THOMAS BENJAMIN DAVIE, B.A., M.B. LLD., F.R.C.P.
AN IN MEMORIAM ADDRESS GIVEN IN LIVERPOOL CATHEDRAL ON 23 DECEMBER 1955 BY THE VICE-CHAIRMAN OF LIVERPOOL UNIVERSITY

We are gathered here in sorrow and mourning for the death of our friend and former colleague Thomas Benjamin Davie, and in thankfulness to Almighty God for the work he achieved during his earthly life and for the example he has set before us. In him our University has lost one of its most distinguished sons and the whole academic world one of its wisest and most valiant leaders.

It was in 1924 that Thomas Davie first came to Liverpool as a student in the Faculty of Medicine. He was then already twenty-eight years old and was embarking upon a second career. Born in South Africa, he had graduated with first class honours in chemistry in the Afrikaans-speaking University of Stellenbosch and had been trained as a teacher. During the First World War he had been commissioned as a pilot in the Royal Flying Corps and had subsequently taught in high-schools in his own country.

It was characteristic of him that once he had made up his mind that medicine, and not high-school teaching, was to be the profession of his choice, he allowed no difficulty to divert him from his path; and slender though his resources were, he faced the future with boldness and determination. It is a matter of pride to us that he deliberately selected Liverpool as his medical school, largely because, as he often told us, the Dean of the Faculty, the late Professor Walter Dilling, showed such understanding and so personal an interest in the application he received from the unknown young man from the other hemisphere.

Davie’s career in the Faculty was one of unusual and consistent brilliance. His intellectual power and his capacity for sheer hard work were such that distinctions in examinations and the winning of medals, prizes and scholarships were his well-merited and ungrudging reward. He achieved his degree with first class honours in 1928, his doctorate of Medicine in 1931; and a later date he became a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians.

His professional colleagues are agreed that had he so chosen, Davie could have achieved eminence as a clinical consultant; but his major interest was in the science of pathology. It was in that subject that he became a member of our University staff, first in 1929 as Lecturer and soon as Senior Lecturer. His quality within his chosen field was speedily recognised, and in 1935 he was appointed to the Chair of Pathology in the University of Bristol. Three years later, however, he returned to us as our George Holt Professor, happy to serve again the University he had come to love;

Thus in 1938 it might well have seemed that all the laudable ambition that Davie may have cherished was now satisfied and that the future held nothing but the pleasing prospect of a life of devotion to his medical science, to his students, and to his friends and colleagues.

But for Davie, as for others, the exigencies of war changed the expected course of life and called forth latent powers. It was now that his great administrative abilities became evident, not only within the University, but particularly in the organisation of the regional blood transfusion service; and when in 1945 the University decided that the Faculty of Medicine needed a full-time Dean, it was inevitable that Professor Davie should be the unanimous choice of all his colleagues. Here was a new and untried task to be undertaken; it meant the almost entire abandonment of the teaching in which he had found one of his greatest joys; it meant, also, if not the abandonment, certainly the retardation of his scientific research. But to Davie’s ear the call of duty was unmistakable and he did not flinch from the sacrifice which was asked of him. Through all the difficulties of a transition period when the National Health Service was being inaugurated, he guided the University with a foresight and soundness of judgment for which we shall ever be in his debt.

The Challenge from South Africa

Then in 1947 came the challenge from the country of his birth: Davie was invited to become Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Town. He was aware, as few others could have been, that it was no position of otiose dignity that he was being asked to accept, but one of the most difficult posts in the whole of the academic world, one which would demand of his holder every resource of tact, diplomacy, firmness and courage. Within the very depths of his being he sensed that it was in South Africa that his destiny now lay and that it was there that all that was in him could and should be dedicated in service and endeavour. And it was in South Africa that the real measure of his greatness became apparent for all the world to see.

Here let us pause a moment. Biographical details are only the framework within which we discern, as best we may, the picture of a man. It is on no small canvas and in none but the richest colours that the portrait of T. B. Davie could be painted.

His students and colleagues here in Liverpool recall with affection his familiar figure. A good six feet tall, well-built, fresh complexioned, he was both in physical energy and in powerfulness of mind, the very quintessence of vitality. Vigorous in speech and lucid in exposition, he brought to classroom and laboratory the arts of the naturally gifted teacher; and to his Faculty and to Senate he brought counsel and advice, founded on a balanced judgment and on an unwavering loyalty to the best interests of the University. He had a deep and impelling devotion to his students. They in return gave him their respect, their admiration, and their affection; for he was not content merely to instruct them in the science of pathology. He also continuously set before them the ideals, the noble opportunities and the abiding obligations of their profession. He fostered in them an active love of knowledge and truth wherever it might be found and in whatever guise. Above all, by his own example, by being what he was, he gave them a pattern of upright and manly living.

