

# Medicine, meteorology and vital statistics: the influence of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh upon Scottish civil registration, c.1840–1855

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**ABSTRACT** The Scottish Registration Act of 1854 introduced compulsory civil registration of births, deaths and marriages under the GROS. The Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh had long campaigned for such legislation, but was dissatisfied with certain sections of the Act. The College possessed strong views on how causes of death ought to be recorded, on the need for a medical Superintendent of Statistics to tabulate and analyse the causes of death for the GROS, on whether or not doctors should be fined for failing to provide certificates of cause of death, and on the importance of including meteorological data in the GROS's reports. Its Fellows accordingly strove to have the new registration measures tailored to their specifications. Drawing upon the College minutes, the GROS archives, and other contemporary sources, this article explains how the College succeeded in influencing some, but not all of these aspects of vital registration in Scotland.

**KEYWORDS** Death registration, meteorology, nineteenth century, Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, Scotland, vital statistics

**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS** General Register Office for Scotland (GROS), National Archives of Scotland (NAS), Parliamentary Papers (PP)

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Until the mid-nineteenth century, registration of vital events in Scotland was the responsibility of the Established Church, and was generally conducted inefficiently. Baptisms, burials and banns of marriage were supposed to be entered in registers kept by every parish kirk session (a governing body of elders nominated by the congregation and chaired by the parish minister), but the quality and regularity of these volumes varied greatly, and they were not always carefully preserved. In fact, only 99 of the 850 parishes that returned information for the 1801 census possessed regular registers. The remainder either kept no register at all, or made only sporadic entries.<sup>1</sup> To make matters worse, the fees demanded by the kirk session clerks for their trouble in recording these events deterred poorer parishioners from coming forward, and since the registers belonged to the Church of Scotland, people of other denominations frequently refused to report their vital events on principle.<sup>2</sup> This meant that many individuals possessed no record of their birth or parentage to prove an inheritance claim, while medical men, statisticians and municipal authorities found it impossible to ascertain the true number of births, deaths and marriages in any parish.

By the 1830s, most educated Scots had become convinced of the public need for a compulsory civil system of vital registration, and many argued that the lack of this left Scotland far behind the rest of Europe, including England and Wales, where the Registration and Marriage Acts of 1836 had introduced civil registration under a General Register Office. Among the most prominent advocates of similar legislation for Scotland was the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh. The College Fellows stressed the desirability of recording births rather than baptisms, since some babies died before they could be christened; deaths as opposed to burials, since not all corpses were 'officially' interred; and marriages rather than proclamations of banns, as couples who announced their intention to marry did not always proceed with the wedding.<sup>3</sup> Above all, they were:

'desirous to see tables of the deaths taking place throughout the Country recorded with regularity and correctness, [so] that they might be useful in illustrating the nature and effects of epidemics, the mortality from different diseases, and prevalence of particular diseases in certain localities, the mortality at different periods of life, the

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comparative salubrity of Town and Country districts, and all those questions in vital statistics, which may enable the Physician to understand the causes of diseases epidemic, endemic and sporadic, and to adopt the means most likely to prevent diseases susceptible of prevention, to diminish mortality, to improve health, and to extend if practicable, the average duration of human life'.<sup>4</sup>

The College was not alone in calling for a Scottish registration act. Other medical bodies, such as the Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow, law and actuarial societies, statistical societies, town councils, and even the Church of Scotland accepted that some kind of statute was required, but achieving it proved to be extraordinarily difficult.<sup>5</sup> Between 1829 and 1854, no fewer than nine Scottish registration bills were brought into parliament. The first eight bills were all rejected, postponed or withdrawn owing to disagreements over who should serve as the new civil registrars, fears of high cost to the taxpayer and excessive administrative machinery, and, most importantly, indignation that four of the bills were accompanied by measures for amending the Scots law of marriage. Scottish lawyers, clergymen and ordinary people were so resistant to any change in the marriage law that they effectively rejected the registration bills by association. The ninth bill, framed by Lord Elcho and passed in 1854, succeeded because it kept administrative costs as low as possible, placated the Church of Scotland by appointing its session clerks as registrars, and did not attempt to interfere with the marriage law.<sup>6</sup> The Registration of Births, Deaths and Marriages (Scotland) Act took effect on 1 January 1855, establishing a compulsory civil system of birth, death, and marriage registration under the GROS.

