

The Royal College of Physicians and Oxford Brookes University Medical Sciences  
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**Lord Butterfield of Stechford in interview with Lord Walton of Detchant  
Oxford, 14 June 1991**

JW Well John, thank you very much indeed for agreeing to be interviewed this morning. This is a series of interviews, as you know, which are being done with the support of the Wellcome Trust for the Royal College of Physicians, as a kind of living compliment to Munk's Roll<sup>1</sup>, the idea being that we should talk to a number of people who have had notable careers in medicine. I think I'd like if I could to ask you first about your parents and your childhood.

WJB Can I just begin by saying how happy I am to be interviewed by you, John.

JW That's very kind.

WJB I've known you a long time, and you've always been ... we've had lots to talk about. Well, my childhood. It was a bit lonely. My father made Levis Motorcycles, and in fact there's a great story in the family that the Junior TT in 1920 was won because strips of my dirty nappies were tied on the handlebars, because in Birmingham they believe 'Where there's muck there's luck.' I lived at first beside the works in Stechford, that's why I'm, I've called myself 'of Stechford' more recently. And most of the other children ... I had to convince them that I wasn't a stuck-up prig because my father was running a business. And I suppose another feature which I hadn't realised until I got to school was that most parents thought motorcycles were dreadful things! And so one started with a little bit of a handicap in establishing friendships. I played cricket with myself and soccer with myself and I ran all over our garden every time there were Olympic Games by myself. So when eventually I got off to school - I was sent to be a boarder at Solihull School first, until the Depression emptied the coffers - that was when I began to make friends. And ... I may, I rushed at them I think, probably. Anybody could be my friend, because I hadn't met, had many people to talk to!

JW No brothers and sisters?

WJB A brother arrived when I was eight, but he was really kind of out of reach.

JW Of course.

WJB He's turned into a very bright mathematical physicist and is busy at the moment making a machine that reads handwriting. So we shall see. I mean, he may buy me out eventually!

JW I see! So you went to Solihull School.

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<sup>1</sup> Munk's Roll was first published in 1861 when the then Harveian Librarian of the Royal College of Physicians, decided to compile obituaries of College members. Ten volumes have now been published.

WJB Yes.

JW And were you determined from an early stage to go into medicine?

WJB Yes. It's very interesting when one interviews people now who are thinking or hoping to go in the different lines that people take about how they wanted to get into it. I wasn't discouraged from thinking about medicine by my mother, who'd seen my father go through hard times. At one stage we had a hundred motorbikes on our lawn, because he wouldn't stop the factory production line. But I hadn't very much doubt that I wanted to do medicine. It's very hard to say why. I remember helping our cat deliver herself of kittens. Everybody said that proved I was going to be an obstetrician, an exam I subsequently failed!

JW So you came up to Oxford in what year?

WJB Yes. '39.

JW Which college?

WJB Exeter. Very extraordinary run of luck I had. I had two schoolmasters, one from Downing actually, a man called Hornsey(?), and another, Morgan(?), who went on to be headmaster at King's College down in Taunton. He was a chemist from Jesus College Oxford. And they just made me work. They had to, mind you, because I was bewitched by the philosophy, the Greek philosophy about heroes and games and winning the match for the school in the last minute and that sort of thing. And I did play I think too many games probably. But I don't regret a minute of it.

JW Well we shall come back to that later. But in 1942 I think that you were successful in getting a Rockefeller Studentship to take you to Hopkins.

WJB Yes, yes. Well, I was terribly fortunate, you know. I had David Whitteridge, whom you will know well on the neurophysiological side, as my ... as my medical tutor. On one occasion he did tear up my essay in front of me saying that I could do better than that. A rather devastating question; 'Is it too much rugby football, or have you met a young lady?' So when I said 'Both,' he said 'I think you'll start ... bring me another one!'

JW I see, right.

WJB As a result of that, I did an enormous amount of work for him in the vacations, and played my games in the afternoons during term time. I was eventually interviewed. Hugh Cairns was among those who interviewed me. At that time in an extraordinary way I'd become captain of the Oxford team. One of the interviewers said 'Are you playing a great deal of cricket?' And Cairns stepped in to bless him and said 'Well, not as much as they used to in peacetime!' And off to Johns Hopkins I went!

JW How was that?

WJB Wonderful! A complete ... cessation of all the distractions of our games. I mean, I didn't want to play baseball, I didn't understand American football, and I worked like stink. And I enjoyed it enormously. In fact, I think had I not gone to Hopkins I think I'd

have ended up in the Thames Valley if I could have done, playing cricket and golf and doing a bit of medicine on Sundays!

JW Were there any particular teachers at Hopkins who impressed you most?

WJB Yes. Rich<sup>2</sup> was wonderful. Al Blalock<sup>3</sup> had a very big impression on me. Longcope<sup>4</sup> the professor of medicine taught me how important it was to look at the patient. I shall always remember how long he took, rather like old ... old Hunter(?), walking around the bed, and making the light fall on the ribcage from different angles. So yes, I was very ... very impressed by many of the teachers at Hopkins.

JW And then I suppose you came back to Oxford to the Radcliffe to complete your clinical training and...

WJB Yes. That's right, yes. That's when I, that's when I wrote a wonderful essay about the wrong kind of moles, and not hydatidiform moles. That's wrong. I wrote a marvellous essay about hydatidiform moles when the question was a carneous mole. And only when I got into the bar after the exam was everyone going on about the beastly question about the carneous mole, and I realised that I'd thrown thirty marks away.

JW So that was how the obstetrics didn't quite work out.

WJB That's how the obstetrics... And do you know when I got to be the regius at Cambridge I was delighted that old Joe Mitchell<sup>5</sup> said 'I too failed obstetrics at Birmingham!' I'm not sure about Keith Peters. I'll have to ask him.

