

Chalmers J, Chalmers I, Tröhler U (2017). Helping physicians to keep abreast of the medical literature: Andrew Duncan and *Medical and Philosophical Commentaries*, 1773-1795.

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Andrew Duncan began his publishing career in 1772, with observations on the use of mercury for treating venereal disease. Thereafter he produced a substantial published output - on therapeutics, *materia medica*, pathology, reports of cases seen at the Edinburgh Public Dispensary, and biographical commentaries on his colleagues. However, Duncan's most successful publishing venture was his *Medical and Philosophical Commentaries* (hereafter, the *Commentaries*). In the *Commentaries*, Duncan endeavoured to meet needs which remain inadequately met even today: namely, how can doctors be helped to cope with cascades of clinical literature (Chalmers and Tröhler 2000).

There had been some attempts in the 17th century to respond to the needs of busy people for relevant research information. *Weekly Memorials* (1682) and *Medicina Curiosa* (1684) contained abstracts of articles and books published elsewhere. The contents of the former were mostly non-medical, however, and the latter ceased publication after only two issues (Colman 1999, pp 324-26). In 1733 a publication entitled *Medical Essays and Observations* was launched by 'a Society in Edinburgh' which had been instituted in 1731 for the improvement of medical knowledge. The secretary of the society was Alexander Monro *primus*, the first Professor of Anatomy at the University of Edinburgh, and he was almost certainly the author of the preface. As explained in the preface, this initiative reflected a concern that, because the preparation and publication of a book was a major undertaking, important observations were not being reported because doctors were not prepared to take on the work of communicating them in book format (*Medical Essays and Observations* 1773, Introduction). In addition, there was a felt need for a publication specifically for medical matters, and one which considered the applicability of observations made in other parts of the world to the climatic and other circumstances of Scotland.

Each issue of the new periodical was to contain registers of climatic measurements in Edinburgh and accounts of the diseases which had been epidemic and 'most universal' there; observations and essays on medical subjects; figures illustrating instruments, pathological specimens, etc.; and lists of medical books, published or in press. Each volume also included accounts of 'the most remarkable Improvements and Discoveries in Physick' which had been made since the previous issue. This element comes nearest to the purposes of Andrew Duncan's *Medical and*

Philosophical Commentaries, but it only used between one and ten per cent of the pages in each volume of *Medical Essays and Observations*, which was principally a vehicle for clinical and pathological case reports.

Medical Essays and Observations was published in five volumes, until 1744, after which the disruption caused by the Jacobite rebellion meant that no further volumes were published. In 1754, *Essays and Observations Physical and Literary* was launched, inspired by the example of *Medical Essays and Observations*, again by ‘a Society in Edinburgh’. It appeared in three volumes (the last published in 1771), and published papers that had been ‘read before the Society’. In addition to medicine, *Essays and Observations Physical and Literary* covered topics as various as astronomy, botany, earthquakes and the benefits of shallow ploughing, but it had no section specifically designed to comment on advances or recently published books.

Although *Medical Essays and Observations* must have had some influence on Andrew Duncan’s decision to launch *Medical and Philosophical Commentaries*, the principal model for his plan for the new publication seems likely to have been *Commentarii de rebus in scientia naturali et medicina gestis* - a periodical containing abstracts of scientific and medical books published in Leipzig, Germany, which appeared between 1752 and 1798 ([Ludwig 1752](#); Tröhler 2000).

Duncan’s *Commentaries* was the first English-language journal of abstracts of books relevant to busy clinicians. Between 1773 and 1780, over a 1000 copies of each quarterly issue came out in three editions simultaneously in Edinburgh, London and Dublin (Zachs 1998). This large circulation suggests that its readership included all types of 18th century practitioners - university trained physicians, barber-surgeons, apothecaries and the new type of surgeons with Scottish or continental MD degrees. It became sufficiently well regarded to justify translation into languages other than English (preface, vol. 6, 1779, pp 5-6). In 1780, it was renamed *Medical Commentaries* (the new title reflecting its clinical contents), and went on to be published annually until 1795.

Finding a publisher for the *Commentaries*

Andrew Duncan had two principal publishers – John Murray in London and Charles Elliot in Edinburgh (their publications for him are listed in the Appendix). The archive of the publishing firm of Murray, recently acquired by the National Library of Scotland, contains many references to the relationship between Duncan and Murray and Elliott. These give an interesting insight into a cut-throat and competitive industry, and also reveal an unflattering aspect of Duncan’s character.

John Murray (1737-1793), the founder of the eminent publishing house, was born in Edinburgh and attended the High School and University there. After trying his hand at a variety of jobs, including serving as an officer in the Royal Marines, Murray bought the bookselling and publishing house of William Sandby in Fleet Street, London, in 1768. Without any experience or training in publishing, he proved to be a shrewd business man and rapidly established himself as one of the leading London publishers with a special interest in medical works. Edinburgh had several eminent publishers with whom Duncan had a friendly relationship, but when first seeking a publisher for his own works he chose John Murray. London had the advantage of greater prestige and a larger potential market.