The College had spent many hours during the 1830s and 1840s campaigning for this result. It appointed internal committees to report on the registration bills and prepare petitions in support of them, and nominated additional committees to agitate for a registration bill during periods when it seemed that none was in contemplation, notably in the years 1841 and 1846.<sup>7</sup> Yet the Fellows also attempted to have certain features of these bills, and of the eventual Registration Act, tailored to their preference. In particular, they strove to influence the manner of recording causes of death in the new registers, to secure the appointment of a medically qualified officer to compile the GROS's statistical reports, and to expunge a clause in the Act that stipulated a fine for medical men who did not submit certificates of cause of death. They additionally pressed for the inclusion of meteorological tables in the GROS's reports, to illustrate the relationship between climatic events and mortality rates. This article considers the extent to which the College's efforts succeeded, beginning with cause of death registration.

## FORMAT OF CAUSE OF DEATH REGISTRATION

Towards the end of 1840, when the Statistical Section of the British Association added its forceful voice to those calling for an improved Scottish registration system, the College was prompted to nominate a six-man committee chaired by Dr William Pulteney Alison 'to consider of and recommend an effective and uniform system of Registration in Scotland of all Births and Deaths, specifying in regard to the latter, the supposed cause; and to point out the means to be employed for the accomplishment of this end'.<sup>8</sup> The committee's report, which was approved by the College and printed in February 1841, shaped the College's attitude towards the clauses on cause of death registration in the future registration bills of 1847, 1848, 1849 and 1854.

The report argued that the English manner of recording causes of death should not be transferred to Scotland. The death schedule prescribed by the English Registration Act of 1836 contained only one column for stating the cause of death, and the College committee believed this to be a fundamental flaw. Although English registrars were supposed to obtain information about the cause of death from the deceased's medical attendant whenever possible,<sup>9</sup> the committee pointed out that in many cases the deceased had no medical attendant, and so the cause of death would be estimated by any relative or neighbour who reported the event. A single column for recording the cause of death would consequently contain entries of very mixed accuracy with respect to diagnosis. For greater authenticity, the committee favoured separating information provided by doctors, from that of unqualified persons.<sup>10</sup> They wanted a schedule with two columns: one for the precise, 'ascertained' cause of death, and another for the 'conjectured' cause, appropriate to cases where the informant was not a medical man. The committee further recommended that any Scottish registration system should employ a shorter, simpler and more practical nosology, or list of disease classifications, than that used in England.<sup>11</sup>

When the death schedule in the Scottish registration bill of 1847 replicated the English single column for stating the name and duration of the fatal disease, representatives from the College met with the Lord Advocate, Andrew Rutherford, who had framed the bill, and successfully persuaded him to alter the schedule in line with their recommendations of 1841.<sup>12</sup> The amended version contained two columns: one for the 'ascertained', and another for the 'conjectured' cause of death.<sup>13</sup> The College exerted similar influence over the content of the next two bills of 1848 and 1849, both of which initially included the English form of death schedule, and both of which were revised to satisfy the College.<sup>14</sup>

The medical input into the Scottish bills is more noticeable than in the earlier English legislation, and indicates that the Edinburgh College had easier access to the political

1855. Deaths in the *Parish of* \_\_\_\_\_ in the County (or Burgh) of *Edinburgh*. Registered by *John Smith*, Registrar.

No	Description of the Deceased.					Particulars of Death.				Signature of Informant.	When and where registered, and Signature of Registrar.		
	Name, Rank, Profession, or Occupation.	Sex.	Age.	Where born, and How long in this District.	Parents' Names, and Rank, Profession, or Occupation.	If Deceased was married, To whom.	Issue, in Order of Birth, their Names and Ages.	When died. Year, Day of Month, Hour.	Where died.			Cause of Death, and how long Disease continued. Medical Attendant by whom certified, and when he last saw Deceased.	Burial Place. Undertaker by whom certified.
301	<i>CANTY,</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>62</i>	<i>County of Cork,</i>	<i>Timothy Canty,</i>	<i>Honora</i>	<i>1. Timothy, 31,</i>	<i>1855.</i>	<i>At 16, Cot-</i>	<i>Pneumonia—</i>	<i>Burial Ground</i>	<i>Honora Canty, her M. Mark.</i>	<i>1855.</i>
	<i>WILLIAM,</i>			<i>Ireland,</i>	<i>Shoemaker,</i>	<i>M. Carty.</i>	<i>2. William, 39,</i>	<i>February</i>	<i>tage Lane,</i>	<i>2 Months.</i>	<i>of Greyfriars,</i>	<i>Widow,</i>	<i>March 3d.</i>
	<i>Labourer.</i>		<i>36 Years in Edin-</i>	<i>deceased.</i>		<i>3. Mary, 29,</i>	<i>Twenty-</i>	<i>Edinburgh.</i>	<i>As certified by H.</i>	<i>Edinburgh.</i>	<i>Informant.</i>	<i>At Edin-</i>	
			<i>burgh.</i>	<i>Mary Canty,</i>		<i>4. John, dec.</i>	<i>eighth,</i>		<i>Bloomfield, M.D.,</i>	<i>As certified by</i>	<i>James Johnston, Shoemaker, Edinburgh,</i>	<i>John</i>	
				<i>Maiden Name</i>		<i>at. 27, in</i>	<i>6h, 30m.</i>		<i>who saw Deceased</i>	<i>George Wat-</i>	<i>kins, Under-</i>	<i>Witness.</i>	<i>Smith,</i>
				<i>Nicolas, deceased.</i>		<i>1854.</i>	<i>a.m.</i>		<i>Feb. 27th.</i>	<i>kins, Under-</i>	<i>taker.</i>	<i>George Henderson, Clerk</i>	<i>Registrar.</i>
						<i>5. Catherine,</i>					<i>in the Register Office,</i>	<i>Edinburgh.</i>	
						<i>dec. at 1, in</i>					<i>Edinburgh.</i>	<i>Witness.</i>	
						<i>1825.</i>							
						<i>6. Stephen, 21.</i>							