JW So when did you qualify?

WJB I qualified in early '45, and ... then ... well, I did a job down ... pathology in Bristol first of all. Then I went to Mary's. Through my games playing friends I got a job there. And from there I went to Birmingham, to work with Leonard Colebrook on burns.

JW And that was of course before you went into the Army.

WJB Yes.

JW Which was in 1947.

WJB Yes.

JW But in the meantime, John, you married.

WJB Yes. I met a marvellous girl on the way back from America, and we got married ... presently. And it was a terrific impact. When I was in the Birmingham Accident Hospital, the secretary was a lovely ex-RN Commander, and he made it quite clear that if I liked to smuggle Ann into my bed that was all right with him, providing I

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<sup>2</sup> Arnold Rich. Professor of Pathology at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine from 1944.

<sup>3</sup> Alfred Blalock. Professor of Surgery at Johns Hopkins 1941-64.

<sup>4</sup> Warfield T Longcope. Professor of Medicine at Johns Hopkins 1922-46.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Stanley Mitchell.

didn't make too much fuss about giving her breakfast every morning! But sadly the poor girl died when our baby arrived, Jonathan. Terrible shock. Most wonderful day in October 1948, 23<sup>rd</sup>, you know, the sun was shining, and I took her into Guy's, and she had a cardiac arrest when they were stitching up her episiotomy. That turned it into a very black day, I can tell you.

JW Oh, very tragic, yes. But Jonathan...

WJB Oh, he's in his forties now. He's banking. He wanted to be a doctor. Made a nonsense of anatomy in the first year at Bristol, and came out and said 'Well, if they won't let me look after their lives perhaps they'll let me look after their money.' And that's how he got into the money game.

JW So he made that deliberate decision to change his ... to change his way.

WJB Yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah.

JW Mmm, indeed. Now, you remarried of course.

WJB Yes.

JW A lady from a very distinguished neurological family.

WJB Yes. That's ... what a remarkable man older Foster Kennedy<sup>6</sup> was, and what a remarkable wife he had, who was the mother of my very remarkable, my very remarkable wife, Isabel. She rescued me. I mean I was really down after that baby was born, and she came over from America and very quietly put me together. It was quite impressive. And I met the old man. I shall never forget watching him doing his clinical examinations. He had a most marvellous golden penknife. He had two points on it for two-point discrimination, and one for checking pain, which was incredibly sharp! She always wanted to be a writer, and she's now reviewing books for *The Times*...

JW Oh is she? Yes.

WJB ...which I encourage in my old age, because they pay her quite a lot of money per book!

JW Oh, indeed. Indeed.

WJB So there you are, you see, it all helps!

JW Of course Foster Kennedy, your father-in-law, was one of the few people, or relatively few people in the modern era, who've got a syndrome named after them.

WJB Yes, yes. Never to be forgotten. One side optic atrophy, the other side papilloedema equals a frontal lobe tumour.

JW Absolutely. And that's one of the things that all of us in neurology learn pretty

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<sup>6</sup> John Foster Kennedy.

early in the day.

WJB But you don't see many of them I don't think.

JW You don't see many of them. Not at all. Let's go back to your sporting interest at this stage before we come back to your medical and scientific career. You played rugger for the university?

WJB Well, I first played hockey.

JW You played hockey?

WJB Now, Solihull School was quite strong in hockey. And I got up to Exeter, and I didn't realise that a rather tall chap with an artificial hair wig, Vivian Cornish(?), was captain of the university hockey team. But after I'd been there about a couple of weeks we played our ... started playing our league matches against Wadham. And I was asked to play inside left, and I cracked in, I don't know, six or seven goals. You know, just happened that way. And I got a card saying would I turn out for the university against the University of Birmingham on Saturday? And I was over the moon! Didn't do any work for two days! Went out to the parks and practised shots from various parts of the, of the circle. And played against Cambridge early in 1940, at Cambridge. I played hockey against Cambridge twice. The first time was a four-all draw, and the second time was a two-all draw. And I was very proud of the fact that we were 2-4 down, twenty minutes to go, when the ball came across the back of the circle about four inches off the ground and I took a swing at it, and the next thing I knew it was in the net! So ... the hero figure, you know! A terrific sensation! Yes, I...

JW So what made you move to the oval ball?

WJB Well, I knew Keith Scott(?), who later captained England, who was then at Lincoln College which was beside Exeter, and we played Cuppers<sup>7</sup> together. There were unions for the wartime Cuppers. And a fellow, a very nice man called Harvard Jones(?) from Christchurch, missed the train back from his girlfriend's 21<sup>st</sup> party in Cardiff. And I was working away at about 12.30, quarter to one, and another medic called Guy Colson came in and said 'Keith wants you to play fullback against Mary's this afternoon.' So I said 'But I've never played fullback.' He said 'He'll nurse you. Come on, get your togs!' And it was a very exciting afternoon. First of all, the first ten minutes everything went wrong. I didn't know where to be, and I was being told 'Move a little to your right, back a bit,' you see. But then I fielded a ball on the run, and kicked it into touchdown wind – a great long one, those were the days when you could kick straight into touch – and I felt this is not a bad place to play. A bit later I managed to tackle their stand-off half – Thomas Kemp! A rather brutal experience, because his knees hit you in the chest if you didn't get him right. And after that, I just went on playing full-back.

JW Tom Kemp of course we both know well.

WJB Oh, a wonderful man.

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<sup>7</sup> Cuppers are intercollegiate sporting competitions at Oxford University.

JW The only man ... no, one of two people to play rugger for England before the war and again after the war. Indeed.

WJB Yes.

JW So you went on to play for the university at rugger as well, having played for...?

WJB Yes, yes. A lot of luck. A lot of luck. The ... Harvard Jones I got to know very well, and I always felt very sorry for him about that one missed train. But that's life, you know! You have to seize it.

