

Dr Colin Chisholm (1754/5–1825)

Colin Chisholm was born in Inverness in 1754/5 and died aged 70 on 2 February 1825 at Old Burlington Street, London.¹ He was the oldest son of the surgeon and merchant William Chisholm, twice provost of Inverness, and his first wife, Katherine Mackintosh. Colin Chisholm was educated in Inverness and from 1770 at King's College, Aberdeen, from where he graduated with an arts degree. In 1772/3 he began studies in medicine and surgery at Edinburgh University and in November 1775 became surgeon to the 2nd Battalion of the 71st Regiment of Foot (Fraser's Highlanders), raised in that year by Simon Fraser of Lovat for service in the American War.² The regiment sailed from Greenock in April 1776 and Chisholm remained with it until shortly before the peace of 1783, when he retired on half-pay and returned to Inverness. It is possible that he was in Inverness in late December 1782 for the marriage of his sister Kitty (Katherine) to Bailie John Mackintosh of Aberarder, who was to be twice provost of the burgh. Colin wrote eight letters to Mackintosh over the next twenty-one years, letters which explain how he came to be a medical practitioner in Grenada and Demerara.³

Colin's mother had died in 1774 and the following year his father remarried, to Katherine Baillie – sister of the slave-traders Alexander and James Baillie. This relationship was important and arriving in London from Inverness in May 1783, he wrote to John Mackintosh:

My father's and Mrs Chisholm's letters to the Baillies have warmly interested them in my Business. I am infinitely indebted to them, for even to their nearest relation they could scarcely be more attentive. With stronger recommendations and fairer prospects than any medical gentleman ever had going to that Country, I go to settle in Grenada in the course of two or three weeks.

On his arrival he was able to confirm that 'Mr Baillie's recommendations have . . . favoured the

¹ London Metropolitan Archives, Saint Luke, Chelsea, Register of burials, P74/LUK, Item 259.

² David Hosack, 'Memoir of the Life and Writings of the late Colin Chisholm M.D., F.R.S. & formerly Inspector General of Ordnance Hospitals in the West Indies' in *The American Journal of Medical Literature* August 1829. 'Biographical Sketch of the late Dr Chisholm' in *The Edinburgh Medical and Surgical Journal* (1825), 428. No record of graduation in List of the Graduates in Medicine in the University of Edinburgh (Edinburgh, 1867).

³ NRS GD128/69/10, Personal letters, Dr. Colin Chisholm to John MacIntosh, 1783–1795.

Interest of his friends on this Island in my favour'. By January 1784 he had entered into a partnership with 'the surgeon of the Hospital of the Windward Islands' and he was able, with some satisfaction, to tell his brother-in-law that their mutual friends were 'the most powerfull on the Island'. Chisholm in turn offered his help, when he could, to friends in Grenada. In 1786 he sent a letter with Thomas Campbell who was 'connected to Mr Alex & James Baillie [of Dochfour] both in business and friendship', the business being the partnership Campbell Baillie & Co. Campbell was on a visit to Glasgow but was also accompanying Katherine Gordon, the wife of the Baillies' cousin James Baillie (1744–1828) – usually referred to as James Baillie of Bedford Square – to her father's estate at Hallhead (Aberdeen-shire). Campbell then intended to visit Alexander Baillie at Dochfour and Chisholm asked Mackintosh to 'shew him every possible attention' while he was in Inverness. Chisholm made similar requests in relation to Normand Macleod, a surgeon with the Royal Artillery, returning home because of a 'consumptive complaint'; and to Alexander McSween, a plantation owner, on a visit to his home in Skye.

In 1786 Chisholm's first essay appeared in the *Edinburgh Medical and Surgical Journal*, a publication to which he contributed a further sixteen papers over the next thirty years. He acquired property in Grenada and, at his death, had two shares in the Baillies' Hermitage plantation. And he also served as a lieutenant in the Grenada militia.⁴ In the summer of 1794 Chisholm returned to Britain and in Inverness, on 23 December 1794, married Eliza Cooper, the daughter of John Cooper of St Kitts.⁵ While in Britain he also published his first book, an important study of the origins of yellow fever. In March of that year, on the strength of that publication and his experience in treating yellow fever, John Mackintosh, now provost of Inverness, wrote to Sir Hector Munro of Novar – who was the member of parliament for the Inverness burghs – urging that Chisholm be appointed 'physician to the forces' in the West Indies.⁶ Mackintosh also pointed out that Chisholm owned a small property in Demerara and it was likely that a British expeditionary force was to be sent to take this, and other colonies, from the Dutch.

Chisholm had been about to leave for the West Indies but he was, as it turned out, fortunate to be absent from Grenada. In the same month, March 1795, the Fédon Revolution began. Chisholm did not leave for the Caribbean until November, when he sailed with the naval fleet from

⁴ *An almanac, calculated for the island of Grenada and the Grenadines, for the year of Our Lord M,DCC,LXXXVII* (Grenada, 1787).

