

# **DERMATOLOGY IN ABERDEEN: A HISTORY**

***Dr Gordon Fraser, Honorary Consultant Dermatologist***

## **The early years**

Scottish medicine during the latter half of the 19th Century was slow to accept dermatology as a separate specialty. However in 1861 Thomas McCall Anderson and Andrew Buchanan, both physicians, had with others set up the Dispensary for Skin Diseases at 63 John Street in the centre of Glasgow. In Edinburgh, Allan Jamieson, a general practitioner, was able in 1884, through the good offices of a hospital manager whose leg eczema he had successfully treated, to start an out-patient clinic for skin diseases on a Saturday morning in a "small dark room" in the Royal Infirmary. No such separation took place at a clinical level in Aberdeen, but the need to provide medical students with information on the emerging specialty was recognized, and a teaching programme was provided by Dr Robert John Garden who was designated in the Medical Directory of 1895, after listing his surgical appointments, as Lecturer on Diseases of the Skin, University of Aberdeen.

## **Robert Garden – Aberdeen's first dermatologist**

Robert Garden graduated in medicine at Aberdeen with highest honours in 1872 and followed this with a 2 year period of postgraduate study at several prominent medical centres on the Continent, including Vienna where skin diseases were taught by Ferdinand von Hebra, described by Sir Alexander Ogston (a surgical colleague of Garden in Aberdeen, and the man who first described the staphylococcus and recognised its significance in sepsis) as the most inspiring of the all the Viennese teachers.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Hebra is regarded as by far the most important dermatologist of the 19th Century. He was the first to describe a number of skin diseases, including erythema multiforme, and Garden adopted his classification of skin diseases, based on pathological processes, rather than the anatomical classification of Willan.

Garden returned to Aberdeen in 1874 and was appointed physician to the General Dispensary where free medical treatment and advice was provided for all who required it. Specialty clinics were held there for diseases of the ear, nose and throat, dental diseases, diseases of women and for vaccination, but there is no record of a separate clinic for skin diseases.<sup>2</sup> In 1880 Garden stood down from the Dispensary on his appointment as a full surgeon to the Infirmary. As a surgeon he was noted for the incredible swiftness and deftness of his technique and, while he was somewhat abrupt in manner, his wide knowledge and clarity of thought, together with his keen sense of humour and kindness, made him a great favourite with the students. In administrative matters too, his wise counsel, in relation to both the Infirmary and the Sick Children's Hospital, was widely acknowledged. However his judgment faltered in one important area. He could not accept Lister's views on antiseptic surgery - views readily and quickly adopted by Ogston - and led the opposition to it in Aberdeen by "frequent attacks in lecture room and theatre".<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly he was described by Ogston's biographers as a "very able but erratic man".<sup>1</sup>

There is little specific information on Garden's practice as a dermatologist, but in 1903 a memorial article written in the Aberdeen Daily Journal (predecessor to The Press and Journal) on his death states that he delivered a series of lectures to the students every summer in which "his own extensive experience and deep knowledge enabled him to invest his lectures with a vividness and freshness which impressed his hearers"

The reliability of this tribute is supported by Garden's foreword to his textbook "Lectures on Diseases on the Skin" published in 1889.<sup>4</sup> He wrote that the textbook was to allow him to devote most of his time "to the demonstration of cases, supplemented by the exhibition of casts and diagrams". As a further aid to the student, blank pages were interleaved in the text to allow for notes from the work of the class or from further reading. The Medico-Chirurgical Society of Aberdeen has one of these books in its library. It had been owned by a student, George Stephen, whose notes tell us much about Robert Garden the dermatologist.

In the early pages of the book, George Stephen made copious notes on the composition and use of soap. Apparently Erasmus Wilson, the London surgeon and dermatologist, thought that a clean skin was necessary for good health, whereas another unnamed writer maintained that cleanliness was not important as "millions of men never wash themselves". Garden clearly did not subscribe to the latter view and used different soap formulae as a means of topical treatment. Stephen records a prescription for superfatted marble soap for acne, containing ground marble as a mechanical exfoliant, and among a number of other interesting formulae is a prescription for quinine soap for the treatment of ringworm. Other informative and exotic comments are also written on the blank interleaves. The occurrence of acne in actors and actresses from the use of cosmetics is noted in a list of occupational hazards; and, in the section on parasites, it is recorded that the Duke of Portland suffered from incurable lice! More striking still is the careful transcription by Stephen of no less than 13 synonyms, with appended authors, for molluscum contagiosum - while paradoxically in a note on the disease itself he designates it as a "very rare disease".

These notes suggest that Garden's lectures were vivid and fresh and, while most of the material reflected the standard teaching of the age of Hebra, he was not averse to setting out his own views. Notably he maintained that eczema was a prime cause of leg ulcers rather than varicose veins, even although this view was rejected by his peers locally, including Ogston.

