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Biographical Notice of

## **Sir Stewart Duke-Elder**

(22 April 1898 – 27 March 1978)

by **H.E. Henkes**

William Stewart Duke-Elder was born in 1898 in Tealing, near Dundee, as son of a minister in the Free Church of Scotland. He entered St. Andrews University in 1915, graduating in 1922 with the highest honors. He also took a Ph.D. (London) in 1925.

Physiology of the eye was his earliest interest and under the direction of Professor Starling he embarked on this aspect of research at University College, London. In the following years, he became a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of England and in 1928 was appointed Honorary Consultant Ophthalmic Surgeon to St. George's Hospital and the famous Moorfields Eye Hospital.

In 1933, he received a knighthood.

For 29 years he was Surgeon-Oculist to the Royal Family. Despite his demanding clinical practice, he worked all the time on his monumental "Textbook of Ophthalmology" of which he was the sole author. The last and seventh volume appeared in 1954. In 1958 he decided that his original textbook, universally used, needed to be brought up to date and he started on his "System of Ophthalmology" in 15 volumes, the last being published in 1976. The first volume, on "The Evolution of Vision" is one of the best examples of Stewart's intellectual mastery of his subject and command of the English language. Wherever one opens one of his books, the reader is captured by his flowing and elegant style, his capacity to gather all of importance that has been written in ophthalmology in any language. One finds it scarcely credible that any human being could organize the material so brilliantly with such intellectual range.

Apart from being a surgeon and clinician of repute, Sir Stewart edited the British Journal of Ophthalmology and Ophthalmic Literature. He played a major role in the organization of national and international ophthalmology, being i.a. life president of the International Council of Ophthalmology. Sir Stewart's greatest achievement was perhaps his non-abating efforts to raise the standard of ophthalmology to a distinct discipline throughout the world. He indeed laid the foundations of modern ophthalmology.

Through his drive he was responsible for the creation of the Institute of Ophthalmology (London) of which he was Director of Research for 17 years.

Based upon his conception, national institutes were founded in various countries of the world; the Netherlands Ophthalmic Research Institute at Amsterdam (Interuniversitair Oogheekundig Instituut) being the most recent one.

The stimulus which he gave to research the world over, was acknowledged by a re-

ward which very rarely is given to a clinician, however brilliant: election to the Royal Society, in 1960.

Many honours were showered upon him; he held some nine honorary doctorates, including the one of Utrecht University. He was honorary member of no less than 28 national ophthalmological societies.

In 1961, Sir Stewart became foreign member of our Academy. An abiding interest of Sir Stewart, was the Venerable Order of St. John of Jerusalem. First as Hospitalier and later as Bailiff Grand Cross he offered his services with great enthusiasm. He was the prime architect of the magnificent hospital of St. John, which still hoists its flag in Jerusalem. All in all, Sir Stewart exerted a unique influence on the progress of ophthalmology throughout the world. We can only endorse the view of Scott\*: "He was a man the like of whom we are unlikely to meet again".

\* G.I. Scott: Obituary, Sir Stewart Duke-Elder. Brit. J. Ophthal. 62: 344 (1978).  
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