COLONEL SIR ROBERT H. FIRTH,
K.B.E., C.B.

First Editor of the Journal of the Royal Army Medical Corps.
The news of the death of Sir Robert Firth will be received with great regret by many officers of the Corps, and especially by those who worked with him at Netley, Aldershot and in London.

Firth had an outstanding personality and devoted all the powers of an unusually acute brain to improving the conditions of the British soldier's life. Perhaps his devotion to scientific work may be partly attributed to his association at University College, London, with a brilliant band of students who in later life attained world-wide fame. Firth used often to talk about Halliburton, later Professor of Physiology at King's College; Victor Horsley, the eminent surgeon who died on service in Mesopotamia; and Dawson, who edited the British Medical Journal for so many years. In his quaint way he would say: the size of the head is no indication of the mental powers, for Horsley had the smallest head but the acutest brain in the college. He seemed to be quite unaware that he himself was another illustration of his argument, for though his head was small his mental powers were of a very high order.

Firth combined great accuracy of statement with an outstanding capacity for putting hard scientific facts in simple, graceful language. He was a born writer, and apart from his scientific papers he made many contributions on philosophic subjects to well-known magazines as well as to the Journal of the Royal Army Medical Corps.

Firth obtained the F.R.C.S.Eng. in 1882 and joined the Army Medical Department as a surgeon on August 3, 1883. Quite early in his Army
career he turned his attention to hygiene and gained the Parkes Memorial Prize and Medal in 1889 and again in 1892.

His first tour of foreign service was in India and he served with the Hazara Expedition, for which he received the Frontier Medal and clasp.

In 1892 he was appointed Assistant Professor of Hygiene at the Army Medical School, Netley, and held this post for five years. Colonel J. Lane Notter was the Professor of Hygiene and in 1896, in conjunction with Firth, now a Surgeon-Major, published the well-known "Theory and Practice of Hygiene." Parkes' "Practical Hygiene" had been the standard text-book for many years and the work had passed through many editions, the last being brought out by Professor de Chaumont just before his death in 1888. But by the year 1896 so much new matter required to be incorporated in the work, that Colonel Notter and Major Firth felt the individual character of Parkes' book would be ruined if they attempted to revise it in accordance with the requirements of the time. They accordingly decided to write a new book for which they alone would have responsibility. The popularity of the "Theory and Practice of Hygiene" proved that they were right in their decision. The book passed through three editions, the last being almost completely rewritten by Firth in 1908. This edition was a large volume of nearly 1,000 pages, and the labour entailed in its compilation must have been enormous.

On completion of his appointment at the Army Medical School, Firth again proceeded to India and took part in the Operations on the Northwest Frontier in 1897-98.

In the eighties and nineties enteric fever became very prevalent among British troops in India. In 1895 there were 1,544 admissions and 343 deaths from enteric fever; in 1898 the admissions were 2,375 and the deaths 654. Alarmed by this gradual increase of disease, the Government of India sanctioned the appointment of three specially qualified officers with headquarters at Rawalpindi, Umballa and Lucknow, whose sole duty would be to investigate fully the causes of disease and give practical advice in sanitary matters. Major R. H. Firth was appointed to the Rawalpindi District in 1898. No bacteriological apparatus was available and when it arrived there was no place to put it in. Firth wrote: "The work I have had to do has been entirely personal work. The only help sanctioned is a chuprassi, an unskilled man of all work, who helps to clean up. All my culture media have to be made by me personally."

