

Biggart, Sir John Henry

by Linde Lunney

Biggart, Sir John Henry (1905–79), pathologist, was born 17 November 1905 in Templepatrick, Co. Antrim, elder son of John Henry Biggart, headmaster of Templepatrick national school, and Mary Biggart (née Gault), also a teacher. He was brilliantly successful in the Royal Belfast Academical Institution, from which he proceeded with an exhibition and a scholarship to QUB medical school (1923), where he won almost all available medals and prizes, was president of the students' union, and graduated with honours (1928). After a houseman year in the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast, he specialised in pathology, and was awarded MD with gold medal for his thesis (1931). He won a commonwealth fellowship, which funded two years of postgraduate work (1931–3) in Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore. His appointment in 1933 to posts in Edinburgh, as lecturer in neuropathology in the university and as research pathologist to the Scottish asylums board, provided him with research opportunities that resulted in a number of important publications. His textbook *Pathology of the nervous system* (1936) was of international importance, and he developed diagnostic techniques and made significant observations on the pathology of the brain, and in particular on the function of the hypothalamus.

In 1937 he became professor of pathology at QUB, and in 1941 was made dean of the faculty of medicine; he held both posts till 1971, and had an almost incalculable influence on generations of medical students. His teaching skills and commitment to his subject were legendary, and were paralleled by his contributions to public life in Northern Ireland: he was described in *Lives of the fellows of the Royal College of Physicians of London* (1984) as the 'dominant figure in every aspect of medicine in Ulster', and was responsible for the development of the blood transfusion service and other elements of the local health service. He was influential in all aspects of medical education, but played a role also in many charitable organisations and was a member of the 1969 Cameron commission, which reported on Northern Ireland political disturbances.

He was a member of QUB senate (1948–71), pro-vice-chancellor (1967–71), and pro-chancellor (1972); he received an honorary MD from TCD (1957), an honorary LLD from QUB (1971), and an honorary D.Sc. from NUI (1973). In 1948 he was awarded the CBE, and in 1967 he was knighted. He died 21 May 1979 in London, while attending a meeting of the General Medical Council, of which he had been a member since 1951. He married (1934) Mary Isobel Gibson of Belfast; a son and a daughter both followed medical careers.

T. W. Moody and J. C. Beckett, *Queen's Belfast 1845–1949* (1959), 618; WWW;
E. F. McK., 'Sir John (Henry) Biggart', *Lives of the Fellows of the Royal College of Physicians of London continued to 1983 [Munk's Roll]*, ed. Gordon Wolstenholme (1984), 42–5; Brian Walker and Alf McCreery, *Degrees of excellence: the story of Queen's Belfast 1845–1995* (1994), 97

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