

Stuart Mawson - Obituary March 2008



During the 1960s and 70s ear surgery enjoyed a renaissance initiated by the adoption of binocular operating microscopes in the operating theatre. Microsurgery was essential for the development of stapedectomy for the surgical treatment of deafness from otosclerosis and tympanoplasties for repairing damage by chronic middle ear disease. Prominent among the British otologists working in this exciting field, and acclaimed internationally for his work and publications, was Stuart Mawson. He became well known for his ear surgery, and for the production of the textbook on ear disease that became the standard British and indeed international work for all trainee otologists.

Stuart Radcliffe Mawson was born on the 4th March 1918, in London. His father Alec Mawson, who was Chief Officer of the old LCC parks' Department, and his actress mother Ena Grossmith were divorced while he was still a boy. Educated at Stagenhoe and Canfield schools he went up to Trinity College Cambridge and then St Thomas's hospital in London to study medicine, qualifying as a doctor and becoming a House Surgeon at St Thomas's in 1943, during the second world war and the Blitz.

He was a young and very inexperienced doctor in 1943, when he was commissioned as Lieutenant in the RAMC. On 18th September 1944, as a Captain and Regimental Medical Officer to the 11th Paratroop Battalion of the 1st Airborne division he took part in the ill fated parachute drop into the Battle of Arnhem. Those fearful events lead to his capture and internment as a prisoner of war, and are recounted in his memoir book "Arnhem Doctor" of 1981. After liberation by the Americans in 1945 he was returned home and, in 1947, became a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons and attained a post as Chief Assistant to the Ear Nose and Throat Department at St Thomas's in 1950.

In 1951 Mawson was appointed as Consultant to the Ear Nose and Throat Department at King's College Hospital in London and the Belgrave Hospital for children, where he worked until his retirement in 1979. In addition to his keen adoption of the new microsurgery of the ear, he took great interest in the diagnosis and management of deafness in childhood.

The high esteem and respect of his medical colleagues made him the ideal candidate for the role of Chairman of the Medical Committee and the District Management Team, which he fulfilled in his last years at Kings. It was a difficult time of change in the Health Service and the task fully exercised his well honed tact and diplomacy.

Mawson's national repute led to membership of the council of the British Association of Otolaryngology – the body concerned with the welfare of the services provided nationally for patients requiring its speciality's care. The Royal Society of Medicine's section of Otology has always been the main academic forum of the specialty, and in recognition of his contributions, he was honoured by election as its President for the 1974-75 year.

Apart from contributions to many other text books, and papers in specialist journals, he produced his internationally acclaimed text book "Diseases of the Ear" in 1973. It soon became recognized as the essential otological text for doctors in specialty training studying for the FRCS in Otolaryngology. He found himself obliged to produce two more editions on his own, and a further one with shared authorship, and it is now in a 6th edition.

Stuart Mawson enjoyed a very happy family life, of paramount importance to him. Married after the war, he and his wife June, known to many as Julie, had four children, and thirteen grandchildren. It was a joy to him that so many of them lived close to him in Suffolk. Julie sadly died in 2006.

He was a most loyal colleague and friend. Always thoughtful and kind he drew great inspiration from his faith. In his second 2006 memoir "Doctor after Arnhem" he has described how the inspiration of his belief sustained him during his worst moments as a prisoner of war, when he cared for sick POWs in several camps in and around Leipzig.

Stuart and Julie spent retirement years in Knodishall, Suffolk, where he sailed his own boat from the Aldeburgh Yacht club, until he felt it unwise to expect Julie to be able to rescue him should he fall overboard at sea. He played regular golf in Aldeburgh until very soon before his death. Ever active in affairs of the Church, having been licensed as a lay reader in 1959, he was appointed as Lay Elder in 1990, and served as church warden at his local St Lawrence's Church.

Stuart Mawson was a fine surgeon who made valuable contributions, and he was a fine man who led a good life in every sense.

He died from a form of leukaemia on February 20th, just missing his 90th birthday.

I can sum him up no better than by quoting his son Jock's words at his funeral service:

"Stuart was a warm, stubborn, courageous perfectionist; forged in war, never offering less than total commitment to his country, his profession, his family and his God"

He is survived by four children and thirteen grandchildren

Harold Ludman FRCS, March 2008