

Mark Akenside (1721-1770), (RGS 1730's), Poet and Physician: A Lover of Contradiction

By Alan Castree (1953 – 61)

I began research into the life and time of Mark Akenside because of his status as one of those old boys immortalised in the School Song. He is perhaps less well known, in fact, than most of those remembered therein. Many readers of the ONA will recall the refrain, "...Collingwood, Armstrong, Eldon and Bourne, *Akenside*, Stowell and Brand...", but perhaps not so many will know much about this outstanding character. I had assumed that all readers would be very familiar with the song but now know that it is only sung at the Newcastle and London gatherings of Old Novos; it is a School Song that is no longer sung at school.

So, I needed an additional hook for this piece other than merely a mention in a soon to be forgotten lyric. I found one: "The Akenside Syndrome", a phrase that embodies Mark in Geordie folklore. It seems that the phrase applies to any Tynesider who moves away, becomes famous and chooses to disclaim his roots; as this is the impression that Mark built for himself his surname is central to the concept.

Is this fair to an exceptionally talented Old Novocastrian who not only shone in medicine and was a master of the classics but also wrote beautiful verse that included direct references to his native county? Readers can decide.

Mark Akenside was born 9th November, 1721, the son of a butcher living and trading in Butcher Bank, St. Nicholas, Newcastle. His family were Presbyterian Dissenters and he was baptised at a Meeting House in Close Gate. From this obscure background Mark rose to become a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, Fellow of the Royal Society and physician-in-ordinary to Queen Charlotte, wife of George III. He also achieved wide acclaim as a leading poet of his age and for his supreme knowledge of the Classics.

Mark attended RGS in the 1730's, possibly twice, the precise dates not being known; he received additional education from William Wilson at the latter's newly opened academy in the Non-Conformist Meeting House in Hanover Square, Newcastle. Non-Conformist support played a significant role in Mark's life: when he left school to enter Edinburgh University to read theology he gained the assistance of a grant from the Dissenters' Society in London.

Reputedly an industrious scholar and extremely bright, Mark could probably have succeeded in entry to Oxford or Cambridge. There was a problem, however, for the Dissenters' Society did not recognise the academic demands of the religious examinations that were a requirement for acceptance as a student at these universities and would not fund any such application. Mark needed financial backing and he chose the alternative path, north of the Border.

In Edinburgh he soon switched to medicine, a field in which he was to make notable progress. He built a reputation as a fierce and able debater in the Edinburgh University Medical Society, an early sign of the disputatious manner that proved to be an irritant to some of those whom he encountered later in his life.

Mark's abandonment of theology came as no great surprise; he seems never to have shown great interest in religion. He was a lover of the Ancients and such was his devotion to them that it was said about him that Socrates was his Christ and Plato his Paul. He repaid the grant from the Dissenters' Society after completing the studies in his chosen field.

Artistically, Mark had displayed his talents as a writer at an early age. Before leaving Newcastle for Edinburgh he had already achieved publication of poems and tales in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, which was rapidly becoming a well-read circulation among the literati.

He completed his most successful work towards the end of 1743, *The Pleasures of Imagination*, a poem of 2,000 lines, adopting the title of an essay by Addison in the *Spectator*. Anna Barbauld, editing a collection of his poems in 1794 considered this particular work remarkable for a young man of 23, with a wry comment on its erudition – *Akenside will not call people from the fields and the highways to partake of his feats; he will wish none to read that are not capable of understanding him.*

Mark negotiated a healthy fee from a publisher for the first draft, thanks to positive backing from other poets, including Alexander Pope. The success of this poem was immediate and through this achievement his name was prominent in literary circles for the rest of his life. Despite the poem's early triumph, Mark engaged in restructuring and reshaping it through much of his later life.

Its publication, in 1744, was not without controversy, on which Mark seemed to thrive. He upset a few people including Richard Dawes, Headmaster at RGS at the time (1738-1749); Mark was probably one of his pupils before going to Edinburgh. Well, headmasters have to tolerate much lampooning from pupils but, unsurprisingly, Dawes took exception to a figure in the verse, whom he saw as himself, being described as a facetious ignoramus.

Mark denied this personification but much sound and fury followed. Dawes was, indeed, a difficult character and what records there are show that academic achievement stagnated at the school during his headship, possibly owing to his preference for his own research rather than for the needs of the boys. His successor, Hugh Moises (1749-1787), transformed the school and restored its sound reputation.

Edinburgh University had a strong link with Leiden University and, also in 1744, in pursuit of further qualifications, Mark moved to Holland to extend his medical knowledge. From Leiden he returned to England and tried, unsuccessfully, to establish a medical practice, first in Northampton, then in London. The coffee house chatter about Mark Akenside in the capital was that this was no surprise as his abrupt manner did not accord to any prospective patients the respect that they felt they deserved. He regularly fell into lively arguments with all and sundry, night after night, at his favourite haunt, Tom's Coffeehouse, in Devereux Court (near Temple Bar) and, by all accounts, his fiery temper nearly led to duels on more than one occasion.

As his medical practice was slow to blossom, he seems to have survived his early days in London through his literary earnings and the constant generosity of Jeremiah Dyson, a barrister, later to become Clerk to the House of Commons, whom Mark had met when Dyson was a law student in Edinburgh. Dyson remained a life-long friend, patron and advisor and,

after Mark's premature death, edited and published a posthumous edition of his poems, in 1772.