Duncan's favoured Edinburgh publisher was Charles Elliot (1748-1790) who established his business in Parliament Square in 1771 (James Boswell and Robert Burns were among his customers). Like Murray he specialised in medical publications, including works by William Cullen, James Gregory, Alexander Monro *secundus* and Alexander Hamilton.

The Murray Archive contains copies of 109 letters sent by Murray to Duncan between 1773 and 1786, mostly business letters concerned with publications. There are no letters from Duncan to Murray, although the content of Duncan's letters can sometimes be inferred from Murray's replies. The Murray Archive also contains the archive of Charles Elliot which came into possession of the Murray family through the marriage of John Murray II, with Elliot's daughter Anne in 1806. The Elliot archive contains no letters to or from Duncan, for the two men lived close together and must have communicated personally, but the copies of Elliot's letters to others contain many references to Duncan's publications.

The copy letters from both the Murray and Elliot Archives are haphazardly punctuated and capitalised. In the interest of clarity these have been edited lightly here, but without altering the text. The letters have been quoted at length for they give a vivid account of the sometimes stormy relationship between Duncan, Murray and Elliot.

In 1772, Murray had published Duncan's *Observations on the operation and use of mercury in the Venereal Diseases*. He began publication of *Medical and Philosophical Commentaries* the following year (see Appendix).

The early letters from Murray, although businesslike, are written in a friendly manner and contain many personal asides:

7 Jan 1773 JM to AD

I was duly favoured with yours by your brother who is to dine with me to-day and whom you need not doubt my readiness to serve, were but my ability equal to my inclination...

I have communicated the Plan of our new intended Publication [the Commentaries] to several people here who are of opinion that it may succeed if it is in some measure extended.... the greatest care should be taken of the Composition and Language of the first number. I mention this particularly as the age we live in requires it and as your proposals are extremely incorrect.... I am the more zealous of having the publication perfect as your own reputation and the reputation of Scotland are in some measure invested.

It was arranged that the *Commentaries* would be published quarterly and sold to the public at 1s 6d (Zachs 1998). The rate to booksellers was 1s to 1s 2d. The four annual numbers were bound into volumes selling at 6s. Duncan was to receive £15 for each number.

28 Jan 1773 JM to AD

If I am fortunate enough to establish the work after the first 4 numbers, you will if my agreement of £15 per no. is judged to [sic] small, have an opportunity of making your own terms... Who ever built a house at the estimate price?

Duncan was to have the *Commentaries* printed in Edinburgh. One thousand copies were to be printed in the first instance, some of these to be retained in Edinburgh by the booksellers Kincaid and Creech for local sale, and the rest shipped to Murray in London.

The launch and development of the *Commentaries*

The first volume of the *Commentaries* was dedicated to William Robertson, principal of the University of Edinburgh, for his efforts on behalf of the ‘celebrated School of Medicine’. The journal was announced as having been prepared by a ‘society’, of which Duncan was the secretary. However, it is clear from the correspondence that Duncan *was* the Society and he deserves all the credit. There is a hint in the Preface to Volume 3 that he received some assistance from his friends, for he apologised for the delay, which he attributed to his teaching commitments and the absence of his friend Dr James Hamilton Sr. He apologised again for delay in the Preface to Volume 4,

...because the greater part of his time has been occupied in academical labour. He has also suffered no inconsiderable distress from circumstances of a more private nature...the death of a beloved daughter [His first born, Katharine Elisa aged 3].

In the preface to Volume 16, 1792, he acknowledges for the first time the assistance of his son Andrew Duncan Jr, then a medical student. His father introduced his contribution with the following notice:

Notwithstanding his youth and want of experience in literary composition, I yet trust, that he has not failed in retaining the sense of the Authors whose writings he has analysed: And, if the language which he employs should sometimes appear deficient in accuracy or perspicacity, the Indulgent Reader will I hope, permit me to offer for him, the apology which the illustrious Haller made for his son ‘Condonandum aliquid juveni octodecimo annorum’ [‘Make some allowance for a youth of eighteen.’]

Duncan’s editorial introduction to the first issue of the *Commentaries* has a remarkably modern ring:

Medicine has long been cultivated with assiduity and attention, but is still capable of farther improvement. Attentive observation, and the collection of useful facts, are the means by which this end may be most readily obtained. In no age ... does greater regard seem to have been paid to these particulars, than in the present. From the liberal spirit of inquiry which universally prevails, it is not surprising that scarce a day should pass without something being communicated to the public as a discovery or an improvement in medicine. It is, however, to be regretted, that the information which can by this means be acquired, is scattered through a great number of volumes, many

of which are so expensive, that they can be purchased for the libraries of public societies only, or of very wealthy individuals. ...

No one, who wishes to practise medicine, either with safety to others, or credit to himself, will incline to remain ignorant of any discovery which time or attention has brought to light. But it is well known that the greatest part of those who are engaged in the actual prosecution of this art, have neither leisure nor opportunity for very extensive reading. (Introduction, Vol 1, 1773, pp 5-6)

The Introduction goes on to explain how the new journal would help doctors to learn about ‘new discoveries, without the necessity of examining a great variety of books’, and thus help them to improve their practice.

