

SIR JOHN WEIR: THE QUEEN'S DOCTOR

By Ken McNaughton

At a glittering gathering of the Clan Macnachtan Association in Mayfair on 24 June 1965, an elderly gentleman bounced up to me and said gaily, “Are you a doctor? I’m a doctor. I’m the Queen’s doctor!” I was a callow youth of 25 years, an Australian post-graduate student making my way in London, book-educated but not yet worldly wise, and may have missed an opportunity to get to know a genuine celebrity. In a Christmas tape-recording to my mother in Australia I described the occasion: “But at one stage this rather elderly gentleman—elderly and stout—came up to me and said to me in a rather aggressive fashion, “Are you a doctor? I’m a doctor. I’m the Queen’s doctor!” I tried not to giggle too much and listened to him for about five minutes. He had many stories to tell and I had my tongue in my cheek and I was rubbishing [making fun of] him as hard as I could without making it appear too obvious when, after about five minutes, I realized he wasn’t rubbishing at all, he was deadly serious, and that’s true” [1].

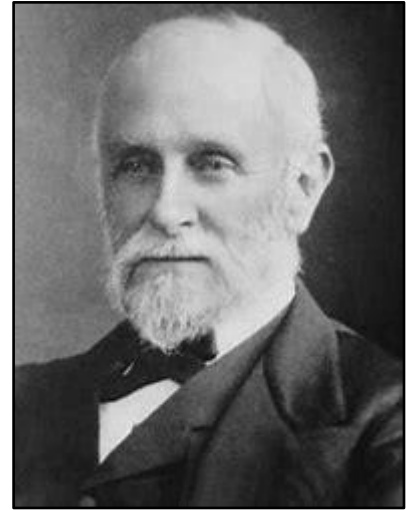
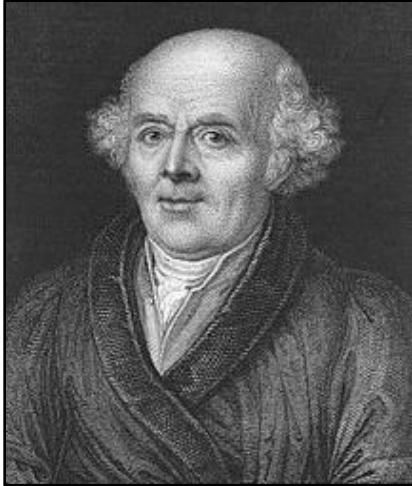


Figure 1. Sir John Weir, Physician Royal to British monarchs for fifty years.

John Weir was born in Paisley, ten miles west of Glasgow, on 19 October 1879. He attended school in Glasgow, with an emphasis on science, and graduated in medicine from Glasgow University in 1907. After a sabbatical year at Hering Medical College in Chicago 1908-9, he returned to the London Homeopathic Hospital as Consultant Physician in 1910, and rose to become President of the Faculty of Homeopathy in 1923.

Wikipedia says: “Homeopathy is a pseudoscientific system of alternative medicine. It was created in 1796 by Samuel Hahnemann. Its practitioners, called homeopaths, believe that a substance that causes symptoms of a disease in healthy people would cure similar symptoms in sick people; this doctrine is called *similia similibus curentur*, or “like cures like.” Homeopathic preparations are termed remedies and are made using a process called homeopathic dilution. This process involves repeatedly diluting a chosen substance, typically until nothing—that is not a single molecule—of the original substance is likely to remain in the product. Between the dilution iterations homeopaths practice hitting the diluent, and/or shaking it violently, and claim that it makes the diluent remember the original substance after its removal. The diluent is typically either distilled water, ethanol or sugar. Practitioners select remedies by consulting reference books known as repertories, and claim that these remedies, upon oral intake, can treat or cure disease.”



King George V reigned from 1910 to 1936 and in 1918, as the First World War ended, John Weir became Physician Royal. This was a great honor and an interesting choice. Of all the great doctors in London, why choose a controversial proponent of a controversial medical practice? The creator of homeopathy, Samuel Hahnemann (1755-1843), was German. George V's father was the German Prince Albert, husband of Queen Victoria, whose mother was German. Weir must have done a good job because, when George V died in 1936, Weir stayed on as doctor to King Edward VIII, who reigned briefly in 1936 before abdicating.

Figure 2. Samuel Hahnemann, creator of homeopathy (Wellcome Library, London).

In the excellent Netflix television series *The Crown*, first season, episode four, about ten minutes in, Edward (later the Duke of Windsor), mentions his doctor, Sir John Weir, which inspired me to jump on this story. In the second season, episode 10, about seven minutes in, Sir John comes to Buckingham Palace to tell the Queen that tests confirm she is pregnant with her fourth child; and by the way, her iron levels are low. This was in 1963, two years before my chat with Sir John. After the abdication, Edward's brother stepped in to become King George VI, and retained Weir as Physician Royal until his death in 1952. Queen Elizabeth II retained Weir as Physician Royal until 1968, so he was indeed "The Queen's Doctor" when I chatted with him in 1965. It was a remarkable feat, for fifty years to be Physician Royal to the British Royal Family, who could choose any doctor they wanted. Weir retired in 1968, at the age of 89, and died three years later aged 91.

