SIR HUGH WILLIAM BELL CAIRNS

Taken from Document on Adelaide High School students who were awarded Rhodes Scholarships – prepared by Bill Pearce

CAIRNS, HUGH WILLIAM BELL – Rhodes Scholar 1917

There was a special assembly of the whole School called suddenly about noon on Monday, December 4, (1916), and great enthusiasm prevailed when it was announced that the purpose for which the assembly was called was to commemorate immediately the success of one of its past pupils. The School has indeed been much honoured by the doings of many of its old students, but perhaps the blue ribbon as far as University attainments and good-fellowships are concerned was attained on that day when it was announced to the School that Mr. Hugh William Bell Cairns was selected as the Rhodes Scholar for South Australia for 1917. We heartily wish Mr. Cairns the health and vigor to enjoy to the full the benefit which this great scholarship confers upon its fortunate recipients. For the benefit of those of more recent day at the School, we attach here Mr. Cairns' school record.

Mr. Cairns was a student at this School for three years. Having been awarded a scholarship by the Government, entitling him to three years' secondary education, he entered the School in January, 1909. At the end of that year he passed the Junior Public University Examination in eight subjects with three credits, and was placed on the General Honours List. In 1910 he passed the Senior Public University Examination in eight subjects with two credits, and was again placed on the General Honours List. In 1911 he passed the Higher Public Examination in five subjects, and for the third time he secured a place on the General Honours List. As the result of this examination he was awarded a Government Bursary at the Adelaide University, and being only fifteen years of age at the time, he had to obtain special permission to enter upon his University course. In 1911, also, he was "dux" of the School, and was also Editor of the School Magazine, a quarterly production. Since leaving us he has had a brilliant course at the University, and has been twelve months at the Front, and has now returned to complete his medical degree, and will return to the Front before taking up his residence in Oxford. Apart from his Scholarship, Mr. Cairns was a lad of many parts, and was held in high esteem by teachers and students alike, and he is generally remembered as one of the strongest and most popular lads that has passed through the School. (Adelaide High School Magazine)

From Adelaide High School Archival Material – prepared by Bill Pearce

THE RHODES SCHOLAR

Mr. H.W.B. CAIRNS SELECTED

A SOLDIER STUDENT

The members of the Rhodes Scholarship committee - His Excellency the Governor (Sir Henry Galway), the Chief Justice (Hon. G.J.R. Murray), Professors Henderson, Stirling and Naylor, Mr. J. R. Fowlet, and the Registrar of the University (Mr. C.R. Hodge) - met at Government House Monday morning for the purpose of selecting the Rhodes Scholar for the ensuing year. There were eight candidates, but only six were able to appear, the other two having gone to the war. The meeting lasted nearly two hours, and upon the conclusion of the deliberations, the Registrar, who is secretary to the committee, announced that the
scholarship had been awarded to Mr. Hugh William Bell Cairns, a medical student, who has a fine record. Mr. Cairns is a son of Mr. W. Cairns, of Riverton, and was born on June 26, 1896. He was educated first at the Riverton Public school, and later at the Adelaide High School, from which he passed to the University. His record, as submitted to the selection committee was as follows:

**EDUCATION**

1905. First prize for essay (8 and 9 years' section), South Australian Exhibition.
1907 Public school fifth class certificate.
1908 Primary Examination passed; five subjects. Gained Government Junior Exhibition.
1909 Passed Junior Public Examination; eight subjects, three credits, general honours. Top of Junior Public form (at Adelaide High School).
1910 Passed Senior Public Examination; eight subjects, two credits, general honours. Top of Senior Public form, A.H.S. Qualified for Government Senior Exhibition.
1911 Passed Higher Public Examination in five subjects, general honors. Dux of Adelaide High School.
1912 Awarded Government Medical Bursary. Passed first year medicine.
1916 Passed fourth-year medicine (first class). Tied for the Davies-Thomas Scholarship.

**In Manly Outdoor Sports.**

1910 and 1911. Tennis, cricket and football at Adelaide High School.
1912 Lacrosse - C Grade, A.U.L.C. Tennis - C Grade, A.U.T.C.
1913 Lacrosse - Grade and Inter-University and Junior Metropolitan team. Rowing - Junior Tyas Fours (Tubs Fours ?) and Maiden Fours, A.U.B.C.
1914 Rowing - Junior Eights, Sir Edwin Eights, Inter-University Senior Tyas Fours, Dash eights. Lacrosse - A Grade pennant matches and Inter-university.
1915 Rowing - Junior Eight. Lacrosse A Grade pennant, till joining A.I.F.
1916 Football - A and B Grade, A.U.F.C.

**Leadership and Popularity**

1911 Lance-Corporal in cadets. Editor of Adelaide High School Magazine.
1914 On committees of University Boat and Lacrosse clubs. Secretary and treasurer on students' concert and procession.
1915 Secretary and treasurer of Boat Club. Delegate to committee of University Sports Association. On Lacrosse Club committee. Lance-Corporal in A.A.M.C. Assistant in charge, X-ray Department, No. 3, A.G.H.; in charge of out-patient dressing station, No. 3 A.G.H.

