

James Matthews Duncan

From willing human guinea pig experimenting with new drugs to winning praise from a queen – meet the modest Barts physician James Matthews Duncan, the man who quietly revolutionised obstetrics and gynaecology.

Edinburgh, late one night in November 1847 – a junior assistant obstetrician called James Matthews Duncan is helping his professor, James Simpson, experiment with various anaesthetic substances. Several have already been inhaled, without much effect. Then tumblers are filled from a small bottle of chloroform.

“Immediately an unwonted hilarity seized the party; they became bright-eyed, very happy and very loquacious – expatiating on the delicious aroma of the new fluid. The conversation was of unusual intelligence, and quite charmed the listeners... but suddenly there was talk of sounds being heard like those of a cotton mill, louder and louder...”

Chloroform high

Experiencing a chloroform high may be an unusual claim to fame for a young 19th century doctor, but James Matthews Duncan was already showing typical dedication to his chosen field of midwifery and women’s diseases. His part in the experiment would lead this

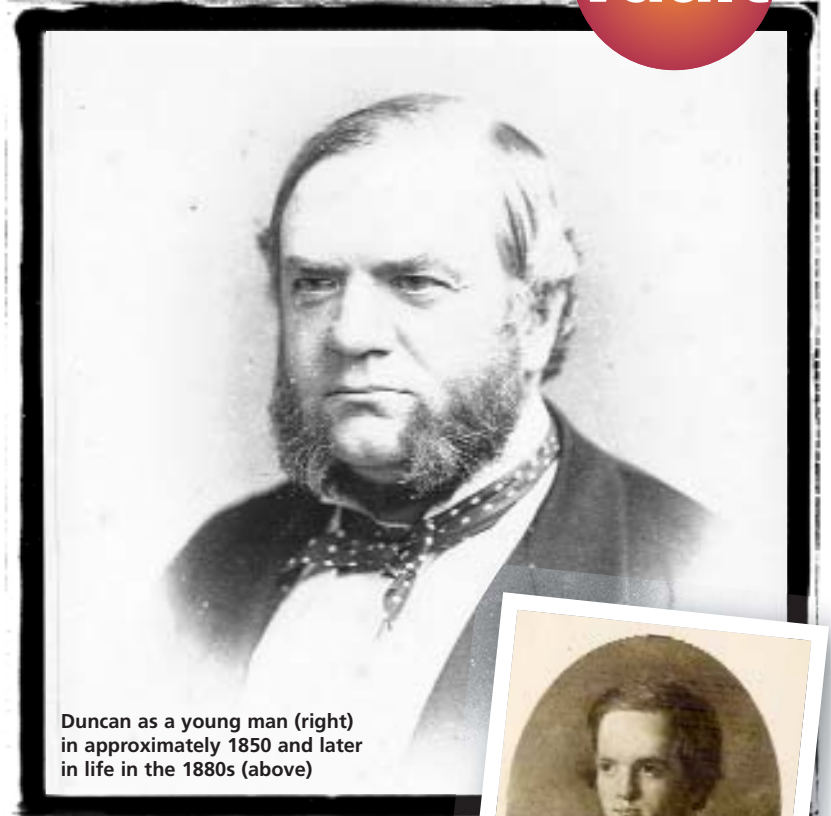
distinguished professor to pioneer the use of chloroform as an anaesthetic in childbirth. Most famously Queen Victoria would use it during labour.

Born in Aberdeen in 1826 – the fifth of 11 children – Duncan was a star pupil at the local grammar school, before studying medicine, and becoming Simpson’s pupil and assistant in Edinburgh. Before turning 21, he had gained two gold medals and the post of Resident Obstetrician at the Edinburgh Maternity Hospital.

High achiever

Described by contemporaries as a modest, sincere and plain-spoken man, Duncan was clearly a high achiever. He obtained fellowship of the Royal College of Physicians and, in 1861, he was appointed Physician for Diseases of Women at the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary, where his teaching skills earned him a large and lucrative practice – probably a necessity for a married man who would have 13 children. He also published a number of works, including *Fecundity, Fertility and Sterility* (1866).

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Duncan as a young man (right) in approximately 1850 and later in life in the 1880s (above)

Then, in 1877, Barts Medical Council, eager to reorganise clinical teaching in obstetrics and gynaecology, invited Duncan to journey south and become lecturer on Midwifery and the Diseases of Women and Children. As ‘Physician Accoucheur’ he saw inpatients with uterine diseases on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays at 2pm.

He is also universally acknowledged as having remodelled midwifery teaching. Instead of a summer course of thrice-weekly lectures, lectures were now six days a week and – according to a contemporary – contained “as much material, packed closely, and made so clear in exposition that it was only when we began to write out our notes at night that we realised how far we had been led...”

Duncan was renowned for never being a minute late or missing a lecture. A stout man, with side whiskers, a twinkle of humour in his eye and a pleasant Scottish accent, he usually wore a black skull cap and graduate’s gown. His forceps (now in Barts Museum, along with his pillbox) were carried in a red silk handkerchief, possibly to avoid alarming his patients and to hold the ebony handles together when in use.

Duncan strove to put obstetrics on a sound scientific basis, and to elevate it from ‘man-midwifery’ to a position as honourable as other medical or

surgical disciplines. In 1881 he became president of the Obstetrical Society, while his *Clinical Lectures in Diseases of Women* (1879-89) became a standard textbook.

Barts students won the coveted gold medal in midwifery eight times between 1880 and 1890 (as opposed to three triumphs between 1840 and 1876) and large numbers of students made the honours list.

Royal patients

Strong, capable and kind, liberal with his time, advice and money, Duncan was consulted by all classes of society – including the royal family. Patients regarded him as a friend as well as physician.

But, in 1890, his health failed and he stopped lecturing, dying suddenly that year of heart trouble in Belgium. In a telegram to his widow, it was Queen Victoria who summed up Duncan’s achievements at Barts and beyond. She said simply: “The country and Europe have lost one of their most distinguished men, and one who will be sorely missed.” Praise indeed.