A year later he wrote, "The heat of my laboratory at Lucknow is so intense, that during the hot weather I had to start work at 4.30 a.m. and even then the temperature was over 90°F. In addition to this one had to bear the vexation of cultures and media continually getting contaminated owing to dust and dirt blowing through badly-fitting windows and doors." In spite of these appalling conditions Firth managed to carry out some valuable research work on dysentery bacilli, which he afterwards incorporated in a paper published in the Journal of the Royal Army Medical Corps, 1903.
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On the retirement of Professor Lane Notter in 1900, Major Firth was appointed Professor of Hygiene in the Army Medical School, Netley. His opposite number in Pathology at that time was Professor A. E. Wright, who had as his assistants Major Semple and then Major Leishman. With so many active minds at work preventive medicine took on a new lease of life, and much valuable research work was done under the supervision and with the active assistance of the two professors. At that time the prevention of enteric fever was constantly in the thoughts of the laboratory workers, and while Wright and his assistants laboured at anti-typhoid inoculation Major Firth and the Assistant Professor of Hygiene, Major Horrocks, worked on the saprophytic existence of the B. typhosus, and the results of their investigations were embodied in a paper on "The Influence of Soil, Fabrics and Flies in the Dissemination of Enteric Infection," which Major Firth read at the Annual Meeting of the British Medical Association in 1902.

When the Army Medical School was brought to London, Firth carried on his research work with some difficulty in the laboratories on the top of the building owned by the Royal College of Physicians on the Embankment close to Waterloo Bridge.

In 1903, when Sir William Taylor was Director-General, it was decided to publish an R.A.M.C. Journal under the direction of a Library and Journal Committee. Major Firth had the proud distinction of being selected to be the first editor. He arranged the lines on which the Journal should appear, and contributed to the first volume an article on "A Comparative Study of some Dysentery Bacilli."

In 1906 Firth was appointed Instructor at the School of Army Sanitation which had just been established at Aldershot. Here he had a larger sphere of work, as he was brought in contact with Generals and Officers Commanding Regiments, who a few years later held high commands in the Expeditionary Force. Firth's enthusiasm for his work proved very infectious and roused in Senior Army Officers, many of whom were imbued with the views contained in Lord Wolseley's "Soldier's Pocket-Book," a sense of the importance of sanitation in the field. There is little doubt that Firth's work at Aldershot laid the foundations of the sanitary effort which helped to preserve so many lives in the Great War.

On the expiration of his appointment at Aldershot, Firth again proceeded to India. In 1902, the appointment of a Sanitary Officer at Army Headquarters had been approved. Major McGill filled the post for a time and was succeeded by Firth, now a Colonel. On December 1, 1912, as part of an economy campaign, the appointment of A.D.M.S. (Sanitary) at headquarters was abolished, and Colonel Firth was the last holder. The post was re-established in 1916, but by that time Firth had left for France. In March, 1915, he was appointed A.D.M.S. of the 20th Division, and in September, 1915, was appointed to be D.D.M.S. of the 11th Corps. He held this appointment until May, 1917, when he was transferred to the Havre Base.
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Colonel Firth was mentioned three times in Despatches, and for his services in France received the Victory and Allied Medals, and the C.B. Military in 1917. In June, 1919, he was made a Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire (K.B.E.).

In 1919 Colonel Firth and several of his officers received a silver medal from the Municipality of Havre, in recognition of medical services rendered to the civilian population of the town.

In 1924 he received a Good Service Reward, which he had well earned by his most useful work for the State.

After his retirement from the Army, Sir Robert Firth still maintained his interest in the Corps, and wrote many articles for the Journal of the Royal Army Medical Corps. The most notable among his contributions were the "Musings of an Idle Man," which he afterwards published in book form.

Sir Robert took a keen interest in the Army Medical Officers' Widows and Orphans Fund, of which he had been President for four years at the time of his death. He devoted much time and thought to its affairs, and was always devising schemes for its advantage. He did not allow his painful illness to interfere with his schemes, and attended meetings in connection with the Fund when work was obviously beyond his strength. He was especially interested in the result of the recent valuation, and, hearing that the actuary's report thereon had been received, insisted on the whole of it being read to him in one of his last intervals of consciousness.

Sir Robert Firth was a Fellow and Member of Council of the Royal Sanitary Institute, a Fellow and Member of Council of the Royal Institute of Public Health, a Fellow of the Society of Medical Officers of Health, and a Membre de la Société de Médecine Militaire.