Mr. Cairns was on active service at the front for ten months, and was sent back to complete his medical course, so that he could return to duty on the medical staff. At present he is on duty at the Children's Hospital.
When the news of Mr. Cairns' selection reached the Adelaide High School the masters and pupils were delighted. Subsequently, Mr. W. J. Adey, the Headmaster, said - "Mr. Cairns was a pupil here for three years, having been awarded a scholarship by the Government, entitling him to three years secondary education. At the end of 1909 he passed the junior public examination in eight subjects with three credits, and was placed on the general honors list. In 1910 he passed the senior in eight subjects with two credits, and was again placed in the honors list. In 1911 he passed the higher public examination in five subjects, and as a result of that examination was awarded a Government bursary in medicine at the University. While here he took an active part in cricket, football and tennis, was the editor of the 'School Magazine', and generally was one of the most popular and capable students of his day."

(Advertiser, 5 December, 1916)

Extract from Letter from Hugh Cairns

From Adelaide High School Magazine, Midwinter 1915, pages 19 – 20

Correspondence

The following is an extract from a letter sent by Hugh Cairns, who in 1911 was one of The Magazine Editors. He won a medical scholarship, tenable at the Adelaide University :-

"You will probably be very surprised to receive this letter from me, and to know that I am sailing for England with the No. 3 Australian Double General Hospital. We go to London direct to equip, and then our destination is censored.

"Well, I had hankered after going as soon as I heard Drs. de Crespigny and Cudmore - our best honoraries - were going, but did not like to take the step on account of domestic arrangements. Father and mother thought that perhaps it was better to stay, but advised me to see Mr. Noack. He advised me to go, and when I went home on Thursday, May 6 (the casualty lists had come out), mother and father were keen on my going. I went to Sydney next day, and went into camp on Monday. The boat sailed from Sydney on the following Saturday. We arrived in Melbourne on Monday, and I came overland to Adelaide, and had a day at home before rejoining the boat again on Thursday. It was all done very suddenly, but really in one way I think it is best to dispense with a lot of these farewells.

"As regards the wisdom of the step, the medical experience will not be of much value to me afterwards; one may gain experience in operative technique - but the worldly experience will be good and I hope to be able to come back again and finish my work with a more experienced outlook on things. Then, again, I would sooner go now than push through and become qualified at the age of twenty, and have to wait a year for registration. Also I will be with doctors aforementioned, and they are always willing to teach.

"To cap all, one would have lasting regret if the war finished and one had not helped.

"If we settle in England, and there is a possibility of it, I will probably be able to do my membership of the College of Surgeons. My scholarship is to be held over for me.

"Will you please give my best wishes to all my former teachers and contemporaries. I am very sorry that I did not have time to come up and say good-bye to you all. I am realizing every day more and more how much I gained out of the A.H.S., and will always be keenly interested in hearing anything about it.

"We have a very fine lot of chaps with us. I am a private at present, but apart from rank hope to get some good work to do when the hospital starts work."

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Extract from Dr Scott Ma’s address to the Leadership Assembly in the school’s Centenary Year – 2008.

The first is Sir Hugh Cairns. After finishing as dux of school in 1911, he studied medicine at the University of Adelaide and received a Rhodes Scholarship. He went on to become a prominent neurosurgeon in the United Kingdom and the first Nuffield Professor of Surgery at Oxford. Sir Hugh was one of the first surgeons to be called when T.E. Lawrence, Lawrence of Arabia, was injured in a motorbike accident in 1935. Unfortunately, he did not survive his injuries, but Sir Hugh went on to devise head protection in the form of a helmet, which was introduced into the Armed Forces in the UK. He found that since introducing the helmets to members in the forces, the death toll related to head injuries reduced significantly and this paved the way for legislation on compulsory head protection in the United Kingdom.

Sir Hugh William Bell Cairns (1896–1952) by E. T. Williams

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Sir Hugh William Bell Cairns (1896-1952), neurosurgeon, was born on 26 June 1896 at Port Pirie, South Australia, son of William Cairns, timber contractor from Scotland, and his Australian-born wife Amy Florence, née Bell. He was educated at Riverton High School and at Adelaide High School, where he was dux and editor of the journal in 1911, and proceeded to the university with an exhibition. On 11 May 1915 he joined the Australian Imperial Force as a private in the Australian Army Medical Corps, and from 30 July served in the 3rd Australian General Hospital on Lemnos. Next February he returned to complete his medical course at the University of Adelaide which he represented at rowing and lacrosse. He graduated M.B., B.S. in 1917 after being Davies Thomas and Everard Scholar, was commissioned as captain on 7 August, and elected to the South Australian Rhodes scholarship. From 29 March 1918 he served in France with the 2nd A.G.H., the 3rd A.G.H., the 47th British Division and the 15th Australian Field Ambulance.

