



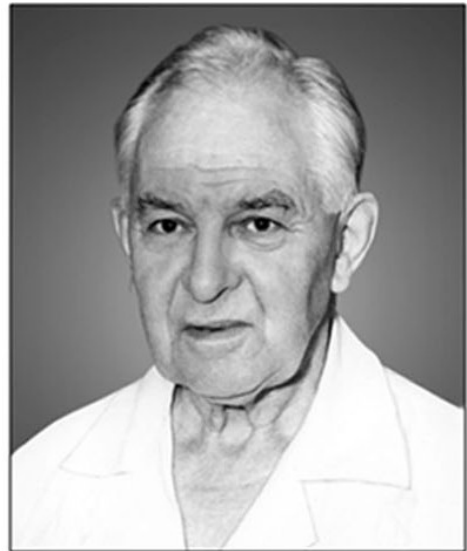
Theodore Howard Somervell (1890 – 1975)

Medical missionary and Renaissance Man par excellence, Somervell was awarded the 'Kaiser-i-Hind', the 'Order of the British Empire', & an Olympic Gold for his achievements in mountaineering

Dr. Theodore Howard Somervell was born on 16th April 1890, at Kendal, Westmoreland, England. During his undergraduate studies in Cambridge, he developed a deep commitment to Christian faith, which became his guiding principle in life.

Dr. Somervell did his undergraduate medical (M.B.,B.Ch) studies and postgraduate surgical training at the University College Hospital, London. His surgical training had many interruptions due to World War I, when he was called to serve in the Royal Army Medical Corps between 1915 and 1918. He eventually graduated as a surgeon with the qualification of FRCS (England) in 1921.

Dr. Somervell had several hobbies – mountaineering, music, drawing and painting – and he excelled in them all. It was his passion for mountaineering, however, that brought him to India, as a member of the 1922 and 1924 British Everest Expeditions.



On completing the first expedition, he set out to see as much as possible of the architecture and customs of India. His final destination of travel was Neyoor, in present-day Kanniyakumari District of Tamil Nadu, where he visited a hospital founded in 1838 by the London Missionary Society (LMS). This visit gave him an opportunity to witness the immense misery and suffering of the people there, due to inadequate medical facilities.

Dr. Somervell perceived the experience as divine prompting for him to return to India. Hence, on returning to England, he wound up his lucrative practice there and returned to Neyoor in 1923. He could, however, assume full responsibilities at the hospital, only on completion of the British Everest Expedition of 1924, due to an earlier commitment he had made. In this expedition, Dr. Somervell and his team reached the altitude of 8570 meters without oxygen support, a record which was not broken till 1952!

Dr. Somervell returned to Neyoor in September 1924 and later in the following year, his wife, Margaret, joined him. From 1926 onwards, in addition to surgery, he shouldered administrative responsibilities as the Medical Superintendent of the hospital. At that time, the Neyoor Hospital, with its network of branch hospitals, was considered one of the largest missionary hospitals in the world!

Dr. Somervell developed various innovative methods of attracting patients to the hospital and dispelling their apprehensions in accepting the treatments offered by modern medicine. He had built a viewing gallery in the operating theater of the hospital from where friends and relatives of the patients could observe surgery and learn about its benefits; this in turn, established a confidence between the surgeon and patients. As Dr. Somervell's name and fame spread, many young surgeons chose to work with him and he was even chosen to be on the panel of postgraduate examiners of the University of Madras.

In 1938, Dr. Somervell was awarded the Kaiser-i-Hind gold medal for his outstanding contribution to medical work in India. The [Kaiser-i-Hind Medal](#) for Public Service in India was a medal awarded by the Emperor/Empress of India between 1900 and 1947.



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Dr. Somervell had to leave Neyoor and return to England in 1945 due to family reasons. But he returned to India in 1949 in response to a need at the Christian Medical College, Vellore (CMC). He joined the department of General Surgery as Associate Professor, and served CMC during the most crucial stage of its development as a medical college.

