

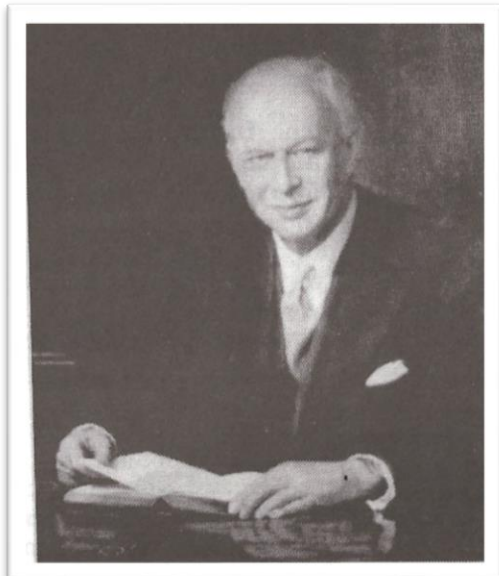
Dr. James Johnstone Gracie, CBE.

James Gracie, after whom Aston University's Wake Green Road Conference Centre was named, exercised a significant influence on industrial education in Birmingham throughout the 1940's, 1950's and 1960's.

In 1937 he came to G.E.C. Witton and almost immediately was co-opted to the Birmingham Education Committee Technical Schools subcommittee. At a meeting of this subcommittee in 1947 he requested that provision should be made for training in industrial administration. This was taken up by Dr James Wilson, the Principal of the Birmingham College of Technology, and a Department of Industrial Administration was set up, the first such department in the country, and a precursor of the present-day Management Centre.

Dr Gracie was soon appointed to the Governing Body of the Technical College and became chairman in 1951, the year in which it became the first College of Advanced Technology. During the nine years of his chairmanship, Dr Gracie profoundly influenced the development of the College. In 1954 he proposed the setting-up of work-based sandwich courses, for which he was able to guarantee an adequate number of apprentices from Witton. The course aimed at degree standard and qualified for the new Diploma in Technology, the first thirty-four of which were awarded to students from the college, a year before any rival colleges. After 1959 Dr Gracie continued working for the College towards the granting of its Charter as the University of Aston in Birmingham in 1966.

For his work with the Birmingham Employment Committee, Dr Gracie was awarded the C.B.E. in 1950. In 1959 Birmingham University, of which he was a Life Governor, conferred on him the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws, while in 1969 the University of Aston made him an honorary Doctor of Science.



*Portrait of J J Gracie at Gracie Hall
Photograph by Miss Cathy Kingham*

In 1956 he became a member of the Council of the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce, and was Vice-President from 1959 to 1961, President from 1961 to 1962 and Treasurer from 1966 to 1970. He was a founder of the British Institute of Management and a member of the management board of the Midland Engineering Employers' Association from 1951.

From 1958 to 1963 Dr Gracie was on the B.B.C. Midland Regional Advisory Council and was a frequent broadcaster on Midland industrial matters. He was also a part-time director of the Birmingham Mint, Chairman from 1964 to 1969 of Washers Ltd., and in 1967 was a member of the Ministry of Labour's Board of Referees Industrial Tribunal.

Besides all his industrial and educational activities, Dr Gracie found time to follow his interest in health and safety. Both he and Mrs Gracie were actively

associated with the St. John Ambulance movement. Dr Gracie was a Commander of the Order of St. John and was for six years from 1949 president of the Birmingham St. John Association. He was also president of a flourishing branch of the Brigade at the G.E.C. Engineering Works, Witton. From 1940 to 1946 Dr Gracie was a member of the Board of Management of the Birmingham Accident Hospital and from 1953 to 1961 a member of the House Committee of the Queen Elizabeth Hospital. As a member of B.U.P.A. he helped to found their Edgbaston nursing home.

James Gracie was born in Rangoon in 1898 and was educated at Wallasey Grammar School and Imperial College, London. He was first employed by Short Bros. in their team at Cardington, building and experimenting with airships. In his spare time he studied, played Rugby for Bedford Town (of which club he became vice-president), and taught at Bedford Evening college. His standard of teaching attracted the notice of one of H.M. Inspectors who recommended him for a scholarship to Imperial College.

As a chartered electrical engineer working for G.E.C. at their Osram Lamp works in Hammersmith from 1921 to 1931, James Gracie eventually became Senior Factory Superintendent of the works. From 1931 to 1937 he worked for British Bedane Ltd in London as a Consulting Engineer and subsequently as Chief Engineer, being promoted to Regional Manager (Midlands) in 1935. In 1937 Gracie returned to G.E.C., working in London until, in 1938, he became Commercial Manager at GEC Engineering Works at Witton. In 1942 he was appointed Joint General Manager at the Witton works.

When he came to live in Chantry Road Dr Gracie joined the Moseley Tennis Club and became its president and also vice-president of the Warwickshire Lawn Tennis Association. As a keen amateur painter, especially of portraits, he attended painting classes whenever he was able and turned his billiard room into a studio. As well as all this, James Gracie was a pianist and also took delight in growing flowering plants in his conservatory. It would seem that Dr Gracie lived up to Kipling's "If you can fill the unforgiving minute with sixty seconds' worth of distance run" throughout his eighty-four years of life.

Sources of information:

Relaxation for a Busy Man by P.P. (1957).

Conferment of honorary degree on Dr J J Gracie at a Congregation of the University of Aston in Birmingham, July 18th, 1969:

Text of presentation address by Professor W.G.Parker.

Letter from Professor Parker.

Communication from The General Electric Company, plc

(Edited by Roy Thomas)