A scheme, better calculated for saving time in reading, and expense in purchasing books, is a concise view of the books themselves. It cannot indeed be alleged, that, from this or any other plan, the same advantages will be obtained as from a careful perusal of original works. But, by this means, those who have not leisure for extensive reading, may easily become acquainted with every thing proposed as a discovery in medicine, and with the principal arguments by which it is supported.

Duncan pays tribute to the *Leipzig Commentarii* which had begun publication 20 years earlier ([Ludwig 1752](#)). He noted that it took little account of British books, however, and that it was not up to date, sometimes taking years to review the books it did cover. This lack of currency was exacerbated by the fact that issues of the journal were often available in Britain only a considerable time after publication. So, Duncan’s introduction to the first issue of the *Commentaries* explains that his new journal

will comprehend four sections, treating of the following subjects: An account of the best new books in medicine, and those branches of philosophy most intimately connected with it; medical cases and observations; medical news; and a list of new medical publications.

He made clear that, of these four sections, the first – an account of the best new books in medicine - was to be the principal feature of the journal. The fourth section of the journal was a kind of 18th century *Index Medicus*. As the editor put it:

The last section will consist of a list of new medical books ... for the satisfaction of those who may be deprived of other methods of information ..., published, both in this and other countries, during the three preceding months. We cannot, indeed, pretend that this list will in any case be a complete one; but it will be our endeavour to render it as much so as our situation will allow; and we are hopeful we shall be able to obtain intelligence of every material book.

Sorting the wheat from the chaff

The first and many of the subsequent editorial Prefaces during the first decade of publication of the *Commentaries* stress the efforts made to be impartial, and they

invite comments and suggestions for improvements from readers. This editorial policy was set out in the Introduction to the first issue:

As it is not our intention to offer any opinion with regard to the general characters of the books, we shall, on every occasion avoid, as much as possible, either applauding or condemning any author. Our chief aim will be, to give such a view of books as may enable every reader to judge for himself."

At the beginning of the second decade of publication, however, 'critical appraisal' of the books reviewed was introduced:

[Those] whose chief pleasure consists in the perusal of ingenious and useful publications ... will now find our analysis of books interspersed with observations on the degree of credit which we think they deserve. Where ... we have had occasion to differ from authors of the first eminence, our sentiments, though stated with freedom, are yet, we trust, expressed with that respect which is due to merit, and that diffidence which the nature of the subject demands: And this line of conduct, it is our intention steadily to pursue (Preface, Vol 1, [2nd decade], 1786, vi-vii)."

The following year, the editor judged this innovation to have been a success:

We are happy to find, that the alteration we have made in our plan, by not confining ourselves to a mere analysis of new books, but by candidly offering our opinion of their contents ... has met with the approbation of some of our most valuable correspondents. And we trust that those criticisms which are contained in the present volume, neither show a want of due deference to the assertions of others, nor inattention to facts (Preface, Vol. II [2nd decade], 1788, p vi).

To understand what the editors rated important as 'a discovery or an improvement ... in medicine' (Introduction, 1773) one needs to be aware of the approach then being taken by British physicians and surgeons who wished to find their way out of 'the labyrinth of therapeutics' and improve 'the evidence of medicine' (Tröhler 1978; 1988; 2010). This quest included quantitative assessment both of procedures that had been in largely unchallenged use for centuries, and of therapeutic innovations. This involved comparing groups of patients who had received different forms of active treatment, as well as comparisons with observations of the natural history of conditions in untreated patients. Examples included comparison of immediate with delayed amputation after limb injuries, and the use of cinchona bark (quinine) for 'ship fever' and childbed fever.

These comparisons were made prospectively as well as retrospectively. Army and Navy institutions and the new voluntary hospitals and dispensaries afforded opportunities for research: there were large numbers of comparable cases, the hierarchical order of the institutions meant that patients were expected to obey instructions, and staff had to report results of treatment in numerical terms to administrative authorities. 'The test of arithmetical calculation ought not to be evaded', wrote John Millar, a protagonist of this movement of 'arithmetic observation' in 1777 (Millar 1777).

This ‘proto-statistical’ enterprise was intended to encourage the adoption of new standards of evidence for inferring therapeutic success, and deplored the common practice of relying on single case reports, or excluding from case series those cases judged to have been treatment failures. These issues were discussed in 18th century Britain and had relevance during an era when there were quite a few innovations in both medicine and surgery (Maehle 1999; [2011](#); Tröhler 1987; Tröhler 1999; [2010](#)).

