

# Sir Alexander Morison (1779–1866)

Sir Alexander Morison specialised in mental and cerebral illness and would be recognised today as a forensic psychiatrist. He was born in Bailie Fyfe's Close, in Anchorfield, near Edinburgh in 1779. Like so many Fellows and past presidents of the College, he attended Edinburgh's Royal High School, before spending five years at the University of Edinburgh. His successful MD, *De Hydrocephalo Phrenitico* (1799) reflected the interest in cerebral and mental illness that he would develop throughout his life.

Two years after qualifying he became a licentiate of the College, and the following year, a Fellow. He apparently did not enjoy much success practising in Edinburgh and in 1808 he moved to London, becoming a licentiate of the London College. He decided to specialise in mental illness, but establishing himself again proved difficult. His first appointment, in 1810, was as Inspecting Physician of Lunatic Asylums in Surrey. In 1835 he became physician to the Bethlehem Hospital, and three years later was appointed personal physician to Princess Charlotte and, later, to her husband Prince Leopold. In that same year (the year Queen Victoria succeeded to the throne) he was knighted.

He became President of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh while working in London, serving from 1827–29. He only became a Fellow of the London College in 1841. He was eager to return to Edinburgh, preferably to a Chair in Mental Illnesses but no post was available or was created for him. Nevertheless he returned to his home city and gave highly popular 'unofficial' courses of lectures. Some of these were included in his books, probably his greatest contribution



Sir Alexander Morison. Portrait by Sir John Watson Gordon RA PRSA, RCPE Collection.

to psychiatry and forensic psychiatry: *Outlines of Lectures on Mental Diseases* (1826), *Cases of Mental Disease with Practical Observations on the Medical Treatment* (1828) and *The Physiognomy of Mental Diseases* (1840). This last book was particularly fascinating as it contained illustrations of some of the 'lunatics' under his care, including Jonathon Martin who had attempted to burn down York Minster in 1829.

The most famous portrait of Morison was done by a patient of his. Richard Dadd, a famous artist and portrait painter created the artwork based on sketches sent to him by Morison's daughter. Dadd was admitted to Morison's care after being convicted of murdering his father, whom he believed to be the devil. The portrait was in the possession of the College for many years before it was sold to the Scottish National Portrait Gallery.

Morison and his first wife had 16 children, the first born and christened on board the ship Royal Albert off Cape Town. He died at Balerno Hill House, Currie in 1866,

leaving behind his second wife. He bequeathed his property 'Larchgrove', and land in Newhaven to the College, who then sold it to create a lectureship in his name as well as fund prizes for long-serving psychiatric nurses. Several of his papers, drawings and diaries are held in the College archives as well as references to the Dadd portrait.

Perhaps the greatest compliment paid to him and one that would have given him much pleasure was that in the *History of Bedlam*, 'the asylum reformer par excellence.'<sup>4</sup>

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## FURTHER READING

- 1 Moore N. Morison, Sir Alexander (1779–1866). In: *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2004.
- 2 Craig WS. *History of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh*. Oxford: Blackwell Scientific Publications; 1976.
- 3 Allderidge P. *The late Richard Dadd 1817–1866*. London: Tate Gallery; 1974.
- 4 Allridge P. *A brief history of Bethlam Hospital 1247–1997. A pictorial record*. London: Phillimore & Co Ltd; 1997.