JW Absolutely! And what about the cricket?

WJB Well that was funny. I was mad keen on cricket. I was keener on cricket than anything else. I mean it is an incredible game, isn't it? We had a lovely man in 1942 called Lomas(?), who played for Middlesex. He was the man who taught me more in the nets about playing back with a dead bat to swing bowling than any coach had ever been able to get through to me. And after the first match [when] the university played I was saying 'I'm really very busy in the hospital now, so count me out chaps,' he suddenly had a very brisk haematemesis.<sup>8</sup> ... I hope I'm not taking too much time on this!

JW Not in the slightest.

WJB It was very entertaining, he said, Stallybrass said 'Well, John, you've run the hockey team, so now you're going to have to run the cricket team. We trust you completely.' So off I went, and I found out how to do it. And it was a very interesting life experience actually, because our batting was about as brittle as England's batting, and I used to go in sixth and have to bat on and on and on, run-less if necessary, but to stop wickets falling. So we get to Lords. They make a lot of runs. We're at ... it's the last wicket. The ninth wicket falls. Duke Hussey, now at the BBC...

JW Yes, of course.

WJB ...comes out, walks up to me, and says 'I don't want to touch a ball.' Eight-ball overs in those days. So I said 'Okay, Duke. I'll see that over out.' After six balls, friends of mine in ... behind my back, I won't say where they were drinking, kept on shouting 'Hit him for six! Hit him for six!' Which I tried to do, and Austin the bowler bowled me. I walked up the steps of the pavilion, there was Stallybrass, principal of BNC [Brasenose College Oxford], looked me in the eye and said 'You fool! You damned fool!' And I was about that big, of course! However, that lovely Ian Peebles said 'It was a magnificent gesture when the Oxford captain tried to hit a six at the end of the match, and brought it to a successful conclusion for the other side!'

JW So you must have three blues?

WJB Wartime ones, yes.

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<sup>8</sup> William Teulon Swan Stallybrass.

JW But still, nevertheless, three blues, and there can't be many people in that, in that situation.

WJB There was a chap at Cambridge called John Bridger, who played later for Hampshire, who had about six. So I mean one ... one wasn't allowed to get swollen-headed!

JW Well, let's come back then to medicine. First of all of course you went into the Army, and in fact you joined in '47.

WJB Yes.

JW Can you tell me what month you joined?

WJB It was August. August.

JW Ah yes. Yes. You ... because I joined in March '47.

WJB Oh, you're Sir! Sir!

JW Exactly! Thank you! Right, well now, tell me about the Operational Research Group.

WJB Well, I'd been in the burns unit. I was sent to Bielefeld where I was ... at the 40 RHU(?), having a great time trying to keep the Blackwatch under control actually. And a message came saying Lieutenant Butterfield was to catch the train and be in the War Office at ten o'clock next morning, which I did. When I got there I was told that they'd just received the advance typescript of the Bikini Report<sup>9</sup>, and the summary included the words 'burn' and 'leucopaenia'. 'Burn' could be translated by the Army Medical Corps staff, but 'leucopaenia' was a bit more difficult. And so I was pulled out of general service, which in some ways I regretted because I'd been having a great time in my little medical inspection room! And I was put into the Army Operational Research Group at Byfleet, West Byfleet. It was quite obvious that the really big problem was the flash burn problem. The ranges were so great compared to everything else. And so I got busy with that. The first thing we decided we'd do, I and some other chaps, we would set up a gadget which would simulate the flash and find out the dose in calories per square centimetre you needed for various degrees of burning injury. In fact we decided that we would link the thermal dose to healing time, because that seemed to be rather more ... well rather more significant as far as the Army was concerned. Well, we produced one or two deep burns, and then we thought well we'd better go up by an order of magnitude and we began burning material. Battle-dress was wonderful. It kind of singed and smelled. But the Army was about to be put in something called 'Gaberline 3170,' and that went off with a crack. It was a celanese, sort of a ... is that the right word? Yes, I suppose it is. And Wansborough-Jones<sup>10</sup>, my Army boss, got me to make a presentation. I'd burn some of this stuff in a major committee, and made everybody, including Solly Zuckerman who was there, laugh, particularly when the chairman said 'Boy, close the,

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<sup>9</sup> The report of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Evaluation Board on the atomic weapons tests held off Bikini Island, July 1946.

<sup>10</sup> Dr Owen Haddon Wansborough-Jones, scientific adviser to the army council 1946-51.

open the window! Open the window! (COUGHS), 'because of the smoke! That meant that when I went to America I was supposed to help them find out if their material burned. And I went there to Richmond, Virginia, to work with a man called Edward Evans(?), who was the US Army's big expert on burns and material damage and that sort of thing.

JW Were you still in the Army when you went to the States?

WJB No. I came out.

JW You came out, I see.

WJB I came out and I was put into the MRC, and I was not on anybody's payroll, and I had to pay a lot of money later to fill my pension gap, for disappearing from the pay roll.

JW So, at no stage really during that period did you, did you do clinical medicine?

WJB No. I had done a year with Grant<sup>11</sup> at Guy's, and I yearned for clinical medicine. And I was allowed to go back to Guy's in 1953, and give up all this atomic bombery. I did a bomb test in '52, in Australia, and 'That' I said 'That's it.' And so I then got back to Guy's, and was really quite a busy chap. Partly in the labs with a man called Eddie Holling.<sup>12</sup> That's when I got interested in forearm metabolism. And ... but a good deal of clinical work – outpatient and ward rounds – and being corrected by the clever diagnosticians that they all were at Guy's.

JW But you were working in the department of experimental medicine, were you?

WJB No. No, no, no. It was called the Medical Research Council's Clinical Research Unit.

JW Oh, Grant's unit.