It would require very detailed historical research to establish the criteria used by Duncan to choose books for review in the *Commentaries*, but there is no doubt that he supported these efforts to improve the methodologies used to assess the effects of clinical practice (Tröhler 2000; [2010](#)). Although the journal did not review the third edition of James Lind’s book (Lind 1772) (which contained the celebrated account of his prospective trial of six remedies for scurvy, [Lind 1753](#)) or Millar’s books on *Practice in the Medical Department of the Westminster General Dispensary and On the Management of Diseases in the Army and Navy* ([Millar 1778-79](#)). John Clark’s *Observations on the Diseases which Prevail in Long Voyages to Hot Countries* (Clark 1773; [1792](#)) was included twice, the second time with some very flattering remarks. *Investigations of mortality* in and around Manchester by Thomas Percival (1767) and by John Coakley Lettsom there and at the Aldersgate Dispensary in London ([Lettsom 1774](#)) were reviewed equally well, as were Matthew Dobson’s observations on ‘fixed air’ in therapeutics ([Dobson 1779](#)) and William Black’s on smallpox (Black 1781).

Thomas Fowler’s and William Withering’s works were the subject of repeated methodological comments. On reading Fowler’s first book on tobacco ([Fowler 1785](#)), the reviewer thought that his manner of introducing this new medicine ‘may justly be considered as a discovery of very great utility’. He agreed with the author that still more facts were necessary, but concluded that whatever further workers would find out, ‘Fowler was still entitled to much praise as a faithful and industrious observer’ (Commentaries 1786). Withering’s now classic *Account of the Foxglove* ([Withering 1785](#)), that is, the introduction of digitalis for treating certain forms of dropsy [oedema] and heart disease on the basis of a large case series - earned similar appreciation (Commentaries 1786, pp 123-132). Both authors were again quoted in relation to Fowler’s second and third *Medical Reports* on the effects of arsenic ([Fowler 1786](#)) and of blood-letting in acute rheumatism, respectively. Fowler received a rare and favorable comment: ‘We cannot too highly applaud the industrious zeal with which he has endeavoured to render hospital practice subservient to medical improvement’ (Commentaries 1795). In a review over 50 pages long, Gilbert Blane’s *Observations on the Diseases incident to Seamen* ([Blane 1785](#)) also received approving comment concerning the necessity for mass observation, and extensive methodological passages on ‘arithmetic observation’ were reprinted completely (Commentaries 1788).

Although most of the editorial Prefaces in the *Commentaries* thanked those who had submitted clinical observations and solicited more such submissions for the second section of the journal, the principal focus of the journal remained the critical appraisal of books published in its first section:

Some ingenious friends, on whose approbation we put a high value ... were of opinion, that too large a proportion of our last volume was occupied with the

analysis of new books. In the present volume, this fault is not corrected ... We flatter ourselves, that ... candidly offering our opinion, respecting the facts and doctrines which new books contain, those even who are possessed of the original works, may still peruse our account of new books with pleasure and advantage; while to those who do not possess these works, this section of our publication must convey much useful information, which they could not otherwise obtain, without both considerable labour and expense. These considerations will, we trust, be a sufficient apology for still continuing our work on the former plan (Preface, Vol. III [2nd decade] 1788, pp v-vi).

What might have been the origins of this attack of Duncan's editorial policy? Possibly some contributors of individual case reports may have been motivated to press for a change so that they would see their names in print. Yet Duncan stuck to his principle of concentrating on reviews rather than case reports.

Duncan's relations with his publishers

The *Commentaries* had been an immediate success and some of the early numbers required reprinting. Duncan must have asked Murray for an increased payment, but this was refused (although as a sop, Duncan was offered 12 free copies of each number for his own use).

29 August 1774 JM to AD

...hope that you will take particular care of yourself in order to confirm your health and to insure against relapse. ... I would willingly offer you more money for the Med. Com did the state of matters admit it. ...The truth is my offer at first (considering the Work was to be established and that all the risk was to be mine) was too much. I agreed to pay a price upon the supposition of their success and it will be hard to deprive me of the reward now that the work promises one. ... It is pleasant to hear Dr. Rush and others tell you that many copies of the Com. would sell at Philadelphia, Charlestown and New York.

Murray detailed the costs of each issue of the *Commentaries*:

14 reams of paper	£10. 10. 0
Printing of 7 sheets	7. 7. 0
Advertising	10. 10. 0
Copy money (to Duncan)	<u>15. 0. 0</u>
	43. 7. 0

Murray's profit ranged from about £10 to £15, depending upon how many were sold to the trade and how many directly to the public.

Advertising was an item which Murray regarded as very important. He insisted, to Duncan's annoyance, that the covers of the issues belonged to the publishers to use for advertising purposes, which led to the first of many prickly letters.

17 May 1777 JM to AD

I always conceived that the cover of any periodical publication was the Bookseller's. ... If you ... insist that no advertisement whatever shall be

printed upon the cover... I cannot agree to the impropriety of such a request, which not only fetters me inconveniently... but which also denotes your want of faith in me... I would much rather keep the Commentaries than not, yet I am not disposed to fight for them ... and I can relinquish them with a quiet conscience whenever you shall be disposed to carry them from me.

Duncan's views did not however prevent him from using the *Commentaries* freely to advertise his own publications and his teaching arrangements.