In a specialty where even today much is uncertain, healthy debate is inevitable and essential, and at a time when the inauguration of a new specialty was not widely welcomed, Robert Garden stands alongside McCall Anderson and Jamieson in helping to promote the climate in which progress towards a proper recognition of the specialty could be made.

## **The formation of a department**

### **John Christie**

In Aberdeen the mantle of Robert Garden fell on Dr John Farquhar Christie. After graduating in medicine in 1895, Christie worked as a house surgeon with Garden, and

it was from him that he gained his interest in dermatology. Like Garden, he studied for a period on the Continent, mainly on the subject of skin disease, before returning to general practice in Aberdeen. His ability was quickly recognised, however, and in 1898 he was appointed Registrar of the Infirmary and in 1903 put in charge of skin diseases - first as Assistant Physician and then in 1910 as Full Physician. Meanwhile, in 1901, the University had appointed him as Lecturer on Diseases of the Skin, and later added Venereal Diseases, a specialty for which he became Chief Medical Officer for the Aberdeen area in 1920.

On the national scene he was one of the original members of the North British Dermatological Society. On the death of Christie in 1931, Sir Norman Walker of Edinburgh, the founder of the North British Dermatological Society, wrote in the British Journal of Dermatology and Syphilis that he did not think that Christie had ever missed a meeting, and added that his "pawky comments and searching questions were much appreciated by his colleagues". Christie was a genuinely nice man, popular with colleagues and students alike. He was also popular with the patients, and was reputed to have had the best private practice in Aberdeen!

### **Thomas Anderson**

In 1929 Christie was joined by Dr Thomas Anderson, who had graduated in Aberdeen in 1926 as the most distinguished student of his year. After graduation he had studied on the Continent with Levaditi and Gougerot in Paris. Later, on Christie's death in 1931, Anderson was appointed Medical Officer in charge of the Department for Diseases of the Skin and Physician for Diseases of the Skin at the Children's Hospital. He was also Assistant Medical Officer in the VD Department. By 1939, the caseload of skin diseases had increased significantly and Colonel Alexander Dawson, a retired Army Medical Officer, was appointed Second Honorary Medical Officer in the department.

Both Medical Officers were called up at the outbreak of the Second World War and the service in the war years was provided initially by Dr Frank Milne, a retired physician and dermatologist from Dundee, until he had to give up on account of illness early in 1941. After that, from 1941 until the end of 1944, the service was provided by Dr Louis Schwartz, a wartime refugee from Paris, and then for several

months in 1945 by Dr Eric Lipman Cohen, a dermatologist working at the large Emergency Medical Service Hospital at Raigmore on the outskirts of Inverness. Dr Lipman Cohen spent 2 days a week in Aberdeen carrying out university and hospital work.

## **The National Health Service**

Following demobilization, and a short resumption of the pre-war service, the National Health Service was formed and Tom Anderson was appointed Consultant in Administrative Charge of the Skin Department. In addition, the Scottish Hospitals Survey, written for the Department of Health for Scotland in 1946 by Professor Robert Aitken of the Department of Medicine in the University of Aberdeen, had recommended that, on the establishment of the National Health Service, dermatology in the Northern region should be provided by "monthly or fortnightly dermatological clinics under the charge of a visiting dermatologist from Aberdeen". Dr Anderson agreed to provide a clinic in the Royal Northern Infirmary, Inverness, on the last Saturday of each month at noon, and this service began on the 24<sup>th</sup> of April, 1948. It continued until Dr Norman Mackinnon was appointed Consultant Dermatologist to the Northern Region Hospital Board in 1956.

### **Alan Lyell**

Meanwhile, in Aberdeen, a second consultant post was created in 1954 and Dr Alan Lyell, training at the time in Edinburgh, was appointed to it. This allowed an expansion of clinics peripheral to Aberdeen, so that clinics at Huntly and Fraserburgh were added to the bimonthly clinics held at Elgin, Peterhead, Banff and Buckie. Clinics in Orkney and Shetland were held on an occasional basis. It was during Dr Lyell's time in Aberdeen that he described toxic epidermal necrolysis, the disease that now bears his name.<sup>5</sup>

But Alan Lyell's time in Aberdeen was not a happy one. He had obtained the consultant appointment against the local candidate, the senior registrar in the department, who was favoured by Dr Anderson. He felt unwelcome and was never able to establish the kind of working relationship with Dr Anderson necessary for the departmental progress he wished to see.

### **Further developments**

Alan Lyell left Aberdeen in 1962 to take over the Skin Department in the Glasgow Royal Infirmary and was succeeded by Dr Robert Main, who had trained in Dundee and Boston and worked for 2 years in Canada. In 1967, Dr Peter Ashurst from Manchester was appointed to a third consultant post, and the following year, on the retirement of Tom Anderson, Dr Leslie Stankler, a graduate of Leeds who had trained in Glasgow, was appointed.