WJB Grant's unit, yes.

JW Yes, because he was in Newcastle during the war, looking at bomb...

WJB That's right, bomb casualties. He was very interested in shock. And I did quite a lot of experimental work with him. It was slightly difficult, because I was rather allergic to rabbits' fur, and he worked with rabbits. But he was a tough taskmaster, I can tell you. Every word that wasn't necessary in any report you gave him was struck out. He said 'My father was the editor of the *Glasgow Herald*, and any, every word cost a penny.' So he took all the unwanted words out!

JW What then made you move more towards internal medicine as distinct from research? Because it would appear that at that stage you were set upon a career in the research field, MRC and so on.

WJB Yes. When I became professor of experimental medicine, I realised that I was going to have to teach. And from 1958 into the early sixties, I just did as much clinical

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<sup>11</sup> Ronald Thomson Grant. Consultant Physician at Guy's and on the staff of the Medical Research Council.

<sup>12</sup> Herbert Edward Holling.



medicine as I could. I guess I did a late senior registrar's course as a professor.

JW     Indeed, yes.

WJB    And enjoyed it very much. All kinds of funny things happened. I remember seeing my first cannon waves in the neck, and realising as I came to the bedside with my team, my firm, my God, they're cannon waves! How do they happen? And that sort of thing. So it was, it was very interesting. Quite stressful at times. But one had to learn quickly.

JW     So you had the chair of experimental medicine?

WJB    For five years...

JW     From '8, '68...

WJB    Sorry, no, '58...

JW     '58 to '63.

WJB    Correct. And then I was turned into professor of medicine. By that time I'd made a little bit of a name for myself by taking my department up to Bedford on that diabetic survey. The really important part about that was we established the sort of blood glucose levels that made it possible to rule out or rule in diabetes. There just weren't diagnostic levels when we went in '62.

JW     No.

WJB    Extraordinary.

JW     Looking back to that particular appointment in experimental medicine, was that a university-funded appointment?

WJB    Yes. Yes.

JW     It was? Because there weren't many chairs of experimental medicine in the UK.

WJB    No. It was ... a good compromise between Guy's wish not to have a hierarchical professor who was going to tell the likes of Conybeare<sup>13</sup> and Willie Mann what to do. But they knew they'd better yield to the university's intention of having professorial units in all the London teaching hospitals, and I was the sacrificial lamb. I mean a lot of people called me the experimental professor of medicine. And when I passed with colours, I won't say flying, they just took the word experimental out.

JW     So that there was no chair of medicine at Guy's before that?

WJB    No. I was the first.

JW     You were the first? Ah! I see! Well, that was a very forward-looking idea. Whose

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<sup>13</sup> Sir John Josias Conybeare.

idea was it, do you know? Have you any idea...?

WJB I think Clifford Wilson was very much behind it. I don't think Sharpey-Schafer<sup>14</sup> blocked it. I mean he was at Thomas' and he was exactly what Thomas' wanted, photographing ... cardiac cathetering ... member of the medical aristocracy really. And I think they hoped that they could have someone who made as little trouble for them as Sharpey at Guy's. And I did my best not to make trouble. I had a philosophy that my boys would write papers with every consultant on the list if we could, on the rounds, that we wanted them to get accustomed to the idea of publishing. Not all of them fell in, but most of them did.

JW Good. When you were of course involved in experimental medicine, you moved into the diabetic field, which was rather different from anything that you'd been doing before. What was it that led you to take an interest in diabetes, as distinct from other diseases?

WJB Opportunism.

JW Serendipity?

WJB Yeah. When I went to Grant, I worked with Eddie Rolling, who's now over 80 and who actually went over to America, to Philadelphia, in '58 when Grant's unit was finally broken up. And he was very keen on measuring the oxygen consumption of the forearm muscles. And we learned how to catheterise the deep vein and ... I eventually learned how to do arterial punctures in the opposite brachial artery. I have to tell you that everyone thought that this was a very wicked thing to do, and there were going to be patients walking around Guy's with no fingers from the emboli that I was going to create. It occurred to both of us that while doing oxygen tensions was one thing, why didn't we measure the glucose? And we put a plethysmograph on the forearm to find out what the oxygen consumption was, and we had a plethysmograph on, and we made very rough calculations of what the glucose uptake was. And the wonderful thing about that John was that it was something you could do on the open ward. I had found out from having my teeth drilled in the dental school that everything is much less painful if it's in public. And so we used to get our diabetics to allow us to work on just their arm. They could talk to everyone around. And of course this was very good for the philosophy of clinical research among the students, who used to come on the ward, look, and 'What on earth?' 'Why have you got an autoanalyser hitched to him?' 'Ah well, that's to measure the blood glucose level.' 'Really?' 'Well, that's really rather ... you mean, you don't have to do it in the lab by titration?' So I think it seeded the place a bit with the idea of work on patients, and it's produced, oh, Stewart Cameron and Cyril Chantler and lots of them as well ... Harry Keen of course.

JW But if you go back of course to the old days, before the war, I suppose that one would have to say that Tommy Lewis and people like him were some of the first clinical scientists in the UK.

WJB Yes, sure.

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<sup>14</sup> Edward Peter Sharpey-Schafer.

JW Diabetes was not a major interest of many people at the time that you got into it.

WJB Harry Himsworth was a hero of mine, because he measured glucose about every five minutes on all kinds of tests and showed there were little wiggles, which got everyone interested in glucagon when it came along. And he used to ask me quite searching questions about the work I was doing. I believe that when he was asked for an opinion about me for the ... for the job at Guy's in '58, since the later dean Jim Houston said 'We all had a terrible shock when we read Harry Himsworth's letter out about you, because he said he was absolutely sure you'd be a first-class investigative professor.' But quite rightly, he said, he wasn't really in a position to say what I'd do if I was the professor of medicine.