[The Words and Figures in *Italics* in this Schedule to be filled in as the Case may be.]

**FIGURE 1** Form of death schedule prescribed by the Registration of Births, Deaths and Marriages (Scotland) Act, 1854, with the column for recording cause of death highlighted.

process than its London counterpart. But although the physicians' influence carried weight in the 1840s, they were bitterly disappointed by the legislation of 1854. Unusually, the first draft of the 1854 bill did not prescribe any form of schedule for recording the cause of death.<sup>15</sup> Lord Elcho, who had drawn up the measure, left this open, presumably so that a schedule could be agreed upon and inserted when the bill went to the Select Committee stage in the House of Commons. He might also have intended to leave such detailed decisions to the new Registrar General for Scotland when the bill passed. The College committee charged with framing a response to this bill feared that, should it pass in this 'open' state, the Registrar General might automatically introduce the flawed English schedule to Scotland, without proper consideration. The committee therefore recommended that if the bill passed,

'it would be important to secure that the entire system of nosology, and other details necessary to be considered in registering deaths, shall be submitted to the Scottish Medical Incorporations, and in particular to the College, whose anxious interest on the subject has been demonstrated by elaborate suggestions for the improvement of the English method, in the anticipation of its application to Scotland under a former Bill'.<sup>16</sup>

The College instructed the committee to petition parliament in favour of the bill, but to request that any cause of death schedule to be adopted should reflect their views, and they also asked the committee to write to the Home Secretary and Lord Elcho on the subject.<sup>17</sup> Elcho replied that a Select Committee of Scots MPs was about to consider the registration bill, and he would 'not fail' to bring the College's points before them, as 'My only object is to make this Bill as complete and perfect as possible and I shall therefore be most ready to adopt

whatever mode may appear the most desirable for registering Deaths'.<sup>18</sup> On learning this, the College committee seized the opportunity of influencing the Scots MPs by sending each one a circular outlining the deficiencies of the English system of recording causes of death, and the merits of the College's proposals, along with a copy of the 1841 report.<sup>19</sup> Finally, the committee published a letter in the Edinburgh newspapers, informing the general public that:

'the value of any System of Registration, must depend on the accuracy with which the returns are made, and the manner in which they are classified; and from want of attention it has happened that the elaborate English reports are useless, or in some respects worse than useless, if trusted to as the basis of any calculations – the forms now in use in England rendering them naturally fallacious. The Committee of this College have shown, in a Report which can be seen by application at the College, that by an alteration of the Schedule employed, and by the adoption of a simpler and shorter nomenclature of diseases, Registers of Mortality might easily be found in Scotland, admitting of easy comparison with those of England, but greatly surpassing them in precision, and scientific value. It is thus for the interest of Scotland, to see that her system is not in this respect assimilated to that of England, but reaps the advantage of all those improvements which are the result of the attention which has been paid to the subject by the medical men of the country'.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the committee's best efforts, and surprisingly considering that the College's tactics of persuasion had worked so well in previous years, the death schedule adopted for the Scottish Registration Act followed the English format of one column for recording the cause of

death, as shown in Figure 1. The Scots registrars did, however, have to include the name of the medical attendant, or the words 'not certified' if a lay informant supplied the cause of death.<sup>21</sup> The College was similarly disappointed that the new Registrar General for Scotland, William Pitt Dundas, intended to utilise the English nosology. In a letter to his English counterpart, George Graham, in November 1854, Pitt Dundas vowed to ensure that the Scottish nosology would be the same as in England, 'even tho' the Doctors should make out that a more perfect one could be framed'.<sup>22</sup> He was anxious to reassure Graham that the Scottish statistics would be comparable with those of England.

