

## Norman Churchill Craig Sharp

**BVMS, PhD, DSc, FIBiol, FBASES, FPEAUK, MRCV,**

### Veterinary scientist, pioneering sport scientist and Burnisian.

Professor Craig Sharp who has died aged 84, will be missed by his family, many friends and by his professional and cultural connections across several fields. Studying veterinary medicine at the University of Glasgow in the 1950s, Craig became a keen student of muscle performance and anatomy, something that he took into what was eventually to become for him a second academic field, the new 'Sports Science', which from the late 1960s as he advised many athletes and their coaches he can be claimed to be one of the founding fathers. Earlier, in 1963, he had left Scotland for Kenya, there to set up a university Faculty of Veterinary Medicine. A keen cross-runner from his student days, Craig set a world record for running up Mount Kilimanjaro (6 hours and 48 minutes). In Africa, he was also the first person scientifically to establish the running speed of the cheetah.

From 1971, Craig was employed at the University of Birmingham, where he co-founded the first Human Motor Performance Laboratory and he was appointed to the British Olympic Association. In 1987 he established for the association the British Olympic Medical Centre at Northwick Park Hospital. His career here saw him advise the likes of Steve Redgrave and Steve Ovett, and he also worked with Rangers F.C. in his home city. Other academic and scientific appointments and numerous prizes and honorary degrees followed, including an honorary DSc from his alma mater in 2005.

After graduating as a vet, Craig had worked for a time in Ayrshire in the late 1950s, including at Robert Burns's former farm at Mossgiel. In this period Craig completed his PhD on cattle worm parasitism. He also developed a particular interest in horses and in Scotland's national poet. Contrary to many received biographical constructions about the Bard, Craig believed that Burns showed great discipline in the controlled effort necessary for him to produce his superlative artistic performances (here again in this formulation – as I paraphrase Craig's words to me at some point in the late 1990s – we glimpse something of the sports scientist). Craig the vet was interested in Burns's horses and believed that the poet had a good eye for these. The same scientific rigour in Craig's professional life was applied to his passion for Burns. In 2004, skilfully using letters, including previous scholarly misreadings of these, carefully considering horse-riding and carriage distances between Edinburgh, Biggar and Ayr, using a brief dedication on the fly-leaf of a book, and also tracking down ignored nineteenth-century testimony, Craig hypothesised – in fact proved, I think – that Burns had absented himself

from Edinburgh at Hogmanay 1786 to return to Ayrshire. He published his findings in *Studies in Scottish Literature*<sup>1</sup>. Every previous biographer had accounted for Burns staying in Edinburgh over this period. But Craig's evidence here is overwhelming, if also a bit counter-intuitive since for the most rational of reasons, Burns ought to have stayed in the Scottish capital in this bleak mid-winter period. Convincing, un-ignorable, Craig's published essay on this topic stopped short of saying what he believed Burns was doing, but clearly implied it: *cherchez la femme!* This part of the puzzle remains: who was that woman? We might never know, but no Burns biographer can now ignore the fact of Burns's 'missing weekend'. Craig once told me he thought of using 'lost weekend' in the title of his article, but he felt this was too loaded, too debauched when that was a stereotype of the poet that he sought to resist. More recently Craig Sharp did another very original Burns article based on sports science about the physical effort that Burns expended in ploughing at Lochlea and Mossgiel, walking some 19 miles a day behind the plough: "*Born at a Ploughtail! – Ploughing and Robert Burns*," was published in the 2014 Burns Chronicle, and he contributed several other shorter pieces of interest.

A great supporter of the Edinburgh Festival, the Scottish arts and writers generally (he once drove 1,200 miles in 22 hours to attend Sorley MacLean's funeral), Craig was a special friend to me and my colleagues at the Centre for Robert Burns Studies at his alma mater. Not long after I founded the centre in 2007, Craig Sharp stunned us by gifting us a 'Christening present': a Kilmarnock edition. Precious as this gift is, we remember equally Craig's support in all we did and I especially remember a reassuring father-figure there for me when certain individuals were attempting to destroy my career.

Craig is survived by his wife, Dorothy, his children, grand-children, a large wider family and a massive circle of friends who are all the better for knowing Craig: often due to his professional skills, even more so for his many gentle kindnesses. He was gifted in equal measure as a scientist and as a human being.

**Gerard Carruthers, University of Glasgow**

<sup>1</sup> Craig Sharp, "Robert Burns's Missing Weekend, Hogmanay 1786," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 33(2004), 413–420. Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol133/iss1/31>