

Doctor Robert Scot Skirving
18th December 1859 to 15th July 1956
Founder of the League of Ancient Mariners 1903



Robert Scot Skirving (1859-1956), physician and surgeon, was born on 18 December 1859 at Camptown, Haddington, East Lothian, Scotland, son of Robert Scot Skirving, farmer, and his wife Elizabeth (Leila), daughter of William Owen, squire of Ekindale, Rathdownie, Ireland. Among his forbears were Adam Skirving, poet, Archibald Skirving, painter, and 'Black' John Skirving who escaped from Flodden Field with the standard wrapped around his body and took it safely to Edinburgh.

Reared in an atmosphere of extreme Calvinism, Robert attended the Edinburgh Academy and Eastman's Royal Naval Academy, near Portsmouth, England. A few weeks too old for the Royal Navy, he entered the merchant service and, after two voyages to Iceland, joined the training ship *Conway*, and was apprenticed in 1875 in a sailing vessel, *Tantallon Castle*, bound for Port Adelaide.

On the return voyage Scot Skirving developed beri-beri, which led him in 1876 to enrol in medicine at the University of Edinburgh (M.B., Ch.M., 1881). He came fifth

in a year which also included (Sir) Alexander MacCormick, (Sir) Thomas Anderson Stuart and (Sir) Arthur Conan Doyle.

After further studies in Dublin and Vienna he was appointed house physician at the Royal Infirmary, Edinburgh, in 1881. Early in 1883 Scot Skirving joined the migrant ship, *Ellora*, as ship's surgeon and returned to Australia. He practised in Queensland until appointed medical superintendent at (Royal) Prince Alfred Hospital, Sydney, by Anderson Stuart in November 1883.

In 1884 he set up practice in College Street and on 6 January 1886 at Willoughby married Lucy Susan Hester (d.1950). He was successively honorary assistant physician (1884-89), honorary physician (1889-1911) and consultant from 1911 at R.P.A.H. As honorary physician at the Hospital for Sick Children (1884-89) he clashed with its lady superintendent, Frances Holden. He was also an able surgeon and was honorary surgeon at St Vincent's Hospital (1889-1923). He was the lecturer in clinical medicine at the University of Sydney (1889-1911), was president of the New South Wales branch of the British Medical Association (1891-92) and served as chief medical adviser to the Australian Mutual Provident Society (1911-36). During World War II he was persuaded by (Sir) Herbert Schlink to lecture at R.P.A.H.

As a clinician Scot Skirving was greatly celebrated. A handsome man, about 5 ft 10 ins (178 cm) tall, with aquiline features, he was a popular teacher and an accomplished, if somewhat flamboyant, lecturer, illustrating his points with amusing anecdotes. He served in the South African War as consulting surgeon (1900-01) with MacCormick and on his return wrote a pamphlet on *Our Army in South Africa* (1901).

In England on the outbreak of World War I, Scot Skirving served as a major in the Royal Army Medical Corps, for three months in charge of an auxiliary hospital in Essex, then as surgeon specialist at Queen Alexandra Military Hospital, Millbank, London. In 1918 he reported on Australian medical units in northern France, at the request of Major General Sir Neville Howse. He returned to Sydney in January 1919.

Scot Skirving published extensively on medical and more general subjects in the *Australian Medical Gazette* and the *Medical Journal of Australia*, including his reminiscences of his voyages to Australia. Widely read, with a poetic turn of phrase and an evident love of the English language, he entertained Robert Louis Stevenson (whose works he admired) and wrote a novel, *Love and Longitude* (1901). His speech, uttered in a deep, rich voice, reflected both the Bible and his saltier experiences in the merchant marine. He became renowned for his biting comments about his colleagues. The sea remained 'his greatest love': he held a master's certificate, belonged to the League of Ancient Mariners of New South Wales, sailed his own yacht until his eighties, and in 1931 published a manual, *Wire Splicing for Yachtsmen*.

Even at the time it was rare for 'a man to practice as a specialist surgeon at one hospital and as a specialist physician at another'. He was proud to be a foundation fellow of both the (Royal) Australasian College of Surgeons (1927) and of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians (1938) and an honorary fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons, England (1953). Scot Skirving died at his Bellevue Hill home on 15 July 1956 and was cremated. He was survived by one of his three sons: one had

died in infancy and Archibald was mortally wounded in 1915 at Gallipoli while serving with the Royal Irish Fusiliers.

Scot Skirving's estate was valued for probate at £213,817 in two States. His name is commemorated at the University of Sydney by a prize in medicine and surgery.

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