JW I see!

WJB Absolutely right!

JW So what did you do as professor of medicine?

WJB Well, I ran the combined rounds on Friday afternoon as often as I could. I never turned down a chance to lecture. I got progressively more interested in the interface between ... well really the patient and the doctors. I was very interested in how the patient has got in the bed. Now, tell me that! Very often of course some very revealing bits of the clinical history would come out. And I knew that we had got to build up a much stronger laboratory/clinical interface, and as we were going to have to rebuild Guy's I began to get interested in where the outpatients came from. And that got me interested in medicine outside the hospital. And that got me interested in why are the people here at all? And that got me interested in what I think I'll call the mistakes people make to their, with their health – like smoking of course, and drinking in the extreme cases. And ... I never really tried to compete with very clever chaps like Charles Joiner on the diagnostic side, because I could see they were going to run rings around my rather extraordinary training. So I made up my mind that I would try and fill in the gaps that Guy's needed.

JW Was it your interest in students and teaching which made you, as it were, susceptible to the approach from Nottingham in 1971, or 1970 it must have been, when they asked you to go there?

WJB Yes. Quite a lot of things mattered there. One thing that ... I think I must confess was very important to me was that I felt it was a very severe challenge, because I knew I was going to follow Fred Dainton whom you've been talking to recently, and I was warned by the people there that it was going to be a hot time in the old town tonight! And I was quite sure in my own mind that the only hope of dealing with the very politically active students was probably a, (sorry about this), was probably on the sort of man-to-man combat. I didn't mean fighting, but actually arguing with them. And that had been rather my style at Guy's with the students, preferably one-to-one, going back to all I'd learned from David Whitteridge. And of course it was a terrific challenge to be going somewhere where there was going to be a new medical school. Fred had done a lot of the groundwork, but used to say 'I don't understand how on earth the regional health boards work. You'll have to take all that on. I mean, I can't make sense of what they do at all.' But there was also a feeling that it was a way in which I could be of some kind of service. I'd always been slightly guilty that when I went into the Army Hitler had

withdrawn from the scene, and this looked to me as though it was a chance where there was going to be something one could do which was going to be uncomfortable. And it was uncomfortable. I mean, they threw bottles through one's windows and all kinds of dreadful things. So I'm very glad I did that. And I'm, in a way I'm sorry I was brought to leave Nottingham because I enjoyed it enormously. I liked the people of Nottingham. I discovered, as we both know, that medicine is not actually the centre of the universe. The classicists have got a lot to teach us. And I began to realise that all those things that doctors hold so dear philosophically – you know, if you go into the Royal robing room you see King Arthur's knights<sup>15</sup> – and mercy and hospitality and kindness are the qualities that we foster, we look for in our medical applicants. But I realised when I was in the vice-chancellor's office, really for the first time, that you have to be able to say 'No' and loudly if necessary. And that isn't easy for doctors, and that's part of our health service problem of course.

JW Of course. Did you find ... did the new medical school open while you were there?

WJB Oh yes.

JW It did, of course.

WJB I saw the first lot through.

JW You did, yes.

WJB And I gave ... I got Derrick Dunlop to give the address to the graduands, and we gave an honorary degree to the director general of WHO. And I'm sorry that his name doesn't come straight to mind.

JW Halfdan Mahler.

WJB Halfdan Mahler, yes, who is actually back at St Thomas' hospital now. Are we all right?

JW Oh no, we're fine. Absolutely. Yes, we're doing very well. Can I just then ask you about your relationship with David Greenfield, who was a delightful man.

WJB Oh, dear David! Oh yes! Well, when I was being interviewed for the vice-chancellorship, I could have kissed him! A lot of questions were thrown at me. Had I been a dean? So I said 'No, I'm afraid I haven't.' 'Well, do you think you can manage this?' I said 'No, I'm not sure I can. But if you want me I'm willing to try.' 'You do realise,' says David, 'that this man has a great deal of scholarly work on his hands, and I do hope that the university will make sure that he is able to continue his scholarly work, perhaps on a diminished scale.' So I used to go every Tuesday to the Royal Infirmary at Derby<sup>16</sup>, to see diabetics. Now that comes to another reason why I went to Nottingham, which I think I'll just reveal to you. In the late sixties we were playing with something called gamma-guanidinobutyramide in the lab, which we thought might be a naturally occurring alternative to the phenformin family. I think it probably would have been a therapeutic runner if the patients had been prepared to eat a porridge-bowl of the stuff. It's

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<sup>15</sup> William Dyce (1806-64) painted a fresco of King Arthur in the Royal robing room at Westminster Palace.

<sup>16</sup> Derbyshire Royal Infirmary.

rather like Chinese remedies, you know; if you have enough of them and eat nothing else it'll cure you! And when it was clear that that needed a lot more work on it, I was bitterly disappointed with the fates. And I think if Nottingham had come when that was in full flood I'd have said 'Not interested.' And I think if I'd have got interested in the next thing I'd have said 'Not interested.' They happened to hit me the very three months when I was dejected, when I realised that what I thought was going to be a real winner wasn't. I knew it improved the clearance of insulin, I knew it did all the things I wanted it to do, but it wasn't going to ... wasn't going to lead one into the textbooks quickly.

JW But it is interesting isn't it how so many of us in medicine, moving into that kind of appointment – I mean, I've never been a vice-chancellor – but we insist upon keeping a toe in our medical life.

WJB Yes, yes, yes. Sure.

JW And you did that in Nottingham.

WJB Yes. Yes. Well, let me just say ... how did I get back to Guy's? I went to see my bosses in the MRC saying 'I'm very happy to serve ... about nuclear explosions, go on trials, but I must have a day a week if I can back at Guy's. I'm getting very irritable.' And I think it's in us. And I think ... if we could foretell what the people are going to do when we're selecting them, if we knew that they were so hooked on it that they'd want to do it one day a week for the rest of their lives, we'd give them the places!