Dr. Somervell was a colourful personality and indeed, a legendary figure, considered the Indian version of Albert Schweitzer. His contributions to surgical training at CMC are special and unique. He was a compassionate surgeon and keen teacher; hence, patients and students alike flocked to him, to be treated and to be trained by him. He was a general surgeon par excellence and belonged to the school of general surgeons who operated from 'head to foot' in its literal sense - neurosurgery to in-growing toe nail!

Since his most active surgical career belonged to the era when anaesthesia as a speciality was in its infancy, Dr. Somervell was always geared to operating at a fast pace. The lesson he taught his surgical trainees was to get into the tissue planes and the heart of the procedure quickly.

Having lived and served among the 'have-not' class of patients in a backward area of India for a long period, Dr. Somervell made surgery available to the poor. In his dealings with people, prince or pauper, fair or dark, he was the same. No place was inadequate or unsatisfactory for him to interact with or examine patients. He would even lie full length on the floor to talk to a patient, who has prostrated himself in front of him as an expression of gratitude and respect!

Because of his attitude of malice towards none, his uniformity of behaviour towards all, as well as his easy availability and approachability, Dr. Somervell was considered an exemplary surgeon of his time. His period of service in CMC, from 1949 to 1961, can be called the 'Somervell Surgical Era' in Vellore.

Dr. Somervell's trainees, the earliest postgraduates of the department of General Surgery, fondly remember him as a true friend, philosopher and guide – a teacher whom they all looked up to with great reverence during work hours, and a friend with whom they relaxed and shared lighter moments during off-duty hours. This could be either over a cup of tea in one of the nearby roadside tea shops or while enjoying a Tamil movie in one of the local cinema theaters, sitting with him on the 'floor ticket' bench, which cost four annas (or 25 paise) per person then!

Dr. Somervell was the Head of Surgery Unit II from 1949 to 1959. Later, when Dr. H.S Bhat went abroad on study leave and all three units were in need of senior coverage, Dr. Somervell moved out of Unit II and kept himself available for the whole department till his retirement in 1961. Dr. Somervell was appointed as Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) during the 1953 New Year honours, and the CMC community, particularly the department of General Surgery, rejoiced with him on the occasion of him receiving this honour.

On his retirement from CMC, he returned to England and was the President of the Alpine Club, London, for three years, keeping his mountaineering interest and expertise active.

Dr. Theodore Howard Somervell was considered a genius of his time and CMC had the privilege of having him on its faculty and as a member of its community for more than a decade. Whatever Dr. Somervell did, he did it well as an expression of the best in him. He also did it with great humility, as a child of God, for the benefit of the larger family of God.

As a mountaineer, he reached the highest altitude of his time and he was one of the 21 recipients of a gold medal awarded at the Winter VIII Olympiad, in Chamonix, in 1924, for achievements in mountaineering. As a musician, he could play the violin and piano at concert level. He even transcribed the Tibetan songs he had heard during his Everest expeditions and played them in India and England.



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As an artist, his drawings and paintings are of such high quality that they are still displayed on the walls of important museums (The Alpine Club and the Royal Geographical Society, London, and the Abbott Hall Gallery, Kendal) in England.

In all, Dr. Theodore Howard Somervell fit the description of him found in the introduction to his autobiography, "**a man of science, a man of art, a man of warm humanity and above all, a Christian**".

Dr. Somervell passed away on 23rd January, 1975, leaving a vacuum that is near-impossible to be filled. During his 85 years in this world, he touched many lives who experienced the love of God through him.

*Compiled by Dr. S. R. Banerjee Jesudason
Professor of Surgery (Retd)*

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Click on the article below to read *The Guardian's* story on Somervell published on May 19, 2012.

'My modest father never mentioned his Everest expedition Olympic gold'

Family of Theodore Howard Somervell recall the achievements of mountaineer honoured with Olympic gold in 1924



▲ Howard Somervell served in the Royal Army Medical Corps in the first world war.