

## Obituary Notice.

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WILLIAM ALEXANDER POTTS, M.A.CAMB., M.D.EDIN.&BIRM.,  
M.R.C.S.ENG., L.R.C.P.LOND.

ON July 23, the day before he was due to retire from his official duties, Dr. W. A. Potts, medical officer to the Birmingham Mental Deficiency Acts Committee and Psychological Adviser to the Birmingham justices, died at his home in Edgbaston, Birmingham, aged 73. He had been an Ordinary Member of the Association since 1913, and at the Annual Meeting in July this year was elected to the Roll of Honorary Members, much to his delight. In 1933 and again in 1937 he was appointed an examiner for the Certificate in Psychological Medicine granted by the Association and for its Gaskell Gold Medal and Prize, holding both appointments until he died.

Dr. Potts was born at Rugby on May 1, 1866. His father, A. W. Potts, Esq., LL.D., then an assistant master at Rugby School, was to become the first headmaster at Fettes College in Edinburgh, where Dr. Potts was educated, and where under the headship of his father he became head of the school. From Fettes he went as an exhibitioner to Pembroke College, Cambridge, obtaining second-class honours there in the mathematical tripos of 1888, and as it was his father's wish that he should teach, Potts accepted an appointment as assistant master at the Bilton Grange preparatory school in Rugby on leaving Cambridge. In 1889 his father died, and Potts, who had always wished to study medicine, was now free to do so. He won a Thomson Bursary to Edinburgh University and left Bilton.

Qualifying in 1895, after gaining the First Senior Medal in the Extra Mural Class of Practical Anatomy, Potts became house surgeon to the late Prof. William Annandale. Then followed a year as resident medical officer at the East Riding Mental Hospital, an interim appointment prior to his returning to Edinburgh to fulfil various house-officerships, finding valuable resident experience at the Royal Infirmary, the Royal Maternity Hospital, and the Royal Hospital for Sick Children. At Edinburgh Potts consciously prepared himself for the general everyday world of his profession, little realizing that at the East Riding, all unconsciously, he had acquired the urge that was to send him pioneering in the years to come. As the redoubtable William Burroughs Steele would have said: "He made a pattern better than he knew—and kept on with it".

In 1898, gaining the M.D. with honours and a gold medal, Potts left

Edinburgh on a visit to his great-aunt in Birmingham, where his grandfather and his great-grandfather had been in business as brass-founders. Here he met Dr. W. S. Mann, who had an extensive practice in Edgbaston. He went into partnership with Dr. Mann and in 1899 married Florence, his third daughter. They had five sons, one of whom is now a doctor and one a schoolmaster. Dr. Potts remained in general practice at Edgbaston for twenty years, and in spite of the many calls upon his time that a large and busy practice brings he was able to secure the English conjoint diplomas and the Birmingham M.D., to undertake the duties of physician to the Birmingham Maternity Hospital, and to lecture on pharmacology in the University, serving as honorary secretary of the Section of Therapeutics at the Annual Meeting of the British Medical Association in Birmingham in 1911.

During those years, too, the seeds sown at the East Riding began silently to sprout, and Potts's interest in the psychological needs and difficulties of his patients reached fruition. He was particularly intrigued with the mental distresses and abnormalities of childhood and adolescence, and long before "child guidance" became the popular vogue, was achieving useful results with these cases, affording valuable help to parents and teachers not only with those children who had fallen into serious trouble, but also with those who were failing to make satisfactory progress at school. In those days this side of his work was not generally known, but with his passion for careful and systematic physical examinations, Potts found that many children whose educational progress was retarded, or who seemed unable to concentrate or were unduly troublesome, were suffering from faulty nutrition, or defective sight, or some hidden foci of infection, and the appropriate treatment soon brought about remarkable improvement all round. In later years this experience was to stand him in good stead, to the lasting benefit of the delinquent youth of Birmingham.

Prior to the Elementary Education (Defective and Epileptic Children) Act of 1899, and before Potts had entered general practice in that city, Mrs. Hume Pinsent, late of the Board of Control, had stimulated Birmingham into undertaking pioneer work in the education of mentally defective children. It was inevitable that Potts should come under her enthusiastic sway, and soon he was associated with her on the Special Schools After-care Committee, of which he eventually became chairman. This work brought him into close contact with Dr. G. A. Auden, the School Medical Officer for Birmingham, but it was not until later that the eminent Birmingham triad was formed, when in 1919 Dr. Hamblin Smith was appointed medical officer to the city prison. Auden, Potts and Hamblin Smith—it will be difficult to value their services to the city of Birmingham, and it is unfortunate that nothing now remains of those activities save a couple of books, a few memoranda and official reports, for there never was a time in the affairs of the city when so enlightened a trio could have formed the nucleus of a mental health service second to none as an

example for others to follow ; the opportunity, however, has passed and it may never return.

