faculty with the intention of continuing mathematics. But like so many of his contemporaries, he was swept along by the tide of War,

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serving in the 4th Battalion of the Gordon Highlanders first as a private then non-commissioned officer and finally commissioned officer.

Demobilized in the spring of 1919 he returned to Aberdeen, graduating in Arts in 1920. But whereas in his salad days mathematics had been his metier, chemistry was now his calling and so he came to graduate B.Sc. with first class honours in Chemistry in 1923. He was elected Fellow of the Chemical Society the following year. After a year of research under Dr. J. E. Humphries he continued his study of organic chemistry at Cambridge with Dr. V. H. Mills.

By 1927 having obtained his Ph.D. in the University of Cambridge he was set to enter industry but, happy chance, Professor A. Findlay of the Chemistry Department asked him to return to Aberdeen as his assistant. Even more inspired was Findlay's suggestion that Strath take over the teaching of Chemistry to the medical students. For the next thirty-seven years of 3,000 medical students on, Roy Strathdee was counsellor, friend, indeed the academic father-figure to those entering and continuing in the Faculty of Medicine.

Students in other faculties moreover were not neglected especially in their sporting activities. From 1940 to 1961 Strath was Secretary of the Field Committee and Treasurer of the Athletic Association. But long before this, while a student on the SRC he was, I believe, instrumental in persuading the Senatus to encourage recreation by decreeing that no lecture would be held on Wednesday afternoons. That felicitous arrangement continues.

When he returned to Aberdeen in 1927, agreeing with Talleyrand that 'War is too serious a thing to be left to military men', Dr. Strathdee became an officer in the STC thus renewing his associations with the Territorial Army.

At the outbreak of the Second World War he was mobilized and went on HM Forces payroll while continuing to teach Chemistry in the University. A Gilbertian situation which in these days of salary freezes must fill us with amazed envy. After an academic year the Paymaster General had sorted things out and Strath while remaining on the teaching strength also commanded the STC contingent until 1946.

He served as Honorary Colonel from 1957 to 1964. His services were acknowledged by the award of the Territorial Decoration in 1944 and his creation as an Officer of the Military Division of the Order of the British Empire in 1946. Roy Strathdee has received other honours but the concept of service is the abiding associations called forth by his name and added to this are the ideals of youth and enthusiasm. Joseph Addison said it much better:

*But thou shalt flourish in immortal youth  
Unhurt amidst the wars of elements  
The wrecks of matter and the crash of worlds*

Unfortunately the General Medical Council prevents us from acknowledging our debt to Roy Strathdee by awarding him an honorary degree in Medicine but, no doubt while asking you Vice-Chancellor to confer the degree of Doctor of Laws upon him the pale shades of Imhotep and Aesculapius are applauding from the side lines.

**British Chemical Community Database - R. B. Strathdee Record**

**BIRTH:** 1897 Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire, Scotland

**DEATH:** 1976

**Education and Qualifications**

**1914** Secondary *Awarding institution:*

School - Scottish, Top Endowed (Robert Gordon College, Aberdeen)

**1923** BSc *Awarding institution:* Aberdeen University

**1923** MA *Awarding institution:* Aberdeen University

**1924** Teachers Diploma *Awarding institution:* Aberdeen University

**1928** PhD *Awarding institution:* Cambridge University

**1928** Associate *Awarding institution:* Institute of Chemistry

**1944** Fellow *Awarding institution:* Institute of Chemistry

**Career**

**1927 - 1936** Assistant Lecturer, Aberdeen University

**1928 - 1939** Inspector, Scottish Education Department (higher science)

**1935 - 1942** Lecturer, WEA

**1936 - 1949** Lecturer, Aberdeen University

**1949 - 1954** Reader, Aberdeen University (Chemistry)

**1954 - 1965** Principal, University College South West England

**Memberships and Roles**

Chemical Society of London Fellow 1924 - 0

Institute of Chemistry GBI Council Member 1948 - 1950

Institute of Chemistry GBI Council Member 1953 - 1956

Institute of Chemistry GBI Vice-President 1956 - 1958

Society of Chemical Industry Member 1944 - 1976

Society of Chemical Industry Section Chair 1947 - 1950

**Honours**

Fellow Royal Society of Edinburgh

R.B. Strathdee as a Sportsman and Military Man

These photos tell the story:



Emmanuel College Rugby at Cambridge

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RBS leads the Aberdeen University Officer's Training Corps parade



RBS received this Order of the British Empire medal after WW II for Territorial Army contributions.