### APPOINTMENT OF A SUPERINTENDENT OF STATISTICS

The College was deeply concerned that the 1854 bill did not require the employment of a medical man to compile the GROS's annual reports on the number and causes of death in Scotland.<sup>23</sup> The Registrar General for England had a medical Superintendent of Statistics, the respected Dr William Farr, but – almost certainly for reasons of economy – no such appointment was written into the Scottish bill. Determined that the preparation of these important statistics should not fall to a non-medically qualified administrative officer,<sup>24</sup> the College committee argued in the Edinburgh press that 'no mere clerk' could possibly tabulate the death statistics properly, whereas 'A medical man who understands the nomenclature of diseases...[,] can from his own knowledge check inaccuracies...[,] of business habits, and who could dedicate his whole time to the work, might easily render these returns, valuable public Documents'. The committee took care to emphasise that they did not covet the job for themselves, 'their sole object...[being] a desire to render these returns really useful'.<sup>25</sup>

William Pulteney Alison also expressed the College's views to the Registrar General, in the following candid terms:

'...we consider the drawing up of these [Annual] Reports a matter of real importance for the elucidation of various points in medical science; &...consider it extremely desirable, that this duty should be assigned in Scotland, – as it is in England, – to a medical man...we have paid a good deal of attention to the subject, & are confident that we could give such advice to a medical man, employed in drawing up these Reports, as would enable him, to make very considerable improvements on the plan adopted in England, & thereby lay a foundation for various conclusions, – particularly as to the external causes of diseases – on which no such satisfactory statistical evidence is to be obtained any where else'.<sup>26</sup>

To the College's relief, Pitt Dundas conceded that no one but a qualified medical practitioner could accurately tabulate the statistics of the number and causes of death throughout Scotland,<sup>27</sup> and he further accepted that the Scottish medical community would never be satisfied until the GROS had its own equivalent to William Farr.<sup>28</sup> After requesting details of Farr's precise duties and manner of appointment from the English Registrar General, Pitt Dundas approached the Treasury and received permission to appoint a Superintendent of Statistics for Scotland. Several medical practitioners put themselves forward for this position. Alison favoured Dr George W Bell, whom he described as:

'...remarkably well fitted for the office, from his intelligence as a medical man & his habits of business...whenever I have heard the subject mentioned among medical men, since the Office has been talked of, the same opinion as to his fitness for it has been expressed. He is pretty well known in Edinburgh – both by his father's & his uncle's extensive practise, & by his being Dr Guthrie's chief assistant in the management of the Original Ragged School; & I know him to be a man of amiable character'.<sup>29</sup>

Bell had already demonstrated an interest in the field of vital statistics, having written an article calling for a Scottish registration act in the 1840s. As the brother-in-law of the Lord Advocate, James Moncrieff, he was also extremely well connected, even though he was not a Fellow of the College.<sup>30</sup>

Pitt Dundas's preferred candidate, however, was Dr James Stark.<sup>31</sup> Stark was a Fellow of the College, a member of the Statistical Society of London, Convener of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland's committee on registration, and the author of several articles on the subject of vital registration.<sup>32</sup> Though never appointed to any of the College committees on registration, he did participate in discussions of the committees' reports. Like Bell, Stark was well connected – his wife was the eldest daughter of Adam Black, the prominent publisher, former Lord Provost and prospective MP for Edinburgh.<sup>33</sup>

Ostensibly at the request of the town council – but probably thanks to his connection with Adam Black, who was Lord Provost at the time – Stark had been compiling monthly mortality tables for Edinburgh and Leith since 1846.<sup>34</sup> He issued every medical practitioner in the area with a supply of blank forms for stating the cause of death, instructing them to fill one up whenever a patient died and have the relatives hand the completed form to the 'recorder' of the burial ground. The latter copied the details into his 'Return of Interments', which he forwarded monthly to Stark. Stark then classified the deaths according to diseases and ages. To demonstrate the influence of atmospheric agencies, especially temperature, on mortality rates, he also augmented his

tables with several others showing 'the state of the barometer, thermometer, and rain-gauge, extracted from the registers kept by Mr Adie, the celebrated optician'.<sup>35</sup> Stark's credentials as a medical statistician were therefore in no doubt, and when offered the post of Superintendent of Statistics on 11 July 1855, he accepted, on the understanding that 'the duties of the office would not interfere with...[his] private practise'.<sup>36</sup> There was also some consolation for the unsuccessful candidate, Dr Bell, who later that year was appointed Registration Examiner for the districts of Edinburgh, Glasgow and Leith.