JW And after four, or was it five years in Nottingham, you...

WJB Yes, I got a letter saying...

JW You got a letter ... and that letter told you?

WJB ... I think it said something like 'The Queen would very much like to appoint you as the regius professor of physic at the University of Cambridge, where they are also starting a new clinical school,' beginning, you know, like you're doing now. And as that meant that I could give up my responsibilities for modern languages and all the other things, engineering ... which incidentally I enjoyed because of my father, I just got into my little car and went over and saw them at Cambridge, and said 'Of course.' And that was an incredible challenge. I met Stuart-Harris<sup>17</sup> soon after I arrived in Cambridge, because the medical sub-committee came to see Cambridge.

JW The medical sub-committee of the UGC [University Grants Committee]?

WJB Of the UGC, yeah, sorry. And Stuart-Harris took me on one side and said 'Well, you're not going to try and start this school, are you John?' And I said 'Oh, I think I'm going to have to. I think I'm going to have to.' He said 'But you're barmy! Nobody wants it. You're going to have a hell of a lot of trouble.' And I did.

JW Indeed. From whom, out of interest?

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<sup>17</sup> Sir Charles (Herbert) Stuart-Harris.

WJB Well, I think the money side of the university was very worried. And of course they eventually put a ring fence around our budget, which was to be what the old graduate school had plus a little more. They sort of earmarked grant for development. 'But don't think you can break out of that and enter the list(?), because we know you're going to wave shrouds(?), and all the other subjects will have to give up a lecturer to you. So we'll be careful. Don't try that.' Matthews<sup>18</sup> the physiologist was not in favour. He felt that it was going to weaken the pre-clinical departments. And [he] eventually came to see me, bless his heart, and said 'I've come to bury the hatchet, John Butterfield. You have not weakened us. I think it's marginally possible that you strengthen us.' So I purred with that! I'm not absolutely sure that all the members of the molecular biology department were completely in favour of it.

JW I wondered...

WJB But they've ... and there I think Keith Peters has done a wonderful job in reassuring them too, because they knew I wasn't going to live forever and they were wondering who would come next. So that's been good. It was a quite remarkable business, encouraging people to give up their jobs and come to us. Almost all of them agreed. There were one or two quite notable exceptions. Arthur Crisp wasn't really sure that he could change gear and come to us ... when Martin<sup>19</sup> was going. But I was terribly delighted when the UGC's medical sub-committee assessments, just when I was stepping down, said 'Well, okay, you're about as good as Oxford and ... and Hammersmith.' And I felt that it had all been worthwhile then.

JW So one of your other major interests of course was that you became a fellow of Downing as soon as you arrived, is that correct, as regius professor?

WJB Well, I mentioned I think that one of the chaps that got me my scholarship to Oxford had been MJ Hornsey(?) of Downing College. So when the master of Downing asked me to have dinner in the college, he said 'We're one of the colleges who are looking for a professor to make up, catch up with the numbers. I suppose, is there any chance ... you know, we have a very strong tradition about medicine...' 'Yes,' I said 'You had the great Whitby<sup>20</sup> here.' And he said 'Well, what about you. Would you come?' So I said 'Yes, certainly,' because it seemed to me that was closing the wheel with old Hornsey and all those examination papers that I'd had in 1939. And so I went, yes. And I certainly don't regret that. That's been great fun.

JW And how long was it before you yourself became the master of the college?

WJB Morien Morgan<sup>21</sup> died suddenly of a coronary, in the spring of '78, and they elected me on June the 1<sup>st</sup>. And it was a very exciting moment. And I suppose you and I know the wonderful business of really having a major responsibility for young people, and knowing that they know they can ring on your bell if they want you. It's almost like being an old country GP. I mean, the things that they bring to you are sometimes frivolous but sometimes devastating when you hear what the trouble is.

JW You know so much of course about the Oxford scene in comparison with the

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<sup>18</sup> Sir Bryan Matthews. Professor of Physiology at Cambridge 1952-1973.

<sup>19</sup> Sir Martin Roth. Professor of Psychiatry at Cambridge 1977-85.

<sup>20</sup> Sir Lionel Whitby.

<sup>21</sup> Sir Morien Bedford Morgan. Master of Downing College 1972-1978.

Cambridge scene. If you were looking at it totally from the outside, would you prefer the Oxford system where heads of houses are whole-time, or would you prefer the Cambridge scene where all of the heads of houses are people holding chairs or other positions of responsibility in the university?

WJB Yes. Selfishly, I like what I had.

JW Of course.

WJB I believe that there is much to be said for taking the chaps off their chairs and giving them the college to run, or giving them very much reduced departmental responsibilities. I think ... I don't know whether I ought to say this to you! One ... one cannot help feeling that, and I felt this when I was in Oxford and when I was playing for Oxford, we have got at Oxford a slight measure of superiority because after all we founded Cambridge. And I have a feeling that the ... the equilibrium between the university and the colleges has been achieved beautifully in Oxford. It's very good at Cambridge, but as you can see we're now wondering what kind of a ... should we have an executive vice-chancellor? And I don't mind that. I just hope and pray they have a man who knows what the college system is all about. Because, as I said, being a head of a house and not knowing what they were going to ask you next seems to me to be such an important gap in the educational process for young people that you must be sure that the university overall understands the importance of that part of the system.

JW Of course it was slightly before our time, but I think it would be fair to say that they were a group of Oxford dissidents who went across to the Fens many years ago, John, and founded the other place.

WJB Well, I've been looking into that.

JW Oh, you have.