Mark settled in Bloomsbury Square, one of the new "garden squares" that were desirable locations, close to London but with a rural aspect. He edited *The Museum*, a periodical that featured articles by Samuel Johnson, William Collins and other prominent writers. He contributed a fortnightly essay and reviewed new publications on the market written not only in English but in Latin, French and Italian too. "The Museum" folded in 1749 and although still writing Mark began to devote more of his energies to his medicine. He became a licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians in 1751 and received the degree of M.D. by mandamus from Cambridge University in 1753. He became a Fellow of the Royal Society that year and a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians in 1754.

In 1759 he became Principal Physician at St Thomas's Hospital and Assistant Physician at the school of Christ's Hospital. It was in 1761 that he gained his royal appointment, a post that carried great prestige. This aroused much comment and sniping from many around him as until then he had been quite open about his republican views but, like a good Old Novo, seeing his chance for advancement, he seized it, burying his anti-royalist views. This caused bitter comment among his republican colleagues.

He moved to Burlington Street in 1762 and he lived there until his early death, arising from an incurable suppuration of the throat. He was buried at St. James' Church, Piccadilly. If there was a memorial to him it was lost in the bombing of the area during World War II. The record of his death, however, on 28th June 1770, is in the archives of the City of Westminster.

Mark Akenside never avoided controversy; he possibly even sought it. Johnson saw him as "*a lover of contradiction and no friend to anything established*". During his considerable progress in medicine he found enough time in his creative writings to engage in satirical attacks upon prominent figures. This was, of course, a great time for satire and he had to suffer such attacks upon himself. Prominent figures that he upset included Tobias Smollett, who took exception to the aspersions that Mark cast upon the Scots. Smollett took his revenge by casting Akenside as a didactic doctor in *Peregrine Pickle*, portraying a character who is pompous and humourless. Mark chose not to respond to this characterisation.

There was another side to his personality: many writers and editors spoke of the consideration and help that they received from Mark in their work. Seemingly, he was not the spiteful critic of other poets that versifiers tended to be but, rather, he was constructive and warm in his praise. Some acquaintances did, with justification, find him irritable and unapproachable whereas others found him pleasurable company. Sir John Hawkins, in his life of Johnson, found Mark Akenside to be "*at ease in congenial society*".

His abrupt manner may well have been due to his self-consciousness about a disability: one of his legs was shorter than the other, reputedly the result of a childhood injury resulting from an accident when playing with his father's meat cleavers. His stiffness of bearing prompted amused comment but any acknowledgment by him of the cause might have revealed a physical weakness and, perhaps, those origins of which he is said to have been ashamed.

Mark did have to endure jibes about his relatively lowly origins. He has since earned the dubious reputation, to which I have referred, as the stereotype of the Tynesider who is ashamed of his origins, thus unwittingly lending his name to the "syndrome". This is a

twenty-first century view and is, I would suggest, unfair, as any provincial keen to make their way in London had to struggle very hard against the snobbery and contempt that eighteenth century society displayed against those from outside its elite circle. There was probably much jealousy of his wide range of abilities and clearly he fought his corner well.

The extent of his writing in verse was considerable, from classic allusion – his *Hymn to the Naiads* drew much praise for its erudite brilliance - to rural nostalgia and he did refer affectionately to his native county:

Would I again with you! O ye dales

Of Tyne, and ye most ancient woodlands; where,

Oft as the giant flood obliquely strides,

And his banks open, and his lawns extend,

Stops short the pleased traveller to view

Presiding o'er the scene some rustic tower

Founded by Norman or by Saxon hands:

And, from his time in Morpeth:

O ye Northumbrian shades, which overlook

The rocky pavement and the mossy falls

Of solitary Wansbeck's limpid stream;

How gladly I recall your well known seat

Beloved of old, and that delightful time

When all alone, for many a summer's day.

I wandered through your calm recesses, led

In silence by some powerful hand unseen.

Nor will I ever forget you;

"Pleasures of the Imagination", ll 31 -46

Surely, this is from the hand of a lover of his north eastern heritage?

There was considerable appreciation for his poetry and it was influential upon the late Romantics, in particular upon Wordsworth and Coleridge. Johnson recognised his talent but was ambivalent about Akenside's verse: *"To his versification justice requires that praise should not be denied. In the general fabrication of his lines he is perhaps superior to any other writer of blank verse; but the concatenation of his verses is commonly too long continued, and the full close does not recur with sufficient frequency."*

Whatever the finer criticisms of his poetry, Mark still had a separate, illustrious career, in medicine.

It is not known how extensive his medical practice was but he did gain professional renown. He wrote a great deal in connection with his profession; many of these medical writings were in Latin and he won praise for his elegant style in that language. He composed several authoritative articles under the auspices of the Royal College of Physicians; Richard Griffin wrote in 1825 that Akenside's medical writing "raised him to the same height of place among the scholars as he possessed before among the wits [through his poetry]".

As a legacy his verse did not regain the considerable reputation that it had during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and is less well known today than that of many of his contemporaries. Mark was still writing both verse and on medicine at his death; he left his whole estate to his friend Dyson.

Whatever his idiosyncrasies, there is no doubt that Mark Akenside was an outstanding scholar and physician and deserves to be remembered as a very able Northumbrian who, while not proclaiming his humble origins from the roof tops, did, nevertheless, pay homage to where his roots lay.

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