Goods were sent between London and Edinburgh generally by sea, which could take five to ten days. Stage coach or wagon was quicker but more expensive, and the goods tended to get chafed by the jolting of the coach. Duncan paid £1.2.6 for the carriage of 300 copies of the *Commentaries* by wagon. For reasons of economy, parcels for several recipients were often packaged together and the first named was asked to distribute them. In this way, Duncan acted as an agent for Murray in Edinburgh. He was frequently asked to carry out small commissions, sending him goods from Edinburgh or seeking purchasers for items that Murray would like to sell, such as the engravings of Dr John Hunter (1728-1793), who had thought highly of the *Commentaries*, in which many of his papers are reproduced.

Murray dealt with other items than books. He would sell anything that might bring a profit, including inks, wines, Irish linen, game birds and Tassie medallions (stone hard miniature portraits and seals invented by James Tassie). He also sold lottery tickets, and the correspondence records that Duncan purchased several. In 1776 he bought a whole ticket, and in 1777 one half and two quarter tickets. The half ticket cost £7.11 and the two quarters £7.14 (smaller fractions of tickets were available). The potential prize was £20,000, but, alas, Duncan was not successful.

Murray was well informed about the medical politics in Edinburgh and at the time when Duncan was applying for the Chair of Institutes of Medicine he wrote:

26 December 1774 JM to Mr Chas. Gordon, Canton, China.

Dr Duncan this year occupied Dr Drummond's chair at Edinburgh as Professor of the Practice of Physic. If Dr Drummond casts up who has been long missing, Dr Duncan must resign the chair, but if that event does not happen the latter I think stands a chance of succeeding him.

25 June 1776 JM to AD

You have my best wishes for your success in the Professorship. I hope however that you have not hitherto lain upon your oars, but have been active by preserving your solicitations. Without your own industry your merit will not be so much recognised. ... Pray acquaint me with what success Mrs Duncan carries on business and if our friend Creech is going to get married.

It is intriguing to speculate on what business Mrs Duncan was engaged. Perhaps it was the common practice in professional households of giving lodgings to students. It is known that the family did take in boarders, one of whom was a Swiss national, Baron Benjamin Constant (1767-1830), who was to play a prominent role in the French Revolution.

9 August 1776 JM to AD

I felt as a friend for the disappointment you met with ... [in failing to get the chair of Institutes of Medicine]. I believe you have been a bad politician. You have proved deficient in your sacrifices to flattery. Your stubbornness on inflexible honesty is no match for it. Now however that the election is over and past it is a folly to regard it ... Happily to digest a repulse has more merit in my eyes than moderately to enjoy good fortune. ... Smellie [1740-1795, printer of the Commentaries] is very irregular and the most unsatisfactory correspondent I ever met with. ... I am glad of the credit your work has acquired in Germany.

These letters indicate the warm relationship between the two men at that time.

Duncan's extramural classes prospered after his unsuccessful bid for a chair and Murray congratulated him.

5 December 1776 JM to AD

I hear your success this winter is beyond conception and congratulate you upon it, even altho the Commentaries may be retarded by it.

Times must have been hard for Duncan in 1778, for he kept pressing Murray for an advance of payment. Murray responded:

25 July 1778 JM to AD

I shall honour your draft of £25 when it appear[s]. Times are really bad otherwise you would find me disposed to give you every indulgence. Meantime, bad as they are, I hope you will not be prevented from putting in execution your design of visiting London and making your friends here happy.

During 1778, Murray's irritation with Smellie's delays reached breaking point. He wrote asking Smellie to ask Duncan to get another printer if he couldn't keep to time.

26 July 1778 JM to Smellie

Let me therefore entreat of you to finish it without delay or honestly to give it up. I cannot forgive a disappointment and I pray for both our sakes that you will not put me to the proof. My interest is very much concerned. Your behaviour will show whether you regard my interest.

19 November 1778 JM to AD

I am favoured with Mr. Smellie's letter and with yours in answer to mine upon the subject of printing the Commentaries here ... yet it was not the opinion of the instant. I had long weighed the matter and the necessity of the alteration ... I am by no means Mr. Smellie's enemy or less his friend than ever. I should act as I do about the Commentaries in any other printer's hands at such a distance, and I see so many real advantages and conveniences that will result to me from the printing here, that I have real pleasure and satisfaction in thanking you for the readiness you express to oblige me. ... The printing here will remove a heavy load from my breast which has long incommoded me ...

A letter of 24 December 1778 indicated that issue no. 21 was being printed in London.

Duncan's dispute with John Murray

During 1779 the cordial relationship between Murray and Duncan came to an abrupt end. Murray had had the effrontery to publish another journal, the *Foreign Medical Review*, without consulting Duncan. To some extent it covered the same ground as the *Commentaries* and Duncan was incandescent. Before he had even seen a copy he must have written an angry letter to Murray. Murray tried to send an emollient reply. He didn't think the journal would continue and he took it on simply 'to prevent it falling into worse hands'. The correspondence tells the story:

27 April 1779 JM to AD

... I write this fully because there seems to be a little jealousy excited by it in your letter which surprises me, for surely after so long an acquaintance you cannot suspect that I would act clandestinely either against you or the Commentaries. The idea if entertained is an imputation upon the confidence one friend should impose in another.