WJB A little bit. Let me tell you what I hear. It sounds as though an Oxford student fired an arrow in the air, which killed somebody. The people in Oxford were so cross with the university that the university thought it had better have a shutdown for a little while. And it was during that shutdown that a man who'd been the chancellor at Oxford said 'Why not come to Cambridge?' There were lots of options. I mean they might have gone to Bury St Edmunds, which was a huge religious centre, with six hospitals ... in 1206, 1208. But ... it's very hard to be sure. They are at the moment writing another history of Cambridge, and we'd better leave our discussions till we see what the experts say.

JW Perhaps we should. Perhaps we should. Now of course you're one of the very few people who actually has held two vice-chancellorships, because as master of Downing and regius professor you then became vice-chancellor of Cambridge. And it's very apposite to comment upon this when you mention the possible prospect for the future. How did you enjoy that?

WJB I enjoyed it very much. I was immensely fortunate in that a loyal and close friend in Downing, called Stephen Fleet, became the university registrar just when I was starting. So I had something straightaway in the, in the job at Cambridge which I hadn't had at Nottingham. I did have David Greenfield, who was a touchstone, but he wasn't working in

the vice-chancellor's orbit. Stephen Fleet was. And I knew others in the vice-chancellor's office or, you know, the central administration in Cambridge. I think that vice-chancellors, if they're like us, academics, who are practising their trade or profession, and are asked to do this job, probably should have a period at the equivalent of the Harvard Business School or whatever, so that they can talk money to the moneybags, and management to the managers, and that kind of thing, using the 'with it' words of the time. This I suppose is a terrible thing to say to you, John, but you and I know that many of the words they use in hosp-, in education, we have different words for them in the medical world. I mean 'clinical practice' is the same as all this 'relevant training' that they're talking about. I reckoned I was just getting into top gear at Nottingham in '74. The student revolt was down, and we were beginning to see things flower, and I was beginning to realise how one grappled better with the ... with Ken Bell(?) and the University Grants Committee. And I felt I would have probably been doing a better job by 1976/77 had I stayed at Nottingham than I could have possibly done in the early stages of my apprenticeship. Two years is too short at Cambridge. I had the advantage; I'd had an apprenticeship at Nottingham. But I do think that Oxford are right with four. Two years is...

JW I thought you would say that, because most people would now agree with that view.

WJB Urn...

JW What's your own feeling about the future, if they're talking about the possibility in Cambridge of...

WJB Five to seven.

JW Yes.

WJB Well, if they get the right chap it'll be marvellous. And I can't believe they won't get the right chap. In the future, there's just the real possibility I suppose that there will be friction which isn't necessary. And that will be very sad. It's the same old thing of having an unpopular captain that you can't get rid of till he retires, which I think is slightly dangerous. I keep saying, whenever I get the chance, in Cambridge 'Please make sure the chap you get in the vice-chancellor's office has been a member of a college, and understands what the college system is all about.' Because if we miss that it'll be ... we shall lose a very important part of our birthright it seems to me. Alec Todd tells me he's worried that by the end of the century the colleges will be the same as halls of residence. I'm a bit doubtful about that actually. There are so many honorary fellows that'll make sure that doesn't happen. But I see what he's getting at. Financial control will squeeze ... squeeze the port out of the combination room!

JW Well, apart from this incredibly busy professional life, you've been involved in a whole range of different organisations. And one of course in which we have shared is the Medical Pilgrims...

WJB Oh yes.

JW ...of which you were for many years secretary. And you had that inevitable ... wickerwork basket, in which you always carried the minutes and the books.



WJB Yes. Yes.

JW Tell us about the Pilgrims.

WJB Well, I was asked by Bow(?) fairly early on in my career at Guy's if I would like to join the Pilgrims. And they were meeting in Zurich, and I ... I joined them. And I think the spirit of the Pilgrims met me when I came into the hotel rather late on a wet August night. 'Will Professor Butterfly please ring somebody!' And of course Donald...

JW That must have been Derrick<sup>22</sup>!

WJB Er ... yes, I think it was Derrick that asked it, but it was Donald Hunter who called me Butterfly for a long time after that.

JW Oh was it? I see.

WJB And they were a wonderful organisation. And I think ... I think all of us owed a great deal to them. I worry a little bit whether ... whether we don't give enough time to them today. I think that one of the difficulties about all this management and administration is there isn't much free time. But probably one learned so much, and had so much of one's judgement improved by exposure to those old chaps. Old chaps – we'd better be careful...!

JW Oh quite, quite. Yes.

WJB Yet, you know, hearing what Derrick had done, and Donald, and Melville Arnott, the whole lot. One ... one had the kind of help that I feel vice-chancellors when they're first appointed need. There were people you could say 'What do you do when somebody's challenging you on every item on the agenda?' And they'd say what you did.

JW Are there any particular pilgrimages – after all, we travel as pilgrims once a year to a centre in the UK or abroad, to see something of their medicine and to see something of the ethos of the place – any particular pilgrimages that stand out in your memory?

WJB I enjoyed the one to Paris very much. I naturally enjoyed the Russian and Chinese visits, because they were looking behind curtains in both cases. I thought you led the one in Norway magnificently. And the great thing there was that ... this was the time when the leader was revered by the hosts, because of your status with the International Neurological<sup>23</sup> ... I thought that the home visits were pretty good too.

JW And you were a marvellous host in Nottingham. I shan't forget that concert that you arranged, that recital in your...

WJB Now, here's a joke. We've got that chap into the Athenaeum on the strength of his piano playing!

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<sup>22</sup> Lord Butterfield is probably referring to Sir Derrick Dunlop here.

<sup>23</sup> The International Neurological Congress was founded in 1955 and was renamed the World Federation of Neurology in 1957.

JW Oh, you have! That's delightful! Good! And I shan't forget in a hurry either you driving the minibus in Cork.

WJB Oh yes! Let's forget when I lost my engine in the tramlines and you all had to get out and push!

