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For information on the Lives of the Fellows project please visit:

www.rcoa.ac.uk/lives-of-the-fellows

AS WE WERE...

A milestone for the 'Lives' Project

'Honour a physician with the honour due...'

Ecclesiasticus 38: 1

The above quote encapsulates the purpose of the College 'Lives' Project exactly: to publish biographies of our early fellows to make their contributions better known.

It is now 30 years since Dr Tom Boulton first attempted to do this: more than 600 fellows completed a biographical record form, but the project stalled. The main reasons were probably lack of resources and Council's focus on achieving independent (Royal) collegiate status. With that done, and our organisation established in its current home, the situation changed and the project was re-launched five years ago with its detail and progress recorded in the *Bulletin* (see *Bulletin* 78, page 35; *Bulletin* 83, pages 40–41; *Bulletin* 104, pages 56–57) and on the website: bit.ly/RCoALives. It is a pleasure to note that our antipodean colleagues have instituted a similar project.

Many thousands of fellowships have been awarded since 1948, so the challenge was great; but the plan was to start at the beginning and see how things progressed. That beginning, in the late 1940s, was a crucial time:

anaesthesia (drugs, equipment, techniques) was advancing rapidly and raising perceptions of its practitioners, their numbers increased considerably by training during the Second World War. Retention of those specialists looked set to be enhanced by the promise of equality of status in the NHS, but it was recognised that both a collegiate organisation and a fellowship-standard examination were needed. The Royal College of Surgeons of England, working with the Association of Anaesthetists, offered to establish a faculty and proposed an upgrade to the then Diploma using the FRCS as a model. The FFARCS was to be awarded on (keenly assessed) merit, with numbers limited: 150 initially, and 10 annually thereafter, producing a total of 170 by December 1952. Had 170 individuals of sufficient status not been available the Faculty might not have developed as quickly (might not have even survived), so those individuals are of great historical

importance. Their biographies were the project's initial focus, and the milestone of the title is their completion. Reaching this stage begs two questions.

First among equals?

Comparison may seem invidious when considering a group who were vital to establishing an independent specialty, but one individual has struck me as particularly worthy of greater attention given his impact – Dr John ('Jack') Halton (Figure 1). Recognised as a skilled thoracic anaesthetist before the Second World War (see *BMJ* 1935;ii:159–161), his RAF war service gave him access to American bases where he learned of Griffith's work with 'Intocostarin' (an extract of curare) in Montreal. Having persuaded his American contacts to import some, he found both supply and agent unreliable, but he remembered 'curarine' from student experiments, and a version ('Tubocurarine') was produced for clinical use. Working with an academic, Dr (later

Professor) Cecil Gray, Halton developed and popularised its use, starting a revolution in anaesthetic practice in the UK. He merits a fuller biography than is allowed for by the 'Lives' format – in Gray's words (see *BMJ* 1968;ii:560), he was 'an outstanding pioneer in the development of modern anaesthesia'.

Whose 'Lives' next?

From 1953, fellowship on the basis of individual merit was replaced by objective criteria, mainly possession of the two-part Diploma or appointment as an NHS consultant. Many hundreds were elected in 1953 alone (and the first FFARCS examination took place) meaning far more biographies than this editor can contemplate. However, a solution is proposed: a complete listing of 1953 recipients on the website, with basic information and reference to an obituary if known. The task has been greatly eased by the kind donation by Dr J G (Dickie) Fairer's (Figure 2) family of his collection of obituaries, and by Dr Bob Palmer volunteering to catalogue them. The option of completing the more detailed 'Lives' form will remain, and a number from the 1953 cohort, and indeed later years, have been written already. The model will be continued and, sooner or later, your year of fellowship will be there so please ease the task by completing your own form (contact: archives@rcoa.ac.uk), or perhaps sending us a CV, retirement being an appropriate moment.

Further reading

See bit.ly/RCoAHeritage for details, more references and biographies.

Acknowledgements

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Figure 1 Dr John (Jack) Halton (1903–1968)



Original in the collection of Dr David Gray (son of Professor T Cecil Gray), but this copy appears 'by kind permission of the Royal Society of Medicine'

Figure 2 Dr John Godfrey (Dickie) Fairer (1926–2018)



Courtesy of his son, Richard