Dr Anderson had seen many changes in the service during his long career. In 1936 a new Royal Infirmary opened on the Foresterhill site and the in-patient care of adults with skin disease was transferred to it from the old Infirmary, although the out-patient department remained at Woolmanhill. After the inauguration of the National Health Service in 1948, Dr Anderson worked for a number of years as a single-handed consultant responsible for the dermatology service for the whole area of the north of Scotland - from Aberdeen and Inverness to the Shetland Isles. A man of quiet disposition, but with deep moral convictions, he would have regarded this Herculean commitment as no more than what was expected of him. He did, however, receive some support from registrar appointments, and in 1952 Dr John McConnachie, a general practitioner in Lossiemouth, was appointed to a part-time Senior Hospital Medical Officer post to provide 4 sessions weekly, divided between Aberdeen and the periphery; and in 1955 Dr John Hooker, a GP in Orkney, was employed to treat skin diseases on these islands. These appointments and those of consultants allowed Dr Anderson to leave behind a strong and forward-looking department when he retired in 1968. Indeed, his long and distinguished service was recognised by the British Association of Dermatologists when he was elected President and he hosted the Annual General Meeting of the Association in Aberdeen in the summer of 1968.

### **A time of change**

On the retiral of Dr Anderson, Bob Main took over the administrative charge of the department. He sought enthusiastically to develop the teaching, training and research base, which was increasingly being demanded of clinical departments in

university centres. These aims were greatly facilitated when, in 1972, the department obtained an 18 bedded ward (later reduced to 9 beds) of its own in the Infirmary with separate dedicated nursing staff. Previously beds for the management of patients with skin disease had been located only in shared wards. As to personnel changes, when Dr Ashurst resigned on health grounds in 1968, he was replaced by Dr Gordon Fraser who had qualified and trained in Glasgow. Dr Fraser left in 1980 to take charge of the department in Inverness and was replaced by Dr Marion White, a local graduate who had been trained in Aberdeen and London.

Dr Main retired in 1988. He had seen the department develop as an academic unit, although the failure of the University to create a substantive post in dermatology had disappointed him. At a national level he had used his position as Secretary of the North British Dermatological Society from 1965-68 to promote the movement for change which culminated in 1970 in the formation of the Scottish Dermatological Society. In 1979 he was elected President of the Society.

Dr Main was succeeded by Dr Tony Ormerod who had trained in Aberdeen and London and who went on to follow a research orientated career. In 2005 he was appointed by the University to the substantive post of Reader in Dermatology.

Dr Leslie Stankler retired in 1993 and was replaced by Dr John Hewitt who had trained in Aberdeen and London. Dr Stankler had brought an active and enquiring mind to the department and did much to promote the climate of investigation and research necessary for an academic department.

### **A new chapter**

But to achieve further progress, particularly in view of the marked increase in the demand on the service, additional personnel were required and so, in 2004, Dr Pick Woo, a specialist registrar in the department, was appointed as a fourth consultant. The following year Dr Anne MacLeod, who had previously worked in Inverness, joined the department in a new post of Associate Specialist. The department was further strengthened by the appointment of Dr Simone Laube, from a training post in Birmingham, to the vacancy left by Dr Ormerod on his transfer to the University.

Additional support was also forthcoming from the provision of 3 new nurse practitioner posts, and from the 16 sessions a month allocated for general practitioners with a special interest in dermatology. These latter sessions were in addition to the support provided by Dr Steve Wedderburn, a Hospital Practitioner and general practitioner in Aberdeen who, over a period of 20 years, has had sessional commitments both in the department and in the community.

These developments mark the beginning of a new chapter in the history of dermatology in Aberdeen and, by a remarkable coincidence, in 2005 it was possible to transfer the out-patient care of skin diseases from Woolmanhill in the city centre to Burnside House, a self-contained and dedicated facility on the Foresterhill site - a move anticipated ever since in-patient care had been transferred from Woolmanhill to the new Infirmary nearly 70 years before.

### **Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to Fiona R Watson, archivist, Grampian Health Board and Aberdeen University Library for help with the preparation of this paper. I also acknowledge the help of many of those mentioned in the paper.

### **References**

1. Ogston WH, Cowan HH, Smith HE. Alexander Ogston KCVO, Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press; 1943.
2. Porter IA. Personal communication. 1990.
3. Robert John Garden Obituary notice. *BMJ* 1903; 2: 1184.
4. Garden RJ. *Synopsis of Lectures on Diseases of the Skin*. Aberdeen: Bon-Accord Press; 1889.
5. Lyell A. Toxic epidermal necrolysis: an eruption resembling scalding of the skin. *Br J Dermatol* 1956; 68:355.