

John Abercrombie (1780–1844).

Born in Aberdeen in 1780, son of the Rev. George Abercrombie, John Abercrombie was educated at Aberdeen Grammar School and then Marischal College where he graduated MA at the age of 15. Thereafter he studied medicine in Edinburgh, graduating MD in 1803. After postgraduate study at St George's Hospital, London, he returned to Edinburgh and was admitted a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons. He started in practice at 8 Nicolson Street, next to the Edinburgh Riding School which in 1832 was to become the site of the Playfair Building of the present Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh. His practice was successful and in 1805 he was appointed Surgeon to the Royal Public Dispensary in Richmond Street, which gave free medical care to the sick poor and provided experience in general practice for the many apprentices whom he attracted. In 1815 the New Town Dispensary was opened in Thistle Street and Abercrombie was appointed senior surgeon. He became a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians in 1824.



FIGURE 1 John Abercrombie by Benjamin Walsh, 1819. Courtesy of the RCSEd.

Abercrombie went on to become the leading physician of his day in Edinburgh. His meticulous case records were to form the basis for two important books published in 1828, both of which received wide acclaim, were translated into French and German, and ran to several editions, including *American Pathological and Practical Researches on Diseases of the Brain and Spinal Cord* was followed by *Diseases of the Stomach, Intestine, Liver and Other Viscera of the Abdomen*. In this latter book he gave the first description of the clinical features of duodenal ulcer and most importantly of perforated duodenal ulcer. In the days before endoscopy, radiology or even abdominal surgery, it was difficult for physicians to correlate clinical features with pathology. Abercrombie's interest in the post-mortem made such correlations possible. He thus gave the first ever description of the clinical features of perforated duodenal ulcer confirmed by the post-mortem. The specimen showing the perforated ulcer was placed in Surgeons' Hall Museum where it is on display to this day.

His consultation practice brought patients from all parts of the British Isles and from abroad. He became medical adviser to and subsequently a close friend of Sir Walter

Scott. His abilities were recognised by his appointment by King George IV as physician in ordinary to the King in Scotland, the first such appointment. The University of Oxford conferred on him the award of the honorary degree of MD. The prestige of this honour can be judged by the fact that the only other recipient in the previous 50 years was Dr Edward Jenner of vaccination fame.

His publications increasingly dealt with philosophical and religious topics rather than medicine or pathology. *The Intellectual Powers and the Investigation of Truth* (1830) went into numerous editions and was used as a textbook at Calcutta University. His essays on

subjects of everyday usefulness were collected into a volume titled *Elements of Sacred Truth*. In later life he devoted himself to the study of religion and of the Bible. Generous throughout his life, his philanthropy continued with support for the Edinburgh Association for Sending Medical Aid to Foreign Countries, which later developed into the Edinburgh Medical Missionary Society.

His *alma mater* honoured him by electing him Lord Rector of Marischal College, Aberdeen. He was elected a member of The Royal Academy of Medicine of France and Vice President of The Royal Society of Edinburgh.

After his death in 1844 his family presented his library of over 900 books to the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, while his extensive papers were donated to the library of The Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh.

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Further reading

- 1 Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2004.
- 2 MacLagan D. Sketch of the life and character of Dr Abercrombie. *Edinburgh Medical and Surgical Journal* 1854; 81:429–57.
- 3 Pitman J. The John Abercrombie collection. *Proc R C Physicians Edinb* 1991; 21:349–54.
- 4 Baxter PA. "A beloved physician" John Abercrombie MD (EDIN) FRCSE, FRCPE, MD (Oxon) 1780–1844. *Scott Med J* 1992; 37:119–21.
- 5 Watson JR. John Abercrombie and the diagnosis of duodenal ulcer. *Annals Med Hist* 1942; 4:468–72.