Obituary

The Lord Porritt GCMG GCVO CBE Bt

Born in Wanganui on 10 August, 1900, Arthur Porritt distinguished himself in numerous professional and public fields. He was educated at Wanganui Collegiate and Otago University where in 1923 he became a Rhodes Scholar. His scholarship took him to Magdalen College, Oxford, then to St Mary's Hospital where he completed his medical studies in 1926. By 1928 he completed his surgical training obtaining his FRCS and MCh (Oxon).

To many New Zealanders, Lord Porritt will be remembered most fondly as our first 'home grown' Governor-General in 1967. For 5 years until 1972, Lord and Lady Porritt warmed the hearts and won the respect of many with their affinity for our country and its people.

In 1962, Lord Porritt established contact with Dr Norrie Jefferson, a Dunedin-based radiologist who shared an active interest in the medical problems of athletes. From that early liaison the New Zealand Federation of Sports Medicine was born with Dr Norrie Jefferson its first national President. Lord Porritt continued as a respected medical adviser and its patron for many years. He was a founding figure of sports medicine in the UK and most certainly influenced the development of the discipline throughout the Commonwealth countries.

In the field of competitive sport, Lord Porritt demonstrated early all-round capabilities in swimming, riding and rugby, including a season with the Otago University A team. But it was in athletics that his most notable successes were recorded. Stamping himself as a track athlete of New Zealand national class before departing to England, he soon became a valued member of the Oxford University athletic team in 1923. Almost immediately he established sprint records over 100 yards and hurdles. His time of 9.9 s for the 100 yards in the annual Oxford-Cambridge clash remained unchallenged for many years. The New Zealand Olympic selectors named Porritt in the 1924 team to compete in the famous Paris Olympics – the event so vividly portrayed in the film 'Chariots of Fire'. For Lord Porritt, New Zealand team captain, the 1924 Olympics were a personal highlight, capped by his bronze medal in the final of the 100 m, behind the legendary Englishman Harold Abrahams. Four years later he represented his country once more, this time at the Amsterdam Olympics of 1928 where, hampered by injury, he failed to defend his sprint medal. However, his involvement with New Zealand Olympic teams continued. He managed the 1936 Olympic Team to Berlin and was a motivating force behind the triumph of another Otago medical undergraduate (and Rhodes Scholar) Jack Lovelock who captured gold in the 1500 m.

Lord Porritt (copyright Hutton Deutsch Collection Ltd)

By then, Lord Porritt was a member of the International Olympic Committee, a position he held until his death. A number of other sporting acknowledgements were accorded this former athlete. These included the Olympic order, Life Vice-Presidency of the British Empire and Commonwealth Games Federation and Life Membership of the New Zealand Olympic and Commonwealth Games Association. Well into his ninth decade Lord Porritt attended Commonwealth Games and Olympic Games.

On such occasions he would make it his policy to visit the New Zealand team in their village quarters. He advocated for the athlete, he condemned drug misuse in sport and he criticized the increasing commercialization of sport. He retained a keen interest in the activities of New Zealand athletes overseas and remained a loyal friend to the University of Otago and its Medical School.

Arthur Porritt, surgeon, Olympic athlete and Baronet leaves behind a legacy born of simple New

Zealand beginnings. As the son of a local general practitioner he preserved his link with his birthplace by becoming Lord Porritt of Hampstead and Wanganui.

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Arthur Espie Porritt was born on 10 August, 1900, in Wanganui, New Zealand, the son and grandson of doctors, and died in his London home, age 93, on 1 January, 1994. He was twice married, latterly to Kathleen Peck by whom he had two sons and a daughter. His son, Jonathan Porritt, succeeds to the Baronetcy.

Arthur Porritt was educated at Wanganui Collegiate and Otago University where he was a distinguished athlete, swimmer and rugby player and a keen rider. Winning a Rhodes Scholarship, he proceeded in 1923 to Oxford University where he was President of OUAC. His Inter-Varsity 100-yard record of 9.9 s lasted for many years. He competed for New Zealand in the Paris Olympics of 1924 and his 100 m bronze medal race featured in the film 'Chariots of Fire'.

Proceeding to St. Mary's Hospital, London, he distinguished himself at rugby and athletics, competed again for New Zealand in the Amsterdam Olympics of 1928 and graduated MRCS LRCP and MBCh (1926) and subsequently FRCS (1928) and MCh.

Author, with the Olympian D.G.A. Lowe, of a book on athletics in 1929, he managed the New Zealand Olympic team of 1936 in Berlin and was appointed to the International Olympic Committee as well as the British Olympic Council and vice-presidency of the British Empire and Commonwealth Games Federation.

He became Assistant Director of the Surgical Unit at St. Mary's, then Assistant Surgeon and finally Surgeon to St. Mary's and many other hospitals. He co-authored with Handfield-Jones the popular textbook *The Essentials of Modern Surgery* and established a firm reputation as a teacher and general surgeon with a special interest in breast and abdominal surgery. Optimistic, equable and widely esteemed by all, he was especially admired by students – one of the very few chiefs who could, and would, greet them all by name in the street. His association with an organization, whether student sports club or national professional body, meant personal commitment, integrity and efficiency.

Surgeon to the Duke of York (1936), subsequently King George VI, he became Serjeant-Surgeon to the

Monarch, becoming KCVO in 1957 and GCVO in 1970.

War service saw Porritt serving at Aldershot, then in France, leaving Dunkirk with the last of the wounded. There followed a large hospital command in Egypt, then the D-Day landings in Normandy and front-line surgery. He attained the rank of Brigadier and the CBE (1945, OBE 1943). Appointed KCMG in 1950, he was surgeon to the Royal Family and Consulting Surgeon to the Army (1954–1967). He was created Baronet in 1963.

The post-war years saw a steady rise in Porritt's public career. Medically, he became an Honorary Fellow of every Royal College of Surgeons and chaired or presided over almost every national professional medical body, including: the BMA (President, 1960–1961); Royal College of Surgeons (President 1960–1963); Royal Society of Medicine (1964–1965); the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries (1964–1966); the Hunterian Society; the Arthritis and Rheumatism Council; the Association of Surgeons of Great Britain and Ireland; the Medical Council on Alcoholism; the Medical Commission on Accident Prevention. He was a Fellow of the American Surgical Association and a Knight of the Order of St. John and an active Chairman of the African Medical and Research Foundation. Other honours included Fellowship of the French Academy of Surgery and the United States Legion of Merit. He was Chairman of the Medical Advisory Committee of the UK government's Overseas Development Agency. He was created GCMG in 1967. He also rose to the highest ranks of the Freemasonry.

His 'Porritt Report', the outcome of a BMA medical services review committee set up in 1962, was influential in the profound changes in National Health Service organization during the 1970s, although Porritt became critical of the administrative hypertrophy introduced by those changes.

With (Sir) Adolphe Abrahams, he cofounded the British Association of Sport and Medicine in 1953, actively chairing it until leaving to govern New Zealand at which time he became President and finally our Patron. BASM veterans will remember the unique Gala Farewell Luncheon given to him by the Association at the Loughborough course in 1980.

He keenly cut, 'surgically' as he put it, all his practical surgery on appointment as a popular – and the first New Zealand born – Governor-General of New Zealand in 1967. He returned, laden with honours, in 1972 to take his seat in the House of Lords as Baron Porritt of Hampstead and Wanganui, his birth-place. He consistently spoke for the rest of his life in the House of Lords for the best interests of the National Health Service.

Peter Sperryn
Editor-in-Chief