JW Yes, quite.

WJB Yes, the Irish trip was a good one too. In fact, the pilgrimages have been wonderful memory sources.

JW They have.

WJB And I do think that they have been nearly as important as external examiners in ensuring the quality of medical education was maintained countrywide.

JW Good. You and I served together on the MRC. How did you find membership of the Medical Research Council?

WJB I have to tell you that having been an employee I was greatly honoured to be involved, and I enjoyed the meetings very much indeed. I suppose all of us have one shock, and that is there are so many parts of medical research that one really isn't master of, hasn't got mastery of. And I think that's probably, it's probably quite important that one is ... I won't ... yes, humiliated a little bit. It stops you getting too big for your boots. I sold, to everybody I met, the Medical Research Council as one of the very great institutions. I enjoyed being taken on by them. I enjoyed my time with Grant enormously, and I had as I mentioned a very nice relationship with Harry Himsworth. I suppose I'm starry-eyed about the Medical Research Council. At Cambridge I was immensely helped by Sydney, who pulls my leg unmercifully, Sydney Brenner! But Max Perutz was terribly kind. I mean on one or two occasions when there were chairs on the go he would come in and say 'No, I won't sit down, my back is bad today. But I did want to have a word with you.'

JW It's interesting, isn't it, because he will stand at the back throughout the longest meeting because of this pain, poor man, and yet always goes.

WJB Yeah. And I have told him and Sydney how ashamed I am that we can't help either of them. Sydney had his bad knee from his motorbike accident, haem- ... a huge bruise and bleeding into the joint, and it's stiff. And Max's back. And yet they're still friendly disposed to us!

JW Indeed! Now, you're starry-eyed about the MRC. Are you equally starry-eyed about the UGC Medical Sub-Committee, on which you also served?

WJB It's quite different. I think ... it has more ... more transparent problems, perhaps. I don't know that we could have done it any other way. I really don't. I think the important thing is to make sure that if people are successful in raising funds you don't handicap them, equilibrate the financial receipts. I enjoyed it. We both see Bob Hunter, and one went around with him for a time. And, no, I don't think it's done a bad job.

JW Good. I some years ago had the privilege of going to Hong Kong to report on their neurological services, supported by the Croucher Foundation.

WJB Yes. Oh yes?

JW It was only afterwards I found that you're a trustee, I believe, of the Croucher Foundation.

WJB Yes. I'm now the chairman.

JW You're now the chairman? Oh well, tell us about that.

WJB Well, I was at Nottingham when I was asked by Melville Arnott if I would join the sub-committee of the University and Polytechnic Grants Committee in Hong Kong. And ... I said I'd go. Well, I think ... my biggest mistake in life is not to say no every second time. However... And I had a marvellous [time] there. The one thing about Hong Kong was that it, if it decides it's going to do something it does it. And they wanted a new medical school, an expansion of the other one, and the establishment of a big school of health professionals. And I'd got three years. And I discovered something which I will ... I use all the time now. And that is that the chairman's notes, the chairman's briefing notes, should be given to all members of the committee. I noticed for example in the medical sub-committee of the committee of vice-chancellors and principals there were yellow sheets that the chairman had, and I know that everyone's a bit jealous that he'd got the ice-cold dope and the rest of us were floundering a bit. So I said 'Let's give it to everyone.' The rate that we got through the business was incredible. We had agendas that went on for pages, because you could say 'Well, you've seen the note. Is that okay?' 'Yes, right, next item.' And away we went. And in this way, we were able to start a school at the Chinese University, and expand the one at Hong Kong University, and the polytechnic<sup>24</sup> set up a big school of science. Now in the midst of all that a man called Croucher, who was a stockbroker, suddenly realised he was not immortal, and he wanted to establish a foundation. And it's a long and complicated story, but eventually he did, and I was one of the people that were drawn into being his foundation trustees. Alec Todd<sup>25</sup> was the main driving force. And we, he said 'Och! I'm 80 now John, I'm slowing down. Next year you'll have to take on the chairmanship.' And so I said 'On condition you'll become president.' 'Och, that'll be good, I like that.' So that's the arrangement. He still, when he wants to, says 'I don't like the way you're running it' and I argue with him! He usually wins.

JW Yes! Well now, John, you're also a much decorated man – honorary doctorate of Nottingham, of Keio University in Tokyo, Florida International University, OBE '53, Knight '78, and of course Life Baron 1989.

WJB Yes.

JW All of these must have given you great pleasure.

WJB Yes.

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<sup>24</sup> Now Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

<sup>25</sup> Alexander Roberts, Lord Todd of Trumpington. President of the Croucher Foundation 1988-.

JW Which do you think, looking back, is the one that you found the most rewarding? Or any of them? I mean obviously all of them, but which would you say are the ones that have given you perhaps...

WJB Well, when I had just retired and I was taken off... I mean, you'll know about this because you've been drawn into this remarkable palace in Westminster. I must confess it suddenly gave me a feeling that I was ... it was my fault if I felt I'd been chucked on the rubbish. So to that extent, it did give me reassurance. I don't know, you probably won't believe this, but I was really quite shy when I was young, being a lonely child. And the very nice thing about the House of Lords is that you can be quiet and you can be shy, but the people are so nice and polite and gentle and ask your opinion even if they don't really want it. So I think probably that one ... that one helped me most.

JW But I think your initial shyness is something that you have successfully overcome, but with a great deal of charm and a great deal of enthusiasm. And I have to say John that we have been as you say friends and contemporaries for many years. It's been a particular pleasure to have had the opportunity of interviewing you today. Thank you for coming.

WJB Bless you, John. Thank you. I've enjoyed ... you've let me talk. As I warned you I was going to talk too much, I probably have!

JW Not at all.

WJB Thank you. Thank you.