

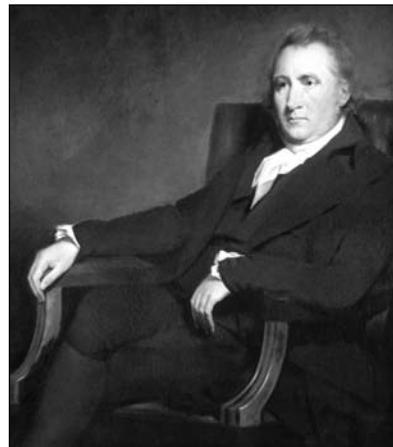
James Gregory (1753–1821)

A member of the famous Gregory family, James was born in Aberdeen, educated at Aberdeen Grammar School and then Edinburgh University but before going there spent a year at Christ Church, Oxford, where his cousin David was Dean.

Entering Edinburgh University in 1767 Gregory was taught by Alexander Monro secundus, William Cullen, Joseph Black and John Hope, as well as his own father, James Gregory the Elder. When his father died while he was still a student, Gregory offered to complete his course of lectures – an offer that was accepted, creating the anomaly of a undergraduate student giving professorial lectures.

Graduating MD at the age of 21, Gregory spent the next two years in Leiden, Paris and Italy before returning to Edinburgh as Professor of the Institutes of Medicine (embracing pathology, therapeutics and physiology). In a very short time he was famous both as a physician and a teacher. Like many subsequent professors of medicine, he wrote a textbook of medicine that became the standard work and brought him international fame – *Conspectus medicinae theoretical* (1788). In its day its impact and standing equalled that of today's 'Davidson'.

Perhaps the high point of Gregory's distinguished career was in 1790, when he was appointed joint professor with Cullen for the rest of his life, with the right to succeed Cullen as the sole occupant of the chair on the latter's retirement or death. Whatever their academic relationship, both men often disagreed most vocally in matters related to the RCPE, which was going through turbulent times. There was eagerness not to permit the surgeons to trespass into the clinical territory of the physicians, particularly in respect of co-operating with apothecaries and



James Gregory by an unknown artist, a copy of the original portrait by Sir Henry Raeburn, owned by Lord Leith of Fyvie. (Oil on canvas, 125 cm x 100 cm)

pharmacists as many surgeons had taken to doing.

More acrimonious debate centred on controls of where physicians might practise and who was to regulate this. Many physicians wished to relax some of the College regulations. Gregory strongly objected to any such changes. As was common practice at the time, he issued pamphlets to support his arguments but in so doing brought dishonour to the College. Printed on quarto and available to the general public, they ran to between 32 and 700 pages in length.

So busy did he become that in 1818 he employed his nephew, William Pulteney Alison, to assist with some of his lectures. (Alison went on to have his own distinguished career and was President of the College in 1836–38.) One of Gregory's famous aphorisms was: 'The best physician is one who can distinguish what he can do from what he cannot do.'

Like so many of his contemporaries Gregory was argumentative, quarrelsome and often feuding ('at war' as he said himself), although to be fair, his disagreements were often justified and his views worth

listening to. For example, since the Edinburgh Infirmary had opened in 1727, RCPE Fellows had taken it in turn to provide medical care to its patients, each serving for a month before being replaced by another. This was clearly not a satisfactory arrangement, as Gregory pointed out. He managed to get agreement that the hospital managers should appoint permanent staff, each to serve for a fixed period of ten years.

Perhaps the most colourful thing Gregory did was to assault a fellow physician, James Hamilton, with his cane. For this he was fined £100 but, far from being contrite, he said he would gladly pay double for the chance to do it again. Hamilton was himself a colourful character.

Known to Edinburgh citizens as 'Cock', he continued to wear ruffles, knee-breeches and a three-cornered hat long after the fashion had died out.

Between 1798 and 1801 Gregory was President of the College. Sadly his association with the RCPE came to an end in 1809 when he was suspended for divulging confidential matters relating to the College and refused to apologise for doing so.

Gregory and his first wife lived in St John Street, but after her untimely death and his second marriage in 1796 he moved to Canaan Lodge, then in the country but now part of Morningside. It was in his garden there that he grew Turkestan rhubarb used in the mixture associated with his name, Gregory's Powder, which he recommended as a laxative and tonic. There were no children from his first marriage but 11 from the second. Gregory had a riding accident in 1820, sustaining fractured ribs and a hydrothorax, and never fully recovered. He died in 1821 and was buried in Canongate Churchyard.

Derek Doyle

Obituaries Editor, *The Journal, RCPE*