Cairns entered Balliol College, Oxford, in January 1919, rowed as bow in the University Boat Race and was president of the Balliol Boat Club. After six months in the Radcliffe Infirmary as house surgeon, he utilized his Rhodes scholarship to begin his long connection with the London Hospital, first in the pathology institute, then in the surgical unit, becoming F.R.C.S. in 1921, the year of his marriage to Barbara Forster, youngest of the remarkable daughters of A. L. Smith, master of his Oxford College.

At this stage Cairns's special interest was genito-urinary work. As Hunterian Professor of the Royal College in 1926, he lectured on testicle tumours and the congenital cystic kidney. His work was marked by thoroughness rather than brilliance. He was already utterly dependable. The time was ripe, in his view, for the development of neurosurgery at the London Hospital, and in 1926-27 he took leave with a Rockefeller fellowship to study...
the new speciality under Harvey Cushing at the Peter Brigham Young Institute, Boston, Massachusetts. Under Cushing’s abiding inspiration, he learned the surgical technique, the organisation of a clinic and the system of record collection with which he was to endow generations of his pupils. Returning to England in 1927 he had an assured appointment at the London Hospital but life was not at first financially easy. The young man took some time to make his mark since he insisted on specializing in neurological surgery in a manner which seemed unorthodox. His beds were scattered, theatres not easily made available, and nurses and especially radiologists were untrained in the new kind of surgery which was, moreover, unpopular with anaesthetists. (Sir) Geoffrey Jefferson and Professor N. M. Dott were facing similar obstacles and the three men soon created a new school of British neurological surgery of international stature.

Cairns soon became inordinately busy, his consulting work being carried out in the London Hospital, his operating in West End nursing homes. Another visit to Cushing strengthened his resolve to be an integral part of a medical school freed from the consuming distractions and wealth of a busy metropolitan practice. ‘Hugo’ Cairns was the vital force in persuading Lord Nuffield, who was stunned by his enthusiastically unyielding energy, to make his farsighted benefaction to Oxford medicine. Cairns had by now an international reputation: when T. E. Lawrence was fatally injured on his motorcycle in May 1935, it was ‘Mr Cairns, the brain surgeon’ who was immediately called to treat him.

Cairns was the inevitable first tenant of the new Nuffield chair of surgery at Oxford in 1937 and he was elected a professorial fellow of Balliol. He left the London clinic in good hands, characteristically taking copies of his case records, clinical photographs and pathological material with him. He was a pioneer in employing a medical artist in his theatres. Doubts about the adequacy of clinical material were soon dispelled, but eighteen creative months with new wards coming to life were interrupted by war, when Cairns at once became adviser on head injuries to the Ministry of Health and neurosurgeon to the army, eventually rising to brigadier. A new base hospital for head injuries was established at St Hugh’s College where ‘The Nutcrackers Suite’ became a neurological unit of first importance. Just as Cairns was swift to stress the advantage of air evacuation of battle casualties, so too was he busy in organizing the mobile surgical teams which revolutionized the treatment of wounded in the North African campaigns. Earlier still in the war he had persuaded the army to make crash helmets for dispatch riders compulsory.

Cairns was inevitably active in developing the use and technique of penicillin treatment developed at Oxford by (Lord) Howard Florey, his successor as Rhodes scholar from Adelaide. Having studied the technique of penicillin treatment of pneumococcal meningitis, and tuberculous meningitis with streptomycin, in his last years he became interested in the operation of leucotomy.

He was appointed K.B.E. in 1946. Next year he was elected the first Sims Commonwealth professor appointed by the Royal College and given the honorary M.D. of Adelaide. He was an enthusiastic supporter of the medical research soon to begin in the Australian National University. He travelled widely and in his later years administrative and ambassadorial duties stole time from his clinical work, but he remained to the end first and foremost the ‘good doctor’. Every patient became Cairns’s personal friend for life. He was always an exacting exemplar, mellowing as he grew older but still fiercely demanding of his pupils as of himself. He played tennis as if his life depended on it; felled or sawed timber at Wytham Woods until his companions were exhausted; snatched holidays at Bamburgh; and listened to music with his own especial raptness. He was the ideal professorial fellow of Balliol, the college he loved; his counsels were all-important.
He faced death stoically when an operation diagnosed cancer. To the end he remained at work, being flown to the pillow of some dying eastern potentate, just as in 1946—a measure of his international repute—he had been flown immediately to attend to the American general, George S. Patton. He was an eagerly scholarly man who produced more than a hundred papers. His own collection of important early French neurological papers was lost by arson in the Cairns library established in his honour at the Radcliffe. He believed himself to be 'very normal', a claim denied by his own very excellence. 'I don't think I'm very clever: I'm quite ordinary really'. What was unique was his personal bravery, his superb stamina, his integrity, and his capacity to brush aside obstacles. He was always looking ahead and was simple in the directness of his plans; people saw through them but found themselves co-operating because of his unique resolution, his charm and his utter dependability. He could not understand the petty, nor could he neglect any detail in 'working up a case', in Cushing's manner. He died in the Radcliffe Infirmary on 18 July 1952 after a singularly happy marriage, leaving a widow, two sons, and two daughters.