Duncan must have approached Charles Elliot to find a new publisher. Elliot wrote to his cousin James Sibbald (1747-1803) who was spending that year in London to learn the book trade.

17 April 1779 CE to Mr James Sibbald, London

I have just now I believe a fair chance of purchasing the property of Dr. Duncan's Medical Commentaries if I incline, not that Mr. Murray has given them up but that the Doctor is determined for certain Reasons to give him up. This is an undertaking, however, I would not chuse to engage in altogether myself owing to the greatest part being sold in London which would oblige me to send quantities there on commission which I by no means like, more particularly in a publication that is to continue like it. I would most willingly take one half if I could get a creditable London Bookseller to take the other. Therefore I beg you will immediately meet with Mr. Longman and ask him if he inclines to take the one half while I keep the other. ... Assure him at the same time they need have no scruples on account of interfering with Mr. Murray, the Doctor being determined to part with him, although he knows nothing of it. Therefore you will not mention the subject to any person but the necessary ones and beg of them not to speak of it till something is done in it. Although I authorise you to make such an offer I am not absolutely certain of it myself having made no bargain but the Doctor assures me none shall have a preference.

Will you please buy from Mr. Murray two copies of No 1st of the Foreign Review ... to be published on the 15 currt. ... You will please send off immediately ... and state them private inclosed. Don't say who the numbers are for anything whatsoever to Mr. Murray. The above are for Dr. Duncan and I fancy it is on account of Murray's engaging in this publication without acquainting Dr Duncan. However it is no business of yours or mine.

3 May 1779 CE to James Sibbald

...If you have come to no terms with anybody about the Medical Commentaries don't say anything more about them till you hear further. I imagine Murray and Dr Duncan will make it up. ...

Murray inevitably heard what was going on behind his back and wrote to Elliot:

10 May 1779 JM to CE

Your behaviour respecting the Medical Commentaries which I have had a hand in establishing, I do not mean to analyse, for it will not bear it. I have only to assure you that I shall never imitate your example in any similar case....

Of the first numbers of the Commentaries I printed 1000 each. Of no 8 I printed 1500 and have continued this number since. In 1774 no 8 was printed and there remains 300 copies unsold of that number and proportional remains of all the following numbers.

To the London trade I sell 25 nos for 27/-.... I have given you a very honest state of the Medical Commentaries and I now offer you my property in the first 5 ½ Vols already executed and all the remaining numbers without reserve that are in my ware rooms at a fair price.

Turn over this proposal in your mind and make me an offer. In doing which it will naturally occur to you that you must value each remaining numbers at a certain price and next my property in the copy....

Without the least tincture of resentment I remain very sincerely yours etc.

Elliot replied in a letter to Murray

29 May 1779 CE to JM

Dr Duncan upon learning your publishing the Foreign Review was very much offended and signified in express terms to me that you should not continue to publish his Commentaries and the other and at the same time asked if I chose to be concerned and that my interference would make no difference as some one must publish them. The only answer I made was that the undertaking would not suit me to have it all in my own hands; that if a person in Lond. was half concerned and the publication to go out of your hands at any rate, in that case I should perhaps have no objection, but with regard to any bargain offered by the Doctor as proposal from me to him, I do assure you never happened. I certainly did write to Mr Sibbald to mention the thing to one or two Booksellers in Lond., but to how many he has done it I do not know...I expressly desired him only to mention the subject and not to conclude anything as I had not in my power to settle anything with any person. I do assure you, my dear sir, that no person hates the very idea of interfering in such a case more than I do and I certainly would not have understood you had it in your power to continue. Dr Duncan no doubt has explained himself with regard to his reasons of complaint. When I instructed my friend Mr. Sibbald I did not look upon you as further concerned from what I have already mentioned and I had not doubt but offers would be made to others. Therefore Sir, do not imagine I either meant or wished to take undue advantage of you and I am certain that Doctor Duncan is incapable of

it even in idea, yet I believe he felt very much upon your engagements in this said Review.

Duncan continued to send angry letters to Murray who replied:

9 June 1779 JM to AD

I never engaged more innocently in any undertaking than in the Foreign Medical Review and had I thought the thing was likely to offend you, I most certainly would have declined it. ... Were I disposed to be surprised at any thing it would be at your resenting my behaviour after the explanation and satisfaction I have given, and particularly with your declaration that the contents of my letter of the 27th Apl. had surprised and offended you and that my conduct required an apology. You say also in your note dated the 4th inst. That 'You hope upon cool deliberation I will think of another method of apologising for my conduct on this affair: that you had not fully expressed your sentiments: yet wished to say no more with regard to it, unless you are forced to it by such observations as those contained in my present letter'... I have gone over it [letter of 27th] with all the bias in your favour I am capable of and for the life of me cannot see what part you can reasonably take offence at....

