

# *Robert Elliott Stevenson*

Robert Elliott Stevenson was born in Port Elizabeth in 1895 and received his schooling at Grey High School and St Andrew's College in Grahamstown. After matriculating he went to Rhodes University College and thereafter, as medical training was then unavailable in South Africa, proceeded to Edinburgh where he enrolled as a medical student, but enlisted in the army before he could start his medical course. Later that year, in his own words, he "went for a commission" and was duly gazetted as a second lieutenant. After training at Salisbury, the battalion went to France in Spring, 1917. His description of his service in the trenches was amusing, although the lightness of touch, which characterised all his written descriptions of important events in his life did not hide the grimness and appalling waste of life which this murderous conflict engendered. He must have borne a charmed life, because the life expectancy of a subaltern at that stage was said to have been about three weeks, and in his own words "subalterns in those days matured quickly and died soon". He was wounded in 1917, returned to France and was severely gassed in 1918 which put an effective end to his combatant service.

After demobilisation Bob Stevenson returned to South Africa, where, in the meantime, the South African College had matured into the University of Cape Town and was now offering a medical course. He qualified along with 26 other doctors in 1925 in the fourth group of graduands. During his time at UCT, Bob Stevenson was Editor of the University quarterly and in a much lighter vein, was one of a quartet of medical students who, in 1921, produced a new student paper, *The Cathartic*. This publication "founded to publish material of a facetious and flippant nature", ceased publication



Dr R.E. Stevenson.

(Photograph: Mrs Stevenson)

(involuntarily) after its second number when the Vice-Chancellor of the University decided that this issue was not up to the standard of the first, and had descended to publishing stories which he "had heard as a small boy of eleven years at preparatory school in Scotland". His qualities of leadership, however, were not all light-hearted and he was President of the Students' Representative Council and captain of the hockey team.

After qualification, Stevenson worked at the New Somerset Hospital as a house surgeon and made a move to the Pretoria General Hospital where he was senior medical officer. In 1928 he was appointed Medical Superintendent of Grey's Hospital. Grey's Hospital until then had never had an official medical superintendent. The administrative work had been done by the secretary of the hospital who was directly responsible to the Board of Trustees. However, with the application of the new Hospital Ordinance of the middle '20s a great deal of the power of the Board of Trustees was removed and it became necessary to have an administrative medical officer in charge of the hospital, with house surgeons and physicians under his control. When he took over at Grey's the building was old and outmoded and many of the wards which have recently been vacated with the move to the new hospital building, were not yet built. It fell to the lot of the new medical superintendent to provide for the reorganisation of this ancient institution. The medical and nursing services were amongst the best in the country but the buildings housing them left much to be desired.

During the course of Dr Stevenson's eight years at Grey's Hospital, enormous alterations were made to the original building erected in 1855/56 by Dr Peter Sutherland. New buildings went up funded by the Provincial Administration and money left to the hospital by Miss Martha Welch. G. and J. Wards, described by Dr Stevenson himself as 'a later accretion, humble in construction, evil in design and hideous to look upon' were built in 1931.

The years of reorganisation at Grey's Hospital were busy but happy ones and never so serious that Bob Stevenson's innate sense of humour was not

able to pierce the gravity of many situations. His reports to the hospital board were models of simplicity. Of the severe and unprecedented epidemic of malaria which hit Pietermaritzburg in 1931 and 1932 he wrote, "no case was refused admission but many refused to be admitted . . . it is no unusual thing to admit 30 cases of malaria in a morning and to treat anything up to 70 to 80 cases as out-patients".

The next big task which Stevenson had to undertake was the opening in 1936 of the new King Edward VIII Hospital for Blacks in Durban. After four years of intensely hard work, he was transferred to Addington as Medical Superintendent in 1940, and remained there throughout the war. He was also commissioned as a Lieutenant Colonel in the South African Medical Corps, being in charge of the military wards in Addington.

In 1944 he was once more promoted, to be the first Director of Medical Services for the Province of Natal. In this position he was arbiter of the fortunes of all the hospitals under the aegis of the Natal Provincial Administration. These were not only the Durban and Pietermaritzburg hospitals but also those in the smaller country towns. It is a measure of his ability in this post that the smaller hospitals were made viable throughout all the vicissitudes of post-war politics and of staff shortages, and were able to provide a full medical service for the people of this province. It was during this time as Director of Hospital Services in the Province that the concept of a medical school with its teaching hospital at King Edward VIII Hospital in Durban became a viable proposition and he was intimately associated with the foundation of the medical school. Until his retirement he was chairman of the Joint Staff Advisory Committee (University and NPA) of that institution.

In 1956 he retired from his post as Director of Hospital Services and thereafter in his retirement joined the staff of the East Street Clinic as a clinical medical officer. He remained associated with this institution as a staff member for many years. Retirement, however, did not spell the end of his association with the organized medical profession in Natal. He was Chairman of the Town Hill Hospital Board and on the death of Mr Leslie Smith in 1974 was appointed Chairman of the Grey's Hospital Advisory Board which position he retained until ill health forced him to relinquish it some few months before his death. For five years, shortly after its inception he was one of the medical men on the South African Nursing Council. Dr Stevenson joined the Medical Association of South Africa in 1926 and took an active part in the affairs of the Association. He was an office bearer in the Natal Inland Branch of MASA, being President of this branch in 1947. He was elected an honorary life member of MASA in 1961.

As with many busy and active men, Dr Stevenson found time for a number of extra-mural activities which reflected his earlier love of writing and the study of history and of the English language. He was a national Vice-President and foundation member of the Simon van der Stel Foundation, President of the Pietermaritzburg Cripple Care Association, a patron of the South African Legion and for the period 1961-64 he was President of the Natal Society. On his retirement from the Chair, he became a trustee of that organisation and remained so until his death.

However, it was Dr Stevenson's enormous interest in things military which was one of the major loves of his life. He was appointed in 1958 to the

South African War Graves Commission and was provincial representative on the Board of the War Museum from 1958 to 1966. He was a member of the South African Military History Society and in 1946 and 1947 he carried out a war graves survey for the province of Natal and through this work the defining of battle fields and, more importantly, of war graves and war cemeteries in the province made great strides. From 1958 to 1966 he was Chairman of the Historical Sites and War Graves Committee of the Province of Natal where, with its Secretary, George Chadwick and others, he performed a great deal of invaluable original work.

Robert Stevenson was an innovator. He was the first man to be appointed as Medical Superintendent at Grey's Hospital and with no guide lines, he set up a viable system of command inside the hospital which stood him in good stead when, as first Medical Superintendent of King Edward VIII Hospital in Durban, he had to open that hospital and start it from scratch. He then, in later years, was the first Director of Medical Services in Natal, a completely new position, where once more he had to lay down guide-lines for the running of his office. I personally can bear witness to his approachability in this position.

Stevenson, the man, was always approachable. He was a kindly person, always available to his juniors but a man who could act with energy and resolution when the occasion demanded. He had an elegant pen, and reminiscences and memoirs which he wrote for various people and organisations were always couched in the most stylish prose. Many of his more ribald reminiscences of early days as a medical student or as a young doctor were recounted with a delicate touch that not even the most prudish could object to. He was a great admirer of the work of Oliver St John Gogarty — another medical man turned politician, writer and poet. On a personal level I knew and admired Dr Stevenson from 1953 when, as a very junior medical officer, I first met him, and was always treated by him with great sympathy and consideration. Our paths crossed not only in our professional lives, but in other common interests and his kindness and help were freely given and always invaluable.

FRANK FRIEDLANDER