As the new parish registrars sent in their returns, Stark and the small clerical staff assigned to assist him began to prepare and publish the GROS's weekly, monthly, quarterly, and in due course, annual reports. But he did not enjoy good health. Stark suffered intermittent attacks of what seems to have been a nervous complaint, which confined him to bed for several weeks at a time. In 1857, he asked that his name be removed from the College's attendance roll on these grounds, having accumulated substantial fines for absenteeism because his delicate state of health would not permit him to attend 'exciting meetings such as those of the College'.<sup>37</sup> From then onwards, Stark took little or no part in the business of the College. His repeated and lengthy absences from the GROS eventually affected the production of the statistics, delaying the completion of the 1871 Census Report so severely that the Registrar General felt compelled to force Stark's resignation in May 1874. Another medical man, Dr William Robertson, replaced him as Superintendent of Statistics.<sup>38</sup> Stark subsequently retired to rural seclusion in Bridge of Allan, and died in 1890.

## PENALTIES FOR FAILURE TO CERTIFY CAUSE OF DEATH

A third feature of the 1854 bill to which the College took exception was its prescription of a substantial fine for any medical attendant who failed to fill out a certificate of cause of death for his patient, as shown in Figure 2. The clause concerned, which had been added when the bill was considered in the Select Committee, stipulated that:

'The Medical Person who shall have been in Attendance during the last Illness, and until the Death of any Person, shall within Fourteen Days after the Death of such Person, and under a Penalty not exceeding Forty Shillings in case of Failure, transmit to the Registrar a Certificate of such Death, in the Form of...Schedule (G.)...which shall forthwith be entered by the Registrar in the Register, and the Registrar shall from Time to Time furnish gratis to every Medical Person within his Parish or District known to him, or who shall require the same, the necessary Copies of such Certificate.'<sup>39</sup>

SCHEDULE (G.)

To the Registrar of the Parish [or District] of \_\_\_\_\_ in  
the County [or Burgh] of \_\_\_\_\_

I hereby certify, That I attended \_\_\_\_\_, who was apparently  
aged \_\_\_\_\_ Years; that I last saw him [or her] on the \_\_\_\_\_  
Day of \_\_\_\_\_ 185 \_\_\_\_\_; that he [or she] died on the \_\_\_\_\_ Day  
of \_\_\_\_\_ 185 \_\_\_\_\_, at \_\_\_\_\_; that the Cause  
of his [or her] Death was \_\_\_\_\_; and that the Disease  
had continued \_\_\_\_\_.

Witness my Hand, this \_\_\_\_\_ Day of  
One thousand eight hundred and \_\_\_\_\_

Signed \_\_\_\_\_  
Profession \_\_\_\_\_  
Residence \_\_\_\_\_

**FIGURE 2** Form of certificate of cause of death prescribed by the Registration of Births, Deaths and Marriages (Scotland) Bill, 29 June 1854.

When Stark drew the College's attention to this new clause and suggested that the Fellows take steps to have it altered, they responded rapidly. The College's committee on the bill drafted letters to Lord Elcho (who had framed the measure), the Lord Advocate, and the local MP, Charles Cowan, pointing out that 'Many of our profession feel themselves aggrieved by the proposal to inflict a penalty upon every medical man who does not make the necessary returns'.<sup>40</sup> Such punishment seemed unfair because the bill prescribed no fine for clergymen who failed to fill in marriage schedules promptly, nor did the English Registration Act impose financial penalties upon doctors. Though the committee objected to a penalty clause, they conceded that, if the bill's promoters deemed it essential for the efficient working of the measure, the College would not obstruct the bill on that score. But they recommended that the bill ought to require registrars, whenever a death was reported to them, to write to the deceased's medical attendant, enclosing a blank cause of death certificate and requesting that it be filled in, and that a penalty should apply only if that form was not completed and returned within a specified number of days.<sup>41</sup> The College's reasoning, expressed quite subtly here, was that, as the clause currently stood, a doctor who had not seen his patient for some time might not know that the patient had died, yet despite his ignorance of the situation, he would still be penalised when no certificate was forthcoming. However, if the registrar were responsible for sending a blank certificate to the doctor, the doctor could never unconsciously incur a penalty.<sup>42</sup>