I am indeed surprised at your offer to continue the Commentaries for me, because as they have been offered by Mr Elliot's agent to several Booksellers here, there must either be a mistake on his part or you have not retained the alternative you propose. ... it is near a month since Mr Sibbald, who acts for Mr Elliot at present in London, first tendered this work to the trade here. He told the gentleman to whom he first applied [sic] that Dr Duncan had done entirely with Mr Murray, that the work was now Mr Elliot's on whose part he had authority to dispose of one half. He enjoined secrecy from me. In this manner has Mr Sibbald offered the Commentaries to four or five booksellers at London....

Your proposal for me to agree for the continuation of the next 16 numbers of the Commentaries from No 25 to 40 for certain at £25 each is so foreign to every calculation I have made, and every idea I entertain of the work, that it requires no time for consideration. I resign my pretensions to your labours at this price; for I cannot afford it; nor can the work if I have any knowledge in figures.

Had you desired an explanation of any parts of my behaviour with which you was dissatisfied, before you had entered into engagements with another bookseller, I think it would have shewn openness and honour. And if Mr Elliot had declined concluding with you till I had been consulted, his conduct would have been praiseworthy. It is a great consolation at this parting that I cannot accuse myself of a single circumstance wherein I have been intentionally to blame respecting you, in the six or seven years of our acquaintance. And I am flattered that more respect has been paid to my name here than at Edinburgh.

10 May 1779 JM to AD

I have received your last, and what your reasons are for saying that you remain in the dark concerning my conduct, after the ample satisfaction I have given, God alone knows for I confess my ignorance. I shall only add

further on this subject that if ever you look at my letters when you are less disposed to be prejudiced against me, I am of opinion you will not be fond of the answers you have written to them.

Duncan's overreaction to a trivial circumstance was totally out of proportion and displays a character defect which was to trouble him later in his unwise contretemps with James Hamilton Jr. The *Foreign Medical Review* was not a success and Murray published only two parts.

Elliot must have been unable to find a willing partner in London, for Murray sent the following letter to another Edinburgh publisher, William Creech.

16 September 1779 JM to Creech

Dr Duncan has taken great offence at my publishing the Foreign Medical Review and has resolved to bring the culprit to condign punishment by withdrawing the Medical Commentaries from him. I thought he had settled matters with Mr Elliot but as you tell me he has made proposals to you, I send you enclosed my last letter to him upon the subject of that work as also part of a letter I wrote at same time to Mr Elliot thinking he was to be the favoured bookseller. And the offer I made to him I now make to you.

You have my thanks for declining to treat with Dr D. till you heard from me upon that subject. But so far I am from wishing to prevent you from undertaking the Commentaries, I shall be very happy to learn that you have come to an agreement with the author. ... I really wish you success.

Reconciliation

In the event the London publisher Charles Dilly took over the publication of the *Commentaries* in 1780 and 1781 and made it an annual publication.

There followed a two years' hiatus in Murray's correspondence with Duncan, but a reconciliation appears to have taken place following a visit by Duncan to London. On 1 November 1781 Murray sent a friendly letter to Duncan ending.

'Mrs Murray joins me in compts to you, Mrs Duncan and Family. I remain Dear Sir Yours etc'.

In May 1782 Murray suffered a stroke. In a letter to James Gilliland, his brother-in-law in Edinburgh, he described his attack:

On Friday last while I was standing in my own Shop at midday I was seized with a swimming in my head and sleepiness in my left limbs. After sometime I returned to my bed where after a puking of 24 hours, my fate was announced in its horrors and I was left in a palsy, the power of my left side being totally, or very near to it, taken from me. ... It is better if it can be done to bear it with fortitude, and to conduct my business....

Remarkably, despite his disability, which left him with permanent weakness, Murray continued his business almost without interruption.

On 25 February 1783, Murray thanked Duncan for his advice about the costs of education of a young man at the High School in Edinburgh. This was probably in connection with Murray's illegitimate son Archie, for whom Murray maintained a close parental responsibility. In the event Archie was sent to an academy at Brighthelmstone (now Brighton) where he proved a quick learner with a gift for languages.

On 16 September 1783, in response to a letter from Duncan, Murray offered to resume publication of the *Commentaries* at the old terms, although the dispute still rankled. In another letter a month later he wrote:

I shall be glad to hear from you upon the subject of the Comments. at any time; although with respect to my behaviour relating to them you are as wrong as any man can be. ...

He did resume its publication in that year, jointly with Dilly, continuing the format of an annual volume which had been established by Dilly. [The publishers of the subsequent volumes were: 10, Murray and Elliot; 11-14, Elliot alone; 15-20, G CJ & J Robinson in London with Peter Hill and G Mudie in Edinburgh. Volume 20, 1795, was the last of the series].

Further evidence of the restoration of good relations was Murray's acknowledgment of a gift.

3 November 1783 JM to AD

I carried yesterday to Mrs Murray ... Mrs Duncan's present; and she begs I would offer to Mrs Duncan and You her very grateful thanks for it. ... I beg to be considered a party in her thanks. ...

The deaths of Charles Elliot in 1790 and John Murray in 1793 brought Duncan's association with these publishers to a conclusion, although both companies continued in the hands of relatives.