On a personal note, my daughter, Dr. Candace McNaughton completed four years pre-medicine at Hahnemann University in Philadelphia, before doing five years at Bastyr University in Seattle for a doctorate in naturopathy, which covers many forms of natural medicine, including homeopathy. The University and associated Hospital were named for Samuel Hahnemann, creator of homeopathy, the specialty of the physician who served the British Royal Family for fifty years.

But why did Sir John Weir attend the reception for the Clan Macnachtan Association on 24 June 1965? According to Duncan McNaughton [2] "Another Argyllshire group is the McNairs or McNuyers, a name anglicized as Weir. The McNaughton interests in Kintyre and Bute have already been mentioned and it is from these lands that the McNairs claim their McNaughton kinship. All McNairs or Weirs are not, however, McNaughtons; it will depend on whether their ancestors originated in these areas." It seems that the Queen's doctor identified with Clan Macnachtan (whatever its numerous spellings). This gathering on 24 June 1965 also included the then Chief of the Clan, Sir Antony Macnaghten and his wife Lady Magdalene, and was hosted by Christabel Lady Aberconway, born a Macnaghten, at her home at 12 North Audley Street W1, so it's possible Weir had other patients there.

There is another distinguished Weir family with close ties to Clan Macnachtan. James and George Weir were brothers who ran an engineering firm on the southern outskirts of Glasgow

[3]. James and his wife Mary had a son, William Douglas Weir, born 12 May 1877. Young William rose rapidly through the ranks of the family firm, married Alice Blanche MacConnachie and, in 1915, was made Director of Munitions for Scotland. In 1917 he became Controller of Aeronautical Supplies and was knighted. In 1918 he was made a Baron and a Privy Councilor and the Secretary of State for Air Forces. Each year, William and Alice would rent a house in Upper Loch Fyne, Argyll, with their three children, as Alice's family had done when she was a child.

The last Scottish Chief of Clan Macnachtan ran up debts with his neighbors the Campbells, who took over the Macnachtan ancestral home, Dunderave Castle, on Upper Loch Fyne around 1710 [4]. The ancestral Campbell home was the castle at Inveraray, five miles west on Loch Fyne. Another Campbell property lay two miles northeast across Loch Fyne—Ardkinglas. In 1905 this was acquired by Sir Andrew Noble, who married Margery Durham Campbell. Noble commissioned the architect Sir Robert Lorimer to design a new large house at Ardkinglas and also, later, to restore Dunderave Castle. A daughter of Andrew and Margery, Lily Noble, lived there, but died in 1937, leaving Dunderave empty. Andrew Nobel was a physicist, an expert on ballistics and gunnery, and knew William Weir, with their obvious mutual interests.

In 1938 the title “Viscount Weir of Eastwood in County Renfrew” (six miles west of Glasgow), was created for William Weir, who was already a Baron. He decided to lease Dunderave for a second home, where the family could holiday, entertain friends and he could fish. On 28 November 1947 he bought Dunderave. His eldest son, James Kenneth Weir (1905-1975) was to become 2nd Viscount Weir, but William made a gift of Dunderave to his second son John William Weir (1907-1953), who was more interested in theater, radio and the arts than in the family business of tanks and airplanes. In 1950, John's wedding to Irene Marguerite Robertson McKechnie was Glasgow's social event of the year, with 500 guests. Sadly, on 18 January 1953, three years after their marriage, John had a heart attack and died, aged 45. Marguerite often welcomed visitors to Dunderave, and was known to some as “Lady Weir.” She died in 1987.

Dunderave Castle was bought by Barry Weir, a property developer and caravan park owner from the south of England. He commissioned development proposals for converting the castle into a guest house, as well as to serve as a home for him and his family. There was strong opposition to his other development plans for buildings in close vicinity to the castle, both from local people and several Heritage organizations. After a short time, Barry Weir evidently decided he could not turn it into a profitable business. In 1990, Dunderave was bought by its present owner, Dr. Stephen Joffe. Hence, for more than fifty years in the twentieth century Dunderave, the ancestral home of Clan Macnachtan, was occupied by Weirs, a sept of Clan Macnachtan.

REFERENCES

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3. Cock, Matthew, "Dunderave Castle and the MacNachtans of Argyll," Dunderave Estate, 1998.
4. McNaughton, Ken, "[The Last Scottish Chief of Clan Macnachtan](#)," Clan Macachtan Association Worldwide, 23 April 2008.

NOTES

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