The College's intervention did not succeed on this occasion, as Elcho and his colleagues remained convinced that the threat of a penalty was necessary to induce doctors to fill up certificates of cause of death. The clause was therefore left unchanged.<sup>43</sup> The committee's assertion that medical men regarded the 40-shilling fine as both objectionable and discriminatory was repeatedly borne out once the Registration Act took effect. The GROS's team of Registration Examiners, who visited all the parishes in Scotland once a year, reported numerous doctors' disgruntlement that although they received no

fee to compensate them for their time and trouble in completing these certificates, they could be fined for not doing so. Yet the committee's request of 1854 did prevail in the end, for when the Registration Act was amended in 1860, the penalty clause was softened. Medical attendants now incurred a fine only if they refused to respond to the registrar's request for a death certificate,<sup>44</sup> which was effectively what the College had suggested.

## INCLUSION OF METEOROLOGICAL DATA IN THE GROS'S STATISTICAL REPORTS

Finally, the College, and Stark more particularly, were instrumental in bringing meteorological data into the GROS's reports. Stark had long taken an interest in the weather, appending tables of humidity, temperature and rainfall to his mortality statistics for Edinburgh and Leith from 1846. Like many medical men, he was convinced of 'the close connection between certain meteorological conditions of the atmosphere, and the amount of sickness and mortality among the population'.<sup>45</sup> The College, too, was keen to explore the tantalising relationship between climatic changes and mortality levels, and at some point prior to 1855, the Fellows acquired a barometer and thermometer for the College Hall and maintained registers of their readings.<sup>46</sup>

There was at that time no meteorological organisation in Scotland, but a number of interested individuals across the country were known to be constructing their own instruments, conducting their own experiments and recording their observations. In the spring of 1855, shortly after the Registration Act came into force, Sir John Stuart Forbes of Pitsligo sought the College's opinion 'on the propriety of establishing [a society for the promotion of] Meteorological Observations in Scotland'. The College appointed a committee to consider this proposal, as well as 'the State of the Meteorological Instruments belonging to the College' and whether any additional apparatus should be obtained.<sup>47</sup> The committee's report, which was endorsed by the College in August 1855, expressed:

'its cordial approval of such a movement, and its readiness to co-operate with its promoters in forwarding the object they have in view. Notwithstanding the comparatively limited advantage which has hitherto accrued to practical Medicine from the results obtained by Meteorological researches, the College is well assured of the importance in a scientific point of view, of continuing and extending such researches: particularly in the way of multiplying the number of accurate observers, using properly constructed and carefully located instruments...and by the skilful collation of observations.'<sup>48</sup>

The committee further reported the opinion of Mr James Bryson, 'philosophical instrument maker', that the

College's barometer and thermometer were still serviceable,<sup>49</sup> and relayed his estimates for the purchase of an additional hygrometer (for measuring humidity), pluviometer (rain gauge), and wind vane. For the hygrometrical apparatus, Mr Bryson recommended using 'the ordinary thermometers with wet and dry bulb[s] set on glass scales, attached to a bracket, and placed outside the Library window immediately below the thermometers', at a cost of £3/10/-. For the rain gauge, he suggested 'a Copper receiver placed on the roof at a distance from chimneys, and connected with a small tube descending into one of the Committee Rooms on the entrance floor, where will be the graduated scale placed along a glass tube, so as to admit of a very small quantity of rain being measured'. This would cost £7/10/-. The wind vane, with connecting rods and dial-plate, was priced highest, at £18 (or £25, if an ornamental gilt weathercock was also desired). The committee considered the latter too expensive, but recommended that the hygrometer and rain gauge should be installed, and the College accordingly authorised them to obtain a wet bulb thermometer and adjusting apparatus.<sup>50</sup>

James Stark was appointed Superintendent of Statistics at the GROS in July 1855, and not long afterwards, he volunteered to act as Secretary to the fledgling Scottish Meteorological Society. That autumn, the GROS published its first quarterly report, and 'it was felt that much of...[the] interest and value [in these reports] would be lost if the influence which the weather exerts on the health of the population were not traced'.<sup>51</sup> This perception almost certainly stemmed from Stark, who also knew that meteorological tables were published in the reports of the General Register Office for England and Wales. However, the Scottish Meteorological Society was not yet in a position to supply the GROS with the necessary climatic data. Although subscriptions had been invited, not enough money had been raised to set the Society properly on foot,<sup>52</sup> and, in Stark's own words, 'it was felt that unless some individual, on his own responsibility, would take the trouble to collect, arrange, and reduce on one uniform plan the observations made in different parts of the country, Scotland might, for an indefinite length of time, be without a series of Meteorological Observations. This trouble I was induced to undertake'.<sup>53</sup> The amateur weather observers around the country now began copying their daily readings onto schedules and transmitting them monthly to Stark, who then corrected and reduced them into tables for the GROS's reports. From 1856, the Society was able to pay Stark a small stipend for his services.<sup>54</sup>