Succession

By the mid-1780s, sales of the journal had declined by 50 per cent to some 500 copies per issue (Zachs 1998). Perhaps the decline in sales of the journal could be attributed to, from 1781, reducing the *Commentaries* from quarterly to annual publication. Beginning in the early 1780s, successive prefaces suggested that Duncan was finding it difficult to devote the time necessary to fulfil his original ambition to provide, every quarter, an up-to-date source of reliable information for practitioners. The philanthropical Duncan had become engaged in other activities. In particular, he had founded and was practising in his public dispensary for the poor in 1776, and was actively publishing case series based on his experience there.

However, the importance of the publication continued to be appreciated. For example, a writer in the *English Review* stated 'Were it not for this periodical [...] how many observations of great importance, might never have made their progress beyond the narrow boundaries of a single practitioner in medicine' (Zachs 1998). In 1791, Duncan recruited the assistance of his son, Andrew Jr, and in 1796, under their joint editorship, *Medical Commentaries* became the *Annals of Medicine*, which followed the same editorial policy, with a format that was identical with that of

Medical Commentaries. In 1805, the new periodical, which appeared more frequently again than annually, was renamed the *Edinburgh Medical and Surgical Journal*, with Duncan Jr as the principal editor. Apart from dropping the words ‘*and Surgical*’ from the title in 1855, the latter lasted for a further 100 years (Johnstone et al. 1954).

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Appendix

John Murray's publications for Andrew Duncan Senior

[extracted from *The First John Murray and the late Eighteenth-Century London Book Trade.* Zachs W. OUP Oxford 1998]

- 1772 *Observations on the operation and use of mercury in the venereal diseases.* Edinburgh, printed for A Kincaid and W. Creech; and for T Cadell and J Murray, London
- 1773 *Elements of therapeutics: or, first principles of the practice of physic.* 2nd ed in two volumes, London.
- 1773 *Medical and Philosophical Commentaries.* by a society in Edinburgh. Vol First. London printed for J. Murray; Kincaid and Creech and W Drummond Edinburgh; and T Ewing Dublin. With an index. Issued in four parts with separate title pages. Price 1s.6d each part, or 6s a vol. Murray lost the publication to Charles Dilly 1780-82, at which time the work began to be issued annually. From Vol 7, title changed to *Medical Commentaries.* Charles Elliot is named as co-publisher with Murray for Vol 5, 1778, Vol 6, 1779, Vol 9, 1785 and Vol 10, 1786.
- 1778 *Medical cases, selected from the records of the Public Dispensary at Edinburgh; with remarks and observations; being the substance of case lectures delivered during the years 1776-7* by Andrew Duncan, M.D. Edinburgh, printed for Charles Elliot; and J. Murray, London.
- 1786 *A short account of the late Dr John Parsons... Dr Richard Huck Saunders,... Dr Charles Colignon, ... and Sir Alexander Dick ...* From the Edinburgh Medical Commentaries, Vol X. London, Murray.
- 1786 *Heads of lectures on materia medica* by Andrew Duncan MD, Edinburgh.

Charles Elliot's publications for Andrew Duncan Senior

[extracted from *Charles Elliot's Medical Publications and the International Book Trade* by McDougall W. pp 215-254 in *Science and Medicine in the Scottish Enlightenment* Eds. Withers CWJW and Wood P. Tuckwell Press, Edinburgh 2002.]

- 1777/8 *Medical and Philosophical Commentaries* vol fifth, also 1779, vol sixth; 1785, vol ninth; 1786, vol tenth.
- 1778 *De laudibus Gulielmi Harvei oratio.*
- 1778 *Medical cases, selected from the records of the Public Dispensary at Edinburgh.* Subsequent editions 1781, 1784.
- 1780 *An account of the life and writings of the late Alexr. Monro Senr.*
- 1781 *Heads of lectures on the theory and practice of medicine* 2nd ed. Subsequent editions 1785, 1789.
- 1782 *Heads of lectures on pathology.*
- 1782 *A letter to Dr Robert Jones of Caermarthenshire.*
- 1784 A portrait of Dr Duncan, painted by Weir and engraved by Trotter.
- 1787 *Medical Commentaries,* Decade second vol 1; 1788, vol II; 1789, vol III; 1790 vol IV
- 1789 *An account of the life, writings and character, of the late Dr John Hope.*
- 1789 *The Edinburgh new dispensatory. Being an improvement upon the new dispensatory of Dr Lewis.*

Elliot paid Duncan £50.8s for *Medical Cases, Selected from the Records of the Public Dispensary at Edinburgh* and £20 for *Heads of Lectures on the Theory and Practice of Medicine*. He paid £60 for each annual volume of *Medical Commentaries* when the publication moved to Edinburgh from London. These sums, although an important part of Duncan's income, appear modest when compared with £250 for James Gregory's *Conspectus Medicinae Theoreticae*. William Cullen's standing in the medical profession is demonstrated by the £1200 which he was able to command for *First Lines of the Practice of Physic* and £1500 for *Materia Medica*.

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