OBITUARIES

Sir Jocelyn Thorpe, C.B.E., F.R.S.

SIR JOCELYN FIELD THORPE died suddenly on June 10 at the White House, Cooden Beach, Sussex. For many years he has been an outstanding and distinguished personality in chemical circles. Born in London on December 1, 1872, he was the sixth son of Mr. W. G. Thorpe of the Middle Temple. He was educated at Worthing College, at King's College, London, at the Royal College of Science, and took a Ph.D. degree in organic chemistry under Victor Meyer at Heidelberg. In 1895 he became research fellow at Owens College, Manchester, where he remained for about fifteen years. Inspired immediately by the magnetic influence of W. H. Perkin, jun., his future career was clear—research was to be the alpha and omega of his life. Alone and jointly he published many papers on subjects which were to serve as the foundation for many of the modern developments in organic chemistry. For four years, from 1909, he transferred to Sheffield, continuing to work on the same subjects as Sorby research fellow of the Royal Society.

The expansion of the Imperial College at South Kensington gave the opportunity to create a full professorship of organic chemistry in 1914. Thorpe held this post until his retirement in 1930, during which period he steadily advanced his reputation for research and teaching: he trained a large number of brilliant students and did much to place Britain in the leading position in organic chemistry which it occupies to-day.

Thorpe's earliest work deals principally with the synthesis of various degradation products derived from the terpenes as well as with cognate problems of aliphatic and alicyclic chemistry; this was published partly with W. H. Perkin, jun. Thorpe was particularly interested in the glutaric and glutaconic acids and their stereochemistry; the latter acids especially provided him with an extremely fruitful field of inquiry, which he exploited to the full after leaving Manchester.

Thorpe's frequent use of ethyl cyanoacetate for synthetic purposes led him to investigate the structure of this compound, and eventually led to the work on the reaction which bears his name. During the Sheffield period he published many papers on the glutaconic acids and produced evidence supporting his "semiaromatic" formula for this compound. This formula, though later abandoned, has points of resemblance with the modern concept of a resonance hybrid and bears testimony to his originality and independence of thought.

After the War of 1914–18, Thorpe's research school underwent a rapid expansion and attracted an enthusiastic band of workers to the Imperial College. Numerous papers dealing with ring formation and with tautomerism appeared in the next few years, although Thorpe's name did not always appear in

these memoirs; he left much of the field to his younger collaborators (Ingold, Kon, Farmer, Linstead) and encouraged them to make a name for themselves.

Thorpe's wide knowledge of and abounding interest in chemistry was perhaps the reason why he accepted the task of producing first a Supplement to the "Dictionary of Applied Chemistry" which bears the name of the other Thorpe (Sir Edward) and later a new edition, which is in course of publication. In this he has been assisted by Dr. M. A. Whitely, one of his most loyal colleagues over a long period of years. Thorpe's conception of this dictionary was on the most grandiose scale, and the effort to produce it must be prodigious.

Externally, Thorpe might have been taken for a country squire: he acquired certain little mannerisms which made him resemble what one might describe in the words 'an Edwardian aristocrat'. Actually he was a simple person and though highly cultured and many-sided in his interests, in the main he lived for his research and for the advancement of co-operative chemistry. He was the born committee man and enjoyed serving on these, though he was seldom assertive. Among Government committees he served on the Advisory Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (1916–22); on the Chemical Defence Committee, War Office; as president of the Indian Chemical Services Committee (1919–20); as a member of the Safety in Mines Research Board (1924–25); and as chairman of the Explosives in Mines Committee, Department of Mines, and as a member of the Dye-stuffs Development Committee, Board of Trade (1925–34). He was a member of almost every chemical committee and served as president of both the Chemical Society and the Institute of Chemistry. The former conferred on him the Longstaff Medal in 1921, and the Royal Society gave him the Davy Medal in 1922. He was made C.B.E. in 1917 and knighted last year.

Thorpe made a great effort to unite various chemical interests, and in particular to found a common meeting place in a Chemistry House, but the task proved too difficult. He was undoubtedly happy in his work, and though it may be said that he spread his energies and efforts too widely to leave him time to achieve outstanding success in any one thing, it is probable that his contribution to the common cause, so wholeheartedly and unstintingly given, has over many years had a profound effect in awakening the co-operative spirit among chemists, who perhaps are even more individualistic than the average citizen.

His many friends knew his sterling merits; he understood and appreciated the luxuries in life, was a wonderful host, collected china, possessed a fine chemical library. He was greatly assisted in all he did by his wife, née Lilian Briggs, whom he married in 1902.

E. F. ARMSTRONG.