

# ROBERT LAWSON TAIT

## SURGEON AND CONTROVERSIALIST

Robert Lawson Tait was born in Edinburgh at 45 Frederick Street, on May 1st, 1845.

His father, Archibald Campbell Tait, was a lawyer by profession, a Guildbrother of Heriot's Hospital and a cousin of the late Archbishop Tait. His mother was Isabella Stewart Lawson, of Leven; she was thought to have been a Roman Catholic as Robert was brought up as a catholic and was, as a boy, often a server at Mass.

Young Robert was educated at Heriot's Hospital, a famous school for boys, where he won a scholarship at the University which maintained him there for four years. He duly entered Edinburgh University in 1860 at the age of 15 and for about a year was an arts student, one of his teachers being the famous Professor Blackie.

He then came under the influence of Sir James Young Simpson, with whom he was a great favourite and to whom he always gave his undivided admiration, affection and respect.

Although he had given up arts in favour of medicine, it is recorded that he never took his M.B., but he obtained the diploma of L.R.C.S., L.R.C.P. (Edin.) in 1866.

His first appointment was as resident surgeon at the Clayton Hospital in Wakefield, an appointment which he held for three years before moving to Birmingham where he acquired the practice of Dr. Partridge, together with the doctor's house in Lozells, and here he brought his wife (previously Miss Sibyl Anne Stewart, daughter of a Wakefield Solicitor). There, at 317 Burbury Street, they set up house in 1871. It is regrettable that they had no family.

He secured the appointment as lecturer in physiology and biology at the Midland Institute, a post which he retained until 1879. During that period he had established a considerable reputation and, as is so often the case, had also made many enemies, whose signifi- cance will be noted later.

In 1873, when he was still only 28 years of age, he was awarded the Hastings Gold Medal for his essay on *Diseases of the Ovary*.

It was during this period that Lawson Tait supported Mr. Arthur Chamberlain's campaign to establish a special hospital for women and, when success crowned their efforts, his opponents came within an ace of barring him from acting in it for they secured the passage of a rule that the acting surgeons must possess the F.R.C.S.(Eng.) That was indeed an awkward situation for Tait who, at that time had only the M.R.C.S.(Eng.) but here is the measure of the man—although he had only three months in which to read up, he set to work with that objective in view and, by June 8th, he had obtained his fellowship which made him eligible for nomination. At the election in the following month he was one of the three elected. He remained a member of the acting staff until his resignation in 1893.

In 1888 he helped to revive and reconstruct the Medical Defence Union and was elected its president.

In 1874 he became associated with the movement for the admission of women into the medical profession on equal terms with men and his Presidential address to the British Gynaecological Society in 1887 made a forceful plea for this equality of status. Another of his activities which incurred the odium of many of his colleagues was one which, to the opponents of the National Health service might be viewed as the thin end of that particular wedge. Playing the part of pioneers of innovation, Birmingham, through Arthur Chamberlain and the Hospital Saturday Fund, agreed to set up a Consulting Institute where two whole-time salaried consultants were to be employed