⁵ *The Scots Magazine* (1794). Old Parish Registers Marriages 098/ 80 191 Inverness.

⁶ *An Essay on the Malignant Pestilential Fever introduced into the West India Islands from Boulam, on the coast of Guinea, as it appeared in 1793 and 1794* (London, 1795: second edition, much enlarged, 2 vols. London, 1801).

Portsmouth, having been appointed surgeon-general to the Ordnance in the expedition to recapture Grenada and seize enemy colonies. This not only took him back to Grenada but also to the Dutch Guianas (Berbice, Demerara and Essequibo). In 1797 he was appointed inspector-general of Ordnance hospitals in the Windward Islands but having completed one tour of inspection he retired on a generous pension.

Chisholm settled in Demerara where according to some accounts he owned the cotton plantation, *Industry* on the east bank of the Demerara river.⁷ His half-brother Alexander had died at the nearby plantation *Friendship* in 1799.⁸ While in Demerara he carried out a series of experiments to establish whether or not core human body temperature was the same in all climates and places – concluding that it was ‘universally the same’. Using a thermometer made in London, graduated on the Fahrenheit scale, he tested six groups of men, allowing him to compare the results by ‘race’ (black or white), time in the colony (recently arrived or resident more than four years), and place of birth (Europe, the Gold Coast, or Demerara).⁹ Chisholm’s experiment was in the spirit of ‘tropical medicine’, conceived as part of the colonial enterprise which would allow whites to work in the tropics and would preserve the health – and maintain the labour – of enslaved peoples. In 1793 he was awarded a medical degree by Kings College, Aberdeen. This was his first formal qualification in medicine.

Chisholm returned from Demerara about 1803 and lived at Bitton, near Bristol, for almost four years before moving to Clifton.¹⁰ His father died in Inverness in 1807 and from this time Colin had little contact with his step-mother, Katharine Baillie. In her will she referred to ‘his total neglect of me since his father’s death’ and presumed that she had offended him in some way.¹¹

In his writings Chisholm had argued that a ‘pestilential fever’ which appeared in Grenada in 1793 was contagious, originated in Africa, and subsequently spread to other islands in the West Indies. In an expanded second edition of his book, published in 1801, Chisholm argued that a ‘yellow fever’ which had appeared in Philadelphia in the autumn of 1793 was the same, contagious disease. Chisholm adhered to the mistaken view that fever was spread by a ‘miasma’ and wrongly defended the curative powers of mercury, but his attempts ‘to merge contemporary scientific data

⁷ S G Checkland, *The Gladstones: A Family Biography 1764-1851* (Cambridge, 1971), 45. According to David F Clyde, *Health in Grenada* (1985), 41 Chisholm bought a cotton plantation on his visit to Demerara in 1790.

⁸ *Aberdeen Journal*, 25 Nov 1799.

⁹ Londa Schiebender, *Secret Cures of Slaves* (Stanford, 2017), 35–42.

¹⁰ Colin Chisholm, essay in *Edinburgh Medical and Surgical Journal*, October 1810.

¹¹ NRS SC29/44/1.

into medical thinking' nevertheless 'put him on the path to progress'.¹² His views were challenged after 1807 in what became an acrimonious debate and, in 1809, Chisholm published a rebuttal of the 'pernicious doctrines' of his critics in *A Letter to John Haygarth*.

In 1808 he was elected a fellow of the Royal Society (London), having been proposed as 'a gentleman well read in various branches of Natural History and Natural Philosophy'. He presented two papers to the Society, 'On Pygmies' in 1809 and 'On Nervous Phenomena' in 1812.¹³ Chisholm continued to divide his time between writing and clinical practice, serving as senior physician to the Clifton Dispensary for four years.

In 1819 Chisholm and his family moved to Switzerland 'for the better education of his children'.¹⁴ In Geneva, Chisholm wrote his last book *A Manual of the Climate and Diseases of the Tropical Countries*, published in London in 1822, aimed at 'the young tropical practitioner on his first resorting to those countries' and dedicated to Prince Frederick, commander in chief of the British army. By this time Chisholm was one of the oldest fellows of the Royal Society and a member of learned societies in Edinburgh, Philadelphia, New York, and Geneva. Chisholm made a tour of Switzerland and Italy and in May 1824 arrived back in England, where he died the next year.

¹² Richard Sheridan, *Doctors and Slaves a medical and demographic history of slavery in the British West Indies, 1680–1834* (Cambridge, 1985 & online 2010).

¹³ The Royal Society EC/1808/07, AP/7/6 & AP/8/6.

¹⁴ Hosack, 'Memoir'.