

Arthur Espie Porritt 1900-1994

Athlete, doctor, sports administrator, Governor-General



The Governor-General, Sir Arthur Porritt (centre) at the first day of the Wairarapa Racing Club's summer meeting, 30 December 1967. He is pictured with the president of the club, James Donald, and a steward, Mr EA Riddiford. (Dominion Post collection, Alexander Turnbull Library, Ref: EP/1968/0016-F)

Arthur Porritt was born in Wanganui where his father was a doctor. He too pursued a medical career and in 1923 he was elected as the first New Zealand Rhodes scholar to study medicine. At Oxford he had enough 'time to be a bit athletic ... and play some rugby'¹ and developed into an outstanding track athlete, holding the Oxford record for the 100, 120 and 220 yards hurdles.

In 1924 he represented New Zealand at the Paris Olympics, 'because I was our fastest sprinter, and because I was already at Oxford, and therefore it was a cheap proposition to send me across to Paris.'² Porritt came third in the 100 metres final even though he had never been properly

coached. The race was immortalised in *Chariots of Fire*, though in the film the third place winner was called 'Tom Watson', as Porritt self-effacingly refused to be named in the script.

Porritt captained the New Zealand Olympic team in 1928 and was manager of the 1936 team that included his friend Jack Lovelock. His involvement in international sport continued with a number of administrative positions, including 20 years as the chairman of the British Empire Games Federation.

His medical career was also high-profile. In 1946 he was appointed surgeon to King George VI, and later sergeant surgeon to Queen Elizabeth II.

Porritt returned to New Zealand in 1967 as the first New Zealand-born Governor-General. He died at the age of 93 as Baron Porritt of Wanganui and Hampstead.

¹ Beaglehole, Diana. 'Porritt, Arthur Espie 1900-1994'. *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, updated 31 July 2003. URL: <http://www.dnzb.govt.nz/>

² Romanos, Joseph. 'Good lord', *NZ Listener*, January 9 1993, p. 24.

'Although I am a complete pommy now, I have never ceased to be a New Zealander one way or another.'



Arthur Espie Porritt in 1923, the first New Zealand Rhodes scholar to study medicine. (Alexander Turnbull Library, Ref: 1/1-018584-F)