He was easy to approach, none easier; for he had an all-pervading kindness, a heart sympathetically attuned to his fellow-men, and a sensitive understanding of their hopes and fears, their doubts and their aspirations. No personal difficulty put to him by student, colleague or friend was too trivial for his interest; and in the ordinary affairs of daily life he was less than in matters of greater moment, his robust commonsense was like a breath of fresh clean air.

He himself has recorded that his recreation was gardening. We who knew him understand what he meant by that. It was not the lazy enjoyment of other men’s labours: he did his own digging; he himself sowed the seed and nurtured the tender plant. Only so could he feel any pride in the maturing crop. There in epitome is the character of T. B. Davie.

One of the most friendly of men, his home was ever open as a haven of hospitality; and on social occasions, and especially in the Students’ Union, his genial presence, his sense of fun and his infectious joy in life, added to the pleasure of every company. In all that he did, and in all that he was, there was a glow and a warmth about Tom Davie.

This was the man who sailed forth at the end of 1947 to a new and arduous task in a land where the bonds between Afrikaners and British were loosening, where the word apartheid was already a political slogan, where the relations between the State and the Universities were becoming strained. For such a task Davie was fitted as no other could have been. Trained in an Afrikaans University, a man with an established academic reputation, and an experienced administrator, he had a prestige which none could ignore. In addition, there was no aspect of the complex racial and political situation in South Africa with which he was not well acquainted. But beyond all this, he had the moral fibre without which all other qualities and endowments would have been of no avail. If any man could lead his University and his native country in the paths of wisdom, it was Thomas Davie.

Warnings of Crippling Illness

Yet on the very threshold of his new career, and even before he touched the shores of his homeland, he had the warnings of a crippling illness, for which not all the armoury of medical science could provide a cure. Year after year he battled against physical disabilities, long after a lesser man would have asked to be relieved. He refused to regard himself as an invalid. Neither continual pain, nor increasing disability in movement nor major surgical operations daunted him; he treated them as annoyances and exasperations, not as obstacles to deflect him from his purpose. He had a task to
A statement compiled by the Department of Nutrition, Pretoria, says: Professor Ancel Keys of the United States of America, who recently visited South Africa and here, as elsewhere, conducted research in connection with the causes of diseases of the heart and arteries, is of the opinion that the fat content of the diet is the single most important causative factor in these diseases. Calories derived from fat, expressed as a percentage of the total calories contained in the diet, vary from 8% in Japan, 15% in the diet of the Bantu in the Union, to more than 40% in the United States of America. Heart and arterial diseases are very rare with the Japanese and Bantu, while they are prevalent in the United States of America and countries where the diet contains much fat.

Fat is a necessary constituent of various kinds of body tissue, however, and is a very good source of energy and warmth. The body cannot remain healthy if the diet does not contain fat. In addition animal fat such as butter and the fat in cheese, eggs, liver and fish contain vitamins which are essential to the body. The question therefore arises: how much fat should be taken to be healthy and to remain healthy?

Expert opinion places the safety level of fat intake for adults at 20-30% of the total calories. In the case of very active persons or children it may safely be increased to 40%. In terms of food this means that fatty foods should be taken in moderation, especially by adults with a sedentary occupation and those who are moderately active; eat bread and butter and not butter with bread; one rich sauce or one fried dish in a meal is sufficient for the middle aged, inactive person and perhaps more than enough; be satisfied with very little fat on the meat; bacon lends a pleasant flavour to a dish and, if used wisely, it will be enjoyed for many more years. Tea parties are meant for social intercourse and not to shorten lives, for the fat content of cakes, pastries and savouries is very high; whipped cream increases in volume and therefore a smaller quantity means that fatty foods should be taken in moderation, especially by adults with a sedentary occupation and those who are moderately active.

The Surgeon General, Union Defence Force, has issued the following information concerning part-time appointments (specialist and general practitioner) in the Department of Defence:

1. It should be noted that in the past these posts were not advertised. They are of a temporary nature renewable every 6 months and terminable by either side at any time, but usually at a month's notice. To bring this department more into line with provincial and similar services and in the interests of all concerned all part-time appointments will in future be advertised, to enable members of the profession who are eligible to apply for these appointments.

2. Efforts have been made, we are glad to say successfully, to alter and improve the conditions of service of these part-time appointments. As alteration of contract requires advertising (see Government Notice No. 1923, amendments to rules of South Afri- can Medical and Dental Council, 4 September, 1953), advertising has become necessary.

3. It is the intention of the department to distribute posts and to enable as many medical men as possible to become acquainted with the military medical set-up. For this reason rotation of posts was decided on and all posts will be advertised periodically, probably every 3 years.

4. Further, as stated, it is intended to encourage part-time officers to obtain knowledge of military organization and routine, for which purpose facilities may be extended and preference given to those who are willing to join the reserve of officers at the time of appointment. Investigation is being carried out on the average age of officers on the reserve and it is hoped to ensure that a sufficient number of officers of the 'active service age' group will be available from the reserve in the event of an emergency.