

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 facilitated this promotion; more nepotism was to follow. Alexander *tertius* went to London, then Paris, to study anatomy and in his absence he was appointed conjoint Professor of Anatomy with his father. By the time he returned to Edinburgh in 1800 he had been made joint Professor of Medicine, Anatomy and Surgery – all this for a 26-year-old with no experience of medical or surgical practice. From 1808 he delivered lecture courses, but without the skills of his father or grandfather. Old fashioned, scruffily dressed and with an air of indifference, he was unpopular with his students. 'So dirty in person and in actions... he made his lectures in anatomy as dull as he was himself,' was Charles Darwin's withering condemnation.² From his early years in the Chair his visits to the anatomy dissecting rooms were rare.

Nor did he fare better with his written works which were lengthy and invariably offered the opinions of others rather than his own. *The Dictionary of National*



FIGURE 1 Alexander Monro *tertius* (courtesy of the RCSEd).

Biography (1895–1900) seemed to summarise popular opinion: 'None of his works are of permanent value, and those written when he was in the prime of life are as confused, prolix and illogical as his senile productions.'³ His publisher wrote in 1814 telling him that, of the 1,250 copies of his anatomy textbook they had printed, over 1,000 remained unsold; they offered these to him for one-third of the cost of production. Even his edited edition of his father's works with accompanying explanatory notes was not well-received. Wright St Clair found the notes 'verbose, often irrelevant and many reveal a totally inadequate reading and understanding of the current literature'.⁴

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. Without nepotistic influence he would probably never have been appointed on merit. It seems the judgement of history was right after all.

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References

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- 3 Moore N. *Alexander Monro tertius*. *Dictionary of National Biography 1885–1900*; vol. 38.
- 4 Wright St Clair RE. *Doctors Monro: a medical saga*. London: Wellcome Historical Medical Library; 1964.
- 5 Rosner L. *Alexander Monro tertius*. Oxford: Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.