

## Douglas, James, fourteenth earl of Morton

(1702–1768)

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James Douglas, fourteenth earl of Morton (1702–1768)

by Jeremiah Davison, 1740 [with members of his family]

Scottish National Portrait Gallery <<http://www.natgalscot.ac.uk/>>

**Douglas, James, fourteenth earl of Morton** (1702–1768), natural philosopher, was born in Edinburgh, the eldest of three sons of George Douglas, thirteenth earl of Morton (1662–1738), politician, and his second wife, Frances, daughter of William Adderley of Halstow, Kent. He graduated MA from King's College, Cambridge, in 1722; he may also have attended the University of Edinburgh. Upon leaving Cambridge he embarked on the grand tour, and established connections with French scientists. After returning to Scotland he entered scientific circles in Edinburgh, and became close friends with the mathematician Colin Maclaurin. Lord Aberdour, as he was known at this time, was elected a fellow of the Royal Society of London on 19 April 1733. With Maclaurin and several others, Aberdour observed a solar eclipse in February 1737. He was one of the six men (Maclaurin, Lord Hope, Andrew Plummer, Alexander Lind of Gorgie, and Alexander Monro *primus* were the others) who in May 1737 proposed the formation of the Philosophical Society of Edinburgh, which expanded

the Medical Society founded in 1731 by Monro into a broader society devoted to natural philosophy and related subjects. Aberdour was named the society's president. Early recipients of his patronage via the society include the applied mathematician and Church of Scotland minister Alexander Bryce.

In 1738 Aberdour succeeded to the title of earl of Morton, and was invested with the Order of the Thistle. The following year, after the death of the earl of Selkirk, he was appointed a lord of the bedchamber, and succeeded Selkirk as a representative peer for Scotland. He regularly spoke in the House of Lords. Before 1731 he had married Agatha (d. 1748), daughter and heir of James Halyburton of Pitcur, Forfarshire; they had five sons and two daughters.

Morton was involved in many scientific activities. He was a patron of the instrument maker James Short (whom he hired to tutor his children) and owned several of Short's telescopes. With Maclaurin and the earl of Hopetoun he was successful in establishing an observatory at the University of Edinburgh, and gave £100 toward the fund in 1740. A member of the Honourable Society for Improvement in the Knowledge of Agriculture in Scotland, he was also interested in mining and chemistry, and was keen to exploit resources of lead and coal