

Alan Lyell

Born 1917 – Died 2007

After a eucharist at St Columba's Church, Largs, on the Ayrshire coast, Alan Lyell was buried on 12th November 2007, next to his wife Rachael, in the cemetery on Haylie Brae from which there is a magnificent view over the Firth of Clyde, its islands and mountains, similar to the vista from his family home in Skelmorlie. He died on 2nd November, two days before his 90th birthday. He has left a considerable legacy: the memory of a great clinician and teacher; an eponymous disease, a major teaching hospital centre named in his honour; and a body of literature that is enjoyed for style as well as substance.

"Born into this world during the First World War, I was to be born into medicine during the Second". After Pembroke College, Cambridge, *"I arrived at St Thomas' Hospital in London just before the Germans started dropping bombs on Poland".* He was inspired by Geoffrey Dowling, *"who crouched at his desk in contemplation of the skin, rubbed his chin once or twice and then wrote the diagnosis – eczema, or psoriasis or what have you. But to the question "why is it eczema?" the only answer was "because it looks like it – next patient please sister."* He was intrigued by *"the contrast between great knowledge and inability to explain it logically."* He qualified in 1942, becoming houseman at Woking War Hospital to Hugh Wallace who was *"to provide the logical steps that made Dowling's diagnostic abilities intelligible"*.

Wounded in action with the RAMC in Normandy, he trained, after recovery, at Cambridge and Edinburgh. *"I was singularly fortunate in my teachers: Dr Whittle for his holistic approach and wide medical and artistic interest, Prof Percival for his expertise in histopathology and the treatment of skin disease, and Dr Peterkin for his experience."*

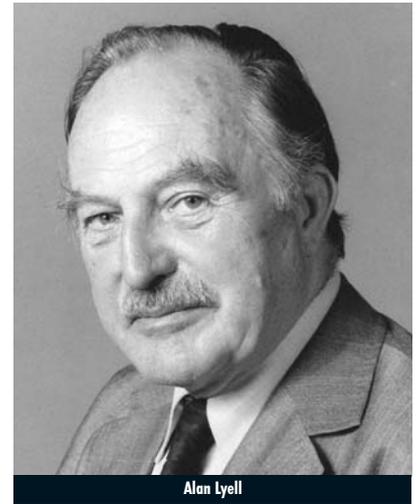
His first consultant appointment, to Aberdeen in 1952, was *"not a happy*

period" – he lacked the necessary *"granite in the genes"* – but here in 1956 he published the paper from which the terms Toxic Epidermal Necrolysis and Scalded Skin Syndrome have passed into standard nomenclature.¹ International recognition followed, *"a bit of notoriety"*, and he *"seized eagerly"* the opportunity to take charge of the department in Glasgow Royal Infirmary. *"The appointment of Alan Lyell marked a turning point"*, as he turned insularity into co-operation, sowing the seeds of a future fully-integrated service, and elevated the status of dermatology in the West of Scotland.

Al, as he was affectionately known, was a superb diagnostician. He could be recognised in clinic in characteristic pose, bending or crouching to peer intently at lesions, then photographing exactly the image required for teaching. His bushy eyebrows, clipped moustache, stiff collars and military-style address could be intimidating initially, but his courtesy, kindness and good humour generated enormous affection as well as respect in patients and all who worked with him. An inspiring and generous teacher, he created a happy department where trainee physicians became converts to dermatology, and amongst frequent international visitors, Herman Pinkus spent a year as visiting professor.

Over the 20 years after he described what became known as Lyell's Syndrome, his research identified the main causes, drug-induced TEN and Staphylococcal Scalded Skin Syndrome (SSSS), and showed that histology could distinguish them. His collaboration with (now Sir) John Arbuthnott demonstrated that SSSS was toxin-induced, and (simultaneously with others) succeeded in isolating epidermolytic toxin.

He was fascinated by the effects of psychological and emotional factors in dermatology, and made important observations on Delusions of Infestation and self-inflicted disease.



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His Prosser-White Oration in 1975 was *"Dermatitis Artefacta in relation to the syndrome of contrived disease"*.

His sense of honour led to important sacrifices. *"I turned down the offer of the Chair of Dermatology at Edinburgh... I felt honour-bound to continue at Glasgow, having set my hand to the plough"*. He felt obliged to withdraw from his forthcoming presidency of the BAD when he resigned from the NHS in 1980 in a principled stand against cost-driven cuts.

After retirement, he produced a series of meticulously-researched and elegantly-written historical reviews and biographies.

He lived to see his vision of an integrated dermatology network in Glasgow come to fruition in 2006. Though frail, he was able to attend the official opening of its new hub, the Alan Lyell Centre for Dermatology.

1. Lyell A. Toxic Epidermal Necrolysis: an eruption resembling scalding of the skin. *Brit J Dermatol* 1956; 68: 355-361.

2. J O'D Alexander. Progress in the Dermatological Service in the West of Scotland since 1948. <http://www.scottish-dermatology.org.uk/Default.asp?Page=52>

[Compiled from his own memoirs, those of the late J O'D Alexander, and contributions from: John Arbuthnott, Helen Cooper, Stewart Douglas, Gordon Fraser, Raymond Fulton, Tahir Haroon, Kurt Holubar, John Hunter, Bridget Lyell, Tom McFadyen, Colin Munro, Dai Roberts, Alexandra Strong, John Thomson, Jim Walker, Elspeth Young, Malcolm Young.]

A full version can be found as a flier with this issue