

Dr. Thordur John Wilhelm Sveinbjörnsson

by Eleanor Oltean

Due to the fact that Thordur practised medicine in English speaking countries he changed his name from Sveinbjörnsson to Swinburne, to make it less difficult for his patients to pronounce.

Thordur was born April 2nd 1891 in Edinburgh, Scotland. He was the eldest child and only son of Sveinbjörn Sveinbjörnsson, an Icelandic composer of music, best known for having composed the music for the Icelandic National anthem. Sveinbjörn's Scottish wife, Eleanor (née Christie), was 22 years younger than her husband. They enjoyed a marriage of happiness and harmony. One of their greatest joys, was the birth of their two children.

Thordur and his younger sister, Helen, approx. twenty months younger than he, grew up at 46 Dick Place in Edinburgh. Their parents' stately two story stone home surrounded by spacious lawns, trees, shrubs and flower beds, enclosed by eight foot stone wall, was indeed, a delightful place for children to grow up. Their nanny, Rebecca, stayed with the family until the children had outgrown requiring her services. Maggie, the cook, was a long term member of the household.

George Watson's College for Boys, was where Thordur received his school education. It was a day school, thus Thordur had the advantage of living at home with his family throughout his entire childhood. After completing grade school and winning a bursary, he attended the University of Edinburgh, it was there that he received his medical degree.

Thordur's first position was as Home Physician and Surgeon at King Edward Hospital in Windsor, England. Six months later on Aug. 2nd. 1915 Thordur joined the British Expeditionary Force and was an officer in the Medical Corps for two years in France and Belgium during the World War I, after which he returned to Scotland and took up duties as a doctor with the Highlands and Islands Board.

Before returning to Scotland, during Thordur's time in World War I, he had been shell shocked. Due to his shattered nerve condition, he was hospitalized for many months with little improvement to his health. Never did he make a full recovery. The end result being that he eventually ceased practicing the medical profession.

After World War I ended Thordur came to Canada. He doctored in small prairie towns, for approx. 13 years. His last medical position was in Sunnynook, Alberta from 1925-1932. The results of the shell shock still troubled him a great deal. Eventually he went to live with his sister Helen, her husband Ralph Lloyd and their family, at Seighford Ranch close to Midnapore, Alberta. By this time his father had passed away and his mother was also living at the ranch.

Life became much less stressful for Thordur. He helped with many things. In those days there was little convenience in rural areas. Water had to be pumped and hauled in and out of the home daily. Wood had to be chopped to keep the home fire burning. Thordur took over those constant indoor-outdoor works which were so necessary. One mile from the home at the top of a hill, was a little grocery store to which Thordur walked whenever required. He also picked up the mail there, three times weekly. In his spare time Thordur studied many subjects of interest to him, he sketched, composed music and wrote poetry.

In 1948, after many years of country living and after the sad death of Helen's husband Ralph, Thordur, Helen and their mother moved to Calgary to live. This opened up a whole new world for Thordur. He became a member of the Calgary Sketch Club. He much enjoyed the frequent „paint outs“ which were often held in the mountains and lasted for several days at a time. He also enjoyed being among new friends who enjoyed the same interests as he. Thordur entered his paintings into art shows and art sales, attended music concerts, attended church each Sunday and commenced to build an organ. He never managed to complete the entire organ, however all the inside works he did complete. It looked like a skeleton but its tone was as pleasing as those of a song bird.

Thordur's mother passed away in 1970, five months short of being 100 years of age. His sister Helen, passed away in 1979 at 86 years of age. Thordur went into the Sarcee Nursing Home in Calgary, shortly after having turned 90.

During Thordur's approx 3 years at the nursing home he lost his eyesight almost to the point of blindness. He did manage to continue to play the piano, almost daily in the early afternoon he would play for an hour or so at the nursing home. Those who enjoyed the music would sit and listen. Thordur passed away Dec. 22nd 1984 at 93 years of age.

Thordur Swinburen leaves a memory of a kind and gentle person, a tall, stately gentleman. One with great admiration for classical music, fine paintings, interesting literature and entertaining conversation.

As told by Thordur's niece, Eleanor Oltean (née Lloyd).