Stark served as Secretary to the Society only for the first three years. By 1858, subscription funds were running low, and the continuation of his stipend could not be guaranteed. Stark's health and pressure of work at the GROS may also have encouraged him to step down.<sup>55</sup> The Society subsequently applied for a government subsidy, which was

refused, but the Treasury instead agreed that the work of compiling meteorological reports for the Registrar General should pass from the Society's Secretary to the Astronomer Royal for Scotland. The raw data for these reports continued to be supplied by the Society's observers, and this was recognised as one of its most important functions: in 1870, the Society asserted that its 'Observations form the basis of official Reports on the Health of the People by the Registrar General, and without these Observations it would be impossible for him to make his Reports complete. This statement will not be questioned by any one conversant with investigations relating to the Public Health, from which the influence of weather cannot be excluded.'<sup>56</sup> Meteorological data still featured prominently in the GROS's reports towards the end of the nineteenth century, and the College continued to support the Society by making periodic donations to its funds.<sup>57</sup>

These examples of the College's influence upon the introduction and production of Scotland's vital statistics in the mid-nineteenth century have highlighted several significant points. Firstly, the College Fellows were prepared to campaign repeatedly and tenaciously to achieve the statutory amendments that they considered necessary, and to exploit every possible opportunity – both public and private – of making their views known. Secondly, an obvious, but nonetheless important point is that despite their individual and collective standing in Edinburgh, the Fellows did not always get their way.

Their arguments for a different type of death schedule in Scotland, for example, may have won the Lord Advocate round in the 1840s, but similar appeals were dismissed or ignored in 1854. The College's views also fuelled a lengthy dispute over Farr's nosology, which divided the English and Scottish Superintendents of Statistics for over two decades.

Where the College succeeded most definitively in influencing the output of the GROS was in convincing Pitt Dundas and Lord Elcho of the need for a medically qualified Superintendent of Statistics to prepare the statistical reports. Had the College not insisted that none but a medical man could adequately tabulate the death statistics, this job would most likely have fallen to the Secretary of the GROS, George Seton, who was a lawyer, or to one of the senior clerks. The GROS operated on a shoestring budget, making it necessary to cut costs wherever possible, and so it is by no means certain that extra money would have been found for Stark's appointment without the College's intervention. Finally, Stark's personal influence is significant. Stark is a key player in many ways – as a Fellow of the College, as Superintendent of Statistics at the GROS, and as Secretary to the Scottish Meteorological Society. We are still attempting to uncover the full extent of his activities, and particularly how his idiosyncratic views shaped the presentation of Scotland's vital statistics.

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- 9 PP 1842 (423) XIX. Fourth annual report of the Registrar General of births, deaths, and marriages in England; 124. This stipulation appears in the regulations for registrars issued by the Registrar General, but not in the original Act.
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- 11 For a detailed discussion of the College's views and its ensuing dispute with William Farr of the General Register Office for England, see *ibid.* 304–15.
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- 19 College Minutes, 26 May 1854.
- 20 College Minutes, 1 Aug 1854.
- 21 1854, 17 & 18 Vict., c.80, An Act to provide for the better registration of births, deaths, and marriages in Scotland, schedule B; *Regulations for the duties of registrars of births, deaths, and marriages, and of Assistant-Registrars*. Edinburgh: Murray and Gibb; 1855; 14.
- 22 Letter from WP Dundas to Major Graham, Registrar General [England], 3 Nov 1854, NAS, GRO1/465, General Register Office letterbook (outletters), 1854; 28.
- 23 College Minutes, 9 May 1854. The 1854 bill, which ultimately became the Registration Act, only specifically provided for a Secretary to be nominated by the Registrar General, but it did permit the Registrar General 'to appoint such [other] Clerks, Officers, and Servants as shall be deemed necessary', with