The work of Dr. Potts for the Royal Commission on the Care and Control of the Feeble-minded is well known. This commission was appointed in 1904, and instituted regional investigations into the incidence of mental defect in the general population in certain selected areas, Potts being chosen to effect such a survey in Birmingham and its neighbourhood. When the commission's work found expression in the Mental Deficiency Act of 1913 Potts naturally became medical adviser to the newly created Birmingham Mental Deficiency Act Committee, and incidentally, this was the first appointment of its kind in England. Dr. Potts began his work for the committee in May, 1914, and continued it through the war in the midst of many difficulties. He was still a busy general practitioner, made more busy by the absence of medical colleagues who had taken khaki, but no case of suspected mental defect in the city escaped his notice. Schools, public assistance institutions and infirmaries, police shelters, hostels and lodging-houses were visited, a register compiled and case-records completed—faithful work which brought its own reward after the war. In 1919 Dr. Potts retired from general practice to devote himself to what had now become his all-absorbing interest—psychological medicine.

When the Mental Deficiency Act came into force in England in 1914 Chicago had begun a new experiment. In that city through the influence of Chief Justice Harry Hobson a psychopathic laboratory was opened for the study of criminal offenders, and under the direction of W. J. Hickson this institution soon demonstrated its usefulness to the courts. Its good work inspired Mr. Gerald Blesley, deputy chairman of the Birmingham bench, to suggest the appointment of a psychological adviser to the court in Birmingham, and in 1919 Dr. Potts, then freed from general practice, accepted the office. This, too, was the first appointment of its kind in England. Thus, as medical officer to the Mental Deficiency Acts Committee and psychological adviser to the Birmingham Justices Potts's specialist career began. Other appointments followed. He became consultant to the Royal Albert Institution for Mental Defectives at Lancaster and to the Great Barr Park Colony near Birmingham. He was appointed an honorary physician to the Tavistock Clinic and physician-in-charge of the mental wards at Hallam Hospital. He collaborated with Dr. Shuttleworth in writing the later editions of the latter's book on *Mentally Deficient Children*. His specialist practice grew, his advice was sought throughout the Midlands, and he took rooms in London. He began to be known in America and his articles were published in continental papers. He was 53 when he began his specialist career, and he was to have twenty years of psychiatric work before him. Like Sir Patrick Manson and Sir James McKenzie he was a specialist born out of general medicine ; like them he began his specialist career after middle life, and like them was wider known as a specialist than as a general practitioner.

Potts was one of the original members of the National Council for Mental Hygiene which was formed in 1923, and he became the first chairman of its Sub-Committee No. 3, which was concerned with the study of the problems of mental deficiency and crime, and which to-day is known as the Social Problems Committee. He wrote many memoranda for the National Council. By heredity and culture he had acquired the gift of popular exposition, the art of "making all things plain to the plain man", and the late Col. Lord, Editor of this Journal, was wont to say of him, "If you want to get it across to the public, ask Potts to write it". Consequently he was much desired as a speaker and lecturer to lay audiences. He had a common-sense point of view and was fundamentally free of "crankiness", the cultural defect of our times. A devotee of no particular psychological creed he was able to see the good in all of them, and like the apostle of old, held fast to that which was good. His outlook in psychiatry was holoistic, neither attributing as many do the majority of mental ills to the mind alone, nor as some would have it to bodily conditions only, but remembering the constant interplay of mind and body, and the relation of both to the insistent environment ever sought in his approach to the study of any problem to view it as a whole, as a good physician should.

The closing years of his life were fraught with much pain and crippled by progressive osteo-arthritis, but he continued at his work with a quiet resolution—an example of fortitude that few would care to emulate. Few, too, would remember him then as he was in 1919 when the most important phase of his career began: tall, erect, with beetling brows and a forceful manner. In those days and to the end to the superficial observer and casual acquaintance he appeared aloof, almost austere, and coldly official, yet he was invariably courteous, and beneath his dour exterior was a kind and sympathetic spirit as his patients will remember, knowing him not as the inscrutable specialist nor as the impassive consultant, but always as the family physician, a genial homely man, an understanding and trusted friend.

H. FREIZE STEPHENS.