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James William Douglas Bull, 1911–1987

George du Boulay

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James William Douglas Bull, 1911–1987



James William Douglas Bull will be remembered most vividly by that early generation of North American neuroradiologists trained in the 1950s who spent time at Queen Square or at Atkinson Morley's Hospital. The first impression of him was of a tireless enthusiast, a man who asked precise and detailed questions, seemed disappointed with vague answers, and was an active campaigner on behalf of any new idea—a lordly man.

In later years, when his former trainees returned to visit or met him on his frequent trips abroad, they found that he had become their warm friend, most interested not only in their professional lives but also in their families and hobbies.

James attained eminence early in his career as President of the IV Symposium Neuroradiologicum in London in 1955, though because the war had interrupted his working life, he was already 43 years old at the time. For 3½ years he had been a prisoner of war after the fall of Singapore, an experience that colored the rest of his life. After his release at the end of the war, he was on the first ship back to Sweden to refresh and continue his training in neuroradiology with Erik Lysholm and Erik Lindgren.

Eminence suited him extremely well. With his upright bearing, strong voice, and clarity of mind, he was a natural leader. Recruited by Dr. Hugh Davis to help build up the department at The National Hospital, Queen Square, he soon was able to establish excellent facilities. He was quick to experiment with and adopt new techniques and to propagate novel expertise; the excitement never diminished. From Queen Square, from Maide Vale, and from the Atkinson Morley, there began a steady export of young neuroradiologists to other parts of Britain and to the world.

In Britain he became a significant influence on the whole organization of radiology, particularly the academic side, through his presidencies of The British Institute of Radiology, 1960; the Section of Radiology of the Royal Society of Medicine, 1968–1969; and the Faculty of Radiologists (later the Royal College), 1969–1972. He was also a considerable figure in the world of neurology: President of the Section of Neurology in the Royal Society of Medicine, 1974–1975, and Dean of the Institute of Neurology, 1962–1968. As Dean he laid important foundations for the Institute's subsequent growth. It was natural for such a man to be recognized as a valuable advisor. Consequently, he served on the Councils of the Royal College of Physicians and of Surgeons of England and advised the Department of Health and the Royal Navy.

He was, of course, the first President of the British Society of Neuroradiologists, and his growing interest in and affection for European neuroradiologists was recognized when he was elected to be the second President of the European Society of Neuroradiology. He was an honorary fellow of the American College of Radiologists, the Italian Neuroradiological Society, the Brazilian Radiological Society, the Royal Australian College of Radiology, the Faculty of Radiologists at RCSI, the Radiological Society of North America, the American Neurological Association, and the French Radiological Society

and was an honorary member of the American Society of Neuroradiology.

James Bull's research is recorded in the joint authorship of numerous papers. Their varied subject matter commonly stemmed from his seminal ideas, but he was above all a team leader, so most of those works published under his name alone are presidential addresses and memorial lectures. His teaching is remembered by his colleagues and pupils as having an exemplary clarity.

How did he do it all? His wife, Edith, deeply mourned by him when she died, and loved and admired by families of all his colleagues, once told me that what sounded so spontaneous in delivery was the fruit of long preparation. She often had heard him pacing up and down in the next room, saying his lines to the walls of the apartment in that far-carrying voice. The same forethought went into his committee work. He gave me this advice: "Before picking up the telephone to make a call, always consider exactly what it is that you want to say."

In his last years, though still the center of a group of friends and of his loving family, it was natural for a man who had lived at such a height of public regard, in the center of so many affairs, to feel lonely. Let me complete this short valediction by recalling another piece of advice that he passed on to me from, I believe, Erik Lysholm, more than 30 years ago: "George," he said to me, "as soon as you have got yourself established, you have to get yourself a stooge." By this he meant someone to do your bidding and take a share in the daily load. As others have found, it was great to be his stooge. One became his intimate friend. My last service to him was to bring back from New York the inscribed gift of the American Society of Neuroradiology on the occasion of their 25th Anniversary Meeting. He sent you his warm thanks.

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