- Treasury approval. 1854, 17 & 18 Vict., c.80, An Act to provide for the better registration of births, deaths, and marriages in Scotland, sections 3 and 4.
- 24 Letter from WP Alison to Alexander Pringle, 11 Jul 1854, NAS, SRO8/78, Scottish Record Office Records: Letters to Deputy Clerk Register [William Pitt Dundas], 1854, item 42.
  - 25 College Minutes, 1 Aug 1854. The committee's letter appeared in various Edinburgh newspapers in mid-July 1854.
  - 26 Alison requested Alexander Pringle, a mutual friend at General Register House, to relay his comments to Pitt Dundas. Letter from WP Alison to Alexander Pringle, 11 Jul 1854, NAS, SRO8/78, Scottish Record Office Records: Letters to Deputy Clerk Register [William Pitt Dundas], 1854, item 42.
  - 27 Letter from WP Dundas to Lord Elcho, 16 Oct 1854, NAS, GRO1/465, General Register Office letterbook (outletters), 1854; 8–9.
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  - 29 Letter from WP Alison to Alexander Pringle, 11 Jul 1854, NAS, SRO8/78, Scottish Record Office Records: Letters to Deputy Clerk Register [William Pitt Dundas], 1854, item 42.
  - 30 *Ibid.* Bell was a licentiate of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh.
  - 31 Letter from WP Dundas to Major Graham, Registrar General [England], 3 Nov 1854, NAS, GRO1/465, General Register Office letterbook (outletters), 1854; 28.
  - 32 Copy of a letter from James Stark to Thomas Headlam, 12 Mar 1855, NAS, AD56/225, Lord Advocate's Department: Letters etc relating to Border marriage, marriage affinity bill, marriage law commission, marriage with deceased wife's sister and proclamation of banns [1855–1877]. For an example of his publications, see Stark J. Contribution to the vital statistics of Scotland. *Journal of the Statistical Society of London* 1851; **14(1)**:48–87.
  - 33 Pitt Dundas and Adam Black were on opposing sides of the political spectrum, but by this time in Scottish politics, being well connected in Edinburgh society was a more important way of advancing a career than actual political affiliation.
  - 34 *Scotsman*, 18 Mar 1846; 3. Mortality bills for Edinburgh had appeared in the *Scots Magazine* from 1739–1794, but had then ceased.
  - 35 *Scotsman*, 18 Mar 1846; 3.
  - 36 Letter from James Stark to WP Dundas, 12 Jul 1855, NAS, SRO8/79, Scottish Record Office Records: Letters to Deputy Clerk Register [William Pitt Dundas], 1855, item 56. It is noteworthy that Alison never mentioned Stark as a candidate for the Superintendent's post, despite the fact that Stark had been compiling the mortality tables for Edinburgh since 1846. Alison perhaps had personal reasons for preferring Bell.
  - 37 Copy of a letter from the College Clerk, Christopher Douglas, to James Stark, with his answer, 10 Dec 1857, College Archives, Box 12: General correspondence, 1704–1885.
  - 38 NAS, AD56/306, Lord Advocate's Department: Miscellaneous papers, series 1. See, especially, letter from W Pitt Dundas to the Lord Advocate, 9 Mar 1874; copy of a letter from W Pitt Dundas to the Secretary to the Treasury, 7 Mar 1874; copy of a letter from W Pitt Dundas to James Stark, 21 May 1874, and letter from W Pitt Dundas to the Lord Advocate, 22 May 1874. For Robertson's appointment, see letter from W Pitt Dundas to the Lord Advocate, 25 May 1874.
  - 39 PP 1854 [163] VI, A bill [as amended in committee and on re-commitment] to provide for the better registration of births, deaths, and marriages in Scotland, clause G.
  - 40 Copy of a letter from the College Secretary, Dr Wood, to Lord Elcho, 14 Jul 1854, College Minutes, 1 Aug 1854.
  - 41 *Ibid.*
  - 42 Elcho's response suggests that he had failed to grasp the subtlety of the College's reasoning. Copy of a letter from Lord Elcho to the College Secretary, 18 Jul 1854, College Minutes, 1 Aug 1854.
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  - 44 1855, 23 & 24 Vict., c.85, An Act to amend two Acts of the seventeenth and eighteenth years, and of the eighteenth year, of Her Present Majesty, relating to the registration of births, deaths, and marriages in Scotland, section 14.
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  - 56 Statement of claim of the Scottish Meteorological Society for government support, enclosed with a letter from David Milne Home to the Lord Advocate [Young], 14 Jul 1870, NAS, AD56/327, Scottish Meteorological Society [1869, 1870], item 10; Watt A. The early days of the Society. *J Scottish Meteorological Society* 1911; **15**:304–12, 309.
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