Alexander Monro, tertius (1773–1859)

The third Alexander Monro inherited an unenviable burden of expectation as a result of the brilliance of his father and grandfather. He famously failed to live up to this and history has judged him harshly for these perceived shortcomings. Would that judgement have been more favourable if he were to be assessed in his own right rather than measured against his family of high achievers?

His great-grandfather, the surgeon John Monro, had been a prime mover in the establishment of the Edinburgh Medical School in 1726, and had prepared his son Alexander primus to be its first Professor of Anatomy, a position which he filled with distinction, helping the new school gain an international reputation. He, in turn, had his son Alexander secundus elected joint Professor, and secundus more than lived up to expectation. Many considered that his talent even outshone that of his father. ‘He showed himself the greater man, both as a teacher and investigator,’ wrote John Comrie.1 Just as his father had done for him, secundus arranged the appointment of his son Alexander tertius to the University Chair, but tertius was not destined to repeat the achievements of his family predecessors.

Alexander tertius was educated at Edinburgh’s Royal High School, then Edinburgh University, where his notes (still preserved in the university archive) were untidy and unmethodical. Yet within a year of graduating MD in 1797, he became a licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh (RCPE), and a Fellow a mere 25 days later, a rapid progression but common at the time. His father, a past President of the College, may have inadvertently advanced the reputation of history was right after all.

The anomaly that surgery should be taught by a physician-anatomist who had never practised surgery led the university’s then masters, the Town Council, to propose in 1827 that a separate Chair of Surgery be established. Tertius vociferously opposed this, and it took the recommendation of a Royal Commission to establish a Chair of Surgery in 1831 in the face of his continuing protests. He had some supporters, however. He had maintained a small medical practice and, after serving as secretary of the RCPE for 11 years, he was elected President of the College in 1825.

Tertius may have inadvertently advanced the reputation of anatomy in Edinburgh. The movement of students opting to learn anatomy in the extramural school rather than from him in the Medical School, which had started as a trickle in his father’s time, now became a flood, swelling the classes of gifted and inspiring teachers like John Barclay and Robert Knox, the latter attracting the largest anatomy classes ever seen in Britain.

Unpopular in life, so it was in death for Alexander tertius and even his obituaries were at best damning with faint praise. More recent assessments by Wright St Clair4 and Rosner5 have done little to salvage his reputation. Iain MacIntyre

References