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OBE. British War Medal 1914-20. Victory Medal 1914-19. Defense Medal 1939-45. War Medal 1939-45.

Not shown: The Territorial Decoration of 1908: The badge of the Decoration consists of an oval oak wreath in silver, tied with gold, and having in the centre the Royal Cypher, surmounted by the crown, both in gold. It is suspended from its ribbon by a silver ring. At the top of the ribbon there is a bar brooch. The ribbon is coloured dark green, with a yellow stripe running down the centre. Recipients were entitled to use the letters TD after their name.

Obituary for ROY BROWN STRATHDEE O.B.E., T.D., D.L., M.A., B.Sc., LL.D.(Aberd.), Ph.D.(Cantab.), F.R.I.C.

Roy Strathdee, affectionately known to his many friends as Strath, died suddenly in Guernsey while on holiday there on 19 June 1976.

Strathdee, born in Aberdeen in 1897 was the eldest of a family of four, His father, who was employed on the railway as a telegraphist emigrated with his family to Montreal, Canada in 1908. His mother, nee Maggie Gilroy, was the sister of James Gilroy, one time Professor of Hebrew and Semitic Languages in the University of Aberdeen and for many years associated with the development of education in that city.

As a result of advice given by Mr. Charles Stewart, Headmaster of Robert Gordon's College, Aberdeen which the young Strathdee was then attending, when the family emigrated the boy remained in Aberdeen in the care of an aunt. Strathdee always recalled Charles Stewart with great admiration and affection and there can be little doubt that, in his mind, the family decision to allow Roy to complete his education in Aberdeen, had a very important influence on his whole career.

In October 1914 Strathdee matriculated in the Arts Faculty of Aberdeen University intending to pursue an Honours course in Mathematics. By this time World War I had broken out and early the following year, although still not eighteen. Strathdee enlisted in the Fourth Battalion of the Gordon Highlanders (Territorial Force), and served throughout the remainder of the War including two years of active service in France, Strathdee did not consider this time in any sense wasted. He was quite emphatic that he learnt, as a young officer in the field, the paramount importance of 'caring for the men under my command'. This lesson was never forgotten and was dearly evident in his dealings more particularly with young students throughout his career.

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Almost exactly four years after enlisting Strath was demobilized and returned to University to complete an ordinary M.A. degree in June 1920 and to proceed thereafter, to the recently instituted B.Sc., degree. He was, in fact, the first ever graduate with Honours in Chemistry which he was awarded in 1923. Why Strathdee changed from his original intention of studying and then teaching Mathematics to taking an obviously deep and successful interest in Chemistry is completely obscure. It could be that he had been influenced by the superb qualities of Alexander Findlay's lectures. (Findlay succeeded Frederick Soddy, F.R.S., in the Chair of Chemistry in Aberdeen University in 1919).

After a very brief period of research in Aberdeen, Strathdee went to Cambridge to study under W. H. Mills and graduated Doctor of Philosophy in 1927 for a thesis entitled '*A New Type of Thiocyanine*'. Strathdee's period at Cambridge coincided with much activity both in the laboratories (Rutherford was then in full flow in the Cavendish) and in other spheres of University life. By this time he had decided to enter the Chemical industry, but at the invitation of Findlay, he returned instead to Aberdeen University to take charge of the teaching of Medical Chemistry.

Strathdee's life was dominated by four great and abiding interests: sport (particularly rugby); the Territorial Army; his old school Robert Gordon's College; and Aberdeen University. These areas were by no means mutually exclusive, but no clashes of interests ever occurred.

At school Strathdee had been an outstanding rugby player and he never lost his enthusiasm for the game. On return from the war he was the guiding spirit in the formation of the Gordonian Rugby Club which he captained until his departure to Cambridge where he gained a College Blue. He retired from actively playing the game around 1929 and thereafter concentrated on coaching. His teammates describe Strathdee as a hard, but scrupulously fair player, with an approach to the game based on the maxim of 'practice makes perfect.

The other sport in which he participated was cricket, but in contrast to his attitude to rugby, Strathdee treated cricket much more as a social relaxation than anything else. It was a game he enjoyed immensely, especially the 'English Village Green' version. Strathdee's sporting interests led him naturally to assist the University Athletic Association for which he acted as Secretary for over twenty years up to 1961. In this capacity he not only came into contact with the student athletes, but also bore a full measure of responsibility for grounds and ground staff.

