

From farm to academic fame

## **Alexander Murray**

**1775-1813**

As a Kirkcudbrightshire shepherd's son with severe short-sightedness, Alexander Murray had few prospects.

His father reluctantly taught him to read and, despite just 60 weeks of rural schooling, the boy proved determined to gain an education.

Alexander had an astonishing flair for languages and taught himself Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, plus some French and German, and even Abyssinian.

His great fortune was that others, like Robert Burns and James M'Harg, a merchant of contraband tea, recognised his abilities and offered support.

Alexander was accepted at Edinburgh University in 1793 where fellow student Lord Cockburn remembered him as 'a little shivering creature, gentle, studious, timid, and reserved'.

Despite his disadvantages he flourished, moving from the tongues of Europe to those of western Asia and north-east Africa, especially the dialects of Abyssinia. When an envoy arrived from Abyssinia with a letter for George III from the governor of Tygrè it was felt that Alexander was the only suitable person to produce a translation.

Eventually Murray rose to become professor of oriental languages at Edinburgh University.

He aimed to bring together the histories of Europe, Asia and Africa through understanding their languages.

His life and dreams were cut short when he died of consumption – a fate that also befell his daughter, while his son, who trained as a ship's surgeon, was drowned on his first voyage.

- Read the Oxford DNB biography here: <http://www.oxforddnb.com/public/dnb/19588.html>.