

Mackenzie, Sir James, 1853-

MD REMEMBERS: A Great General Practitioner

■ In January 1925 while attending the Robert Burns memorial concert in London's Albert Hall, the distinguished Scottish physician Sir James Mackenzie suffered a severe attack of angina pectoris and died 24 hours later of a coronary occlusion. The noted pioneer of modern cardiology, whose studies of arrhythmias and auricular fibrillation revolutionized concepts of heart disease, had investigated angina for more than three decades and suffered attacks for 17 years.

A small town general practitioner who undertook clinical research for his own edification, Mackenzie became a famous Harley Street consultant and the author of classic works on heart disorders. He also investigated referred pain and the areas of cutaneous hyperesthesia.

Highland Bairn. The third of seven children of a hard-working Scotsman and his wife, James Mackenzie was born April 4, 1853, at Pickstonhill Farm near Scone in the Highlands. Like his three brothers and three sisters, the future physician attended the village school and at the age of 12 was sent to the ancient Perth Academy. Calling himself "a dunce" because he found it difficult to learn by rote, he dropped out of school when he was 15 and became an apprentice at a Perth pharmacy. Although he was offered a partnership by the time he was 20, he decided on a career in medicine.

In 1874 Mackenzie entered the university in Edinburgh where he shared "digs" in a tenement with his younger brother Robert and subsisted on "oatmeal porridge and the shorter catechism." James was only an average student in the basic sciences but his work in the clinical years was outstanding and when he was awarded his M.B. and Ch.B. in 1878 he received three medals.

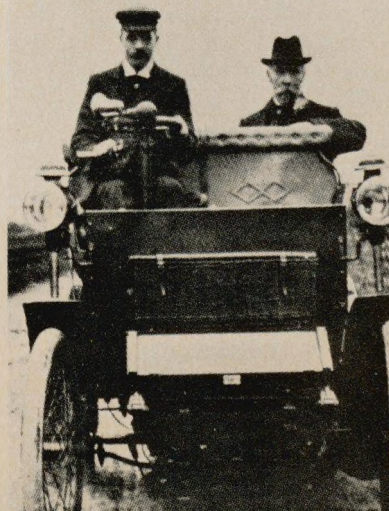
He spent several months in Spennymoor, County Durham, treating coal miners then became house physician at the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary. On completing his residency he joined Drs. John Brown and Henry Briggs as assistant in their practice in Burnley, a Lanca-

shire cotton mill town with little sanitation and a high incidence of infectious diseases. Mackenzie described conditions in the town and the problems of the poor workers, the labor unions, in *Mary Helm*, his novel of the trials of a drunken ne'er-do-well's wife who supports her family by working long hours in the weaving mill.

Within a year of his arrival in Burnley, Mackenzie became a partner in the doctors' practice and in 1882 received his M.D. for a thesis on hemiparaplegia spinalis. When a young woman whom he was attending in childbirth died of cardiac failure, he resolved to learn more about the heart and began to study irregularities in the pulse with a clinical polygraph that he invented. His research reported in his book *Study of the Pulse* explained extrasystoles, showed that they were of no serious import, and demonstrated paralysis of the auricles, later termed auricular fibrillation by Sir Thomas Lewis.

Later Years. In 1907 Mackenzie moved to London and within a few years became a fashionable Harley Street consultant with a roster of patients that read like Burke's Peerage. He served on the staffs of the West End Hospital for Nervous Diseases, the Mount Vernon Hospital for tuberculosis patients in Hamstead, and the London Hospital, where he was appointed head of the newly formed cardiac department in 1913. He was not particularly enthusiastic about the recently developed elec-

Sir James Mackenzie on rounds in one of the first cars in Burnley.



trocardiograph, resisted x-rays in the diagnosis of heart disease, and said that he feared that the "day may come when a 'heart specialist' will no longer be a physician looking at the body as a whole but with more and more complicated instruments working in a narrow and restricted area."

Elected a fellow of the Royal College of Physicians and fellow of the Royal Society, Mackenzie was awarded and honorary LL.D. by Aberdeen University and knighted in 1915. Three years later he moved to St. Andrews to found the Institute for Clinical Research but a few months after he settled in the Highlands he represented the British government at the American Medical Association convention.

Pater Familias. Mackenzie was a tall, handsome eminence who inspired awe in some of his younger colleagues, confidence in his patients, and great affection in his friends and family. His wife, Frances Bellamy Jackson, was a governess in Burnley when she met and married in 1887 her charges' physician. The Mackenzies' first child, Dorothy, was crippled by poliomyelitis at the age of 17 months and their second daughter, Jean, died of meningitis when she was 16 years old. During the girls' early years, they discovered that their father was the author of a serial appearing in a popular children's magazine.

In contrast to these lighthearted stories, Mackenzie wrote ten medical books and numerous scientific papers, chiefly on cardiac disorders. He read extensively, loved Old English and Scottish ballads, enjoyed billiards, chess, bridge, and continued to play golf for many years after he developed angina and even when he was subject to attacks of intermittent claudication. Sir John Parkinson recalled that Mackenzie never seemed nervous or anxious about his anginal attacks, even toward the end, but that "he would quietly chew a trinitrin tablet before leaving his study to enable him to walk into the lounge to greet one of his numerous visitors."