On his return to Aberdeen in 1927 Strathdee was invited to become one of the officers in the OTC thereby renewing service in the Territorial Army. In 1939, on the outbreak of War, he was again mobilized and acted as adjutant of a reception unit in Aberdeen. At the same time he also played his part as a lecturer in Chemistry, such was the shortage of University staff. After release from the Army in 1940 Strathdee returned to his lecturing duties, but at the same time assumed command of the newly designated Senior Training Corps (STC). He undertook these new duties with great enthusiasm and efficiency--certainly not mirrored by many of the student cadets. For these wartime services Strathdee was awarded the Territorial Decoration in 1944 and the Order of the British Empire (Military Division) in 1946 and from 1957 to 1964 Roy Strathdee was Honorary Colonel of the STC.

Although Strathdee had always had a very real and affectionate interest in Robert Gordon's Colleges it was not until after World War II that he became a Governor--a position he retained for some twenty years. His work for the Secondary School was performed energetically and imaginatively, but no more so than his endeavours on the part

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of the Technical College (now Robert Gordon's Institute of Technology). Many of his refreshingly new ideas were adopted, but, sadly, some of the more far-seeing ones were not.

As has been said, Strathdee returned to the Chemistry Department in Aberdeen University as an assistant lecturer in 1927 and was immediately made responsible for teaching Chemistry to medical students - a function he fulfilled with great acceptance and skill until his retirement in 1965. He was appointed a lecturer in 1936 and reader in 1949. While he maintained a lively interest in advances in chemical knowledge, more particularly in organic chemistry, Strath was not an active researcher. His passion was education in Chemistry and he himself was a most able lecturer - clear and precise, without fuss and illustrating his material with well-turned stories or equally telling demonstrations.

He was elected a Fellow of the Chemical Society in 1924 and a Fellow of the Royal Institute of Chemistry in 1944. His interest in educational matters resulted in service on the Council of the Institute from 1947 to 1950 and again from 1953 to 1956 followed by a Vice-Presidency from 1956 to 1958. He was elected to the Fellowship of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1954 again, largely in recognition of his contributions to teaching.

Very much as a result of his Army training Strathdee was a superb administrator. His services were sought widely throughout the University, more particularly by the Faculty of Medicine. It was indeed largely by his efforts that the degree of Bachelor of Medical Biology (B. Med. Biol.) was introduced by the Faculty as an additional study undertaken by some medical students. On two occasions Strathdee was acting head of department-in the interregnum in 1949 between Professor H. W. Melville and Professor R. M. Barrer and again in 1954 between Barrer and me. It is impossible to imagine how well this duty was carried out. Decisions were taken and not left until the new man came. Everything was in perfect order for the eventual hand over. Beyond that Strath was a reliable and meticulous second in command, always ready to give sensible and well-considered advice, but never thrusting it on the head of department for a young and administratively inexperienced professor.

Strathdee was the very essential guide and friend - roles he always fulfilled with great willingness. His immense services to the University in so many spheres were recognized in the award of an Honorary Doctor of Laws in 1975.

Latterly Strathdee's talents were turned towards what he, himself, loosely called 'amateur history and scholarship'. His writing was clear and eminently readable. Much of what he wrote he published privately to the great delight of his friends. Included among these works are *Chemistry---from Retort to Grid* (a history of the Chemistry Department of Aberdeen University); *The Playing Fields of Kings*; *A Scarlet Cloak in My Land* (the Toga-Rubra of Aberdeen University students); *Fort Cumberland* (the early history of Robert Gordon's College); *Scientia et Opera* (the history of Robert Gordon's Technical College). While these are in no sense complete and deep historical works, they, nonetheless, showed evidence of much patient and painstaking research. It was Strathdee's hope that some of these publications would give a starting point for deeper study - particularly in the case of the history of the Technical College whose origin and development fascinated him, specially the parallelism which he perceived with the development of other similar institutions in Scotland and beyond. In common with Professor Alexander Findlay, Strathdee found great delight in the writings of Robert Louis Stevenson and this gave rise to two lengthy essays *Stevenson as a Scientist* and *R.L.S.-Nomad*.

In the preparation of this note I am particularly grateful for the information which

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was made available by Mr. Eric Finlayson, C.A., Aberdeen, a lifelong associate of Roy Strathdee, who acted, in some measure, on behalf of his very many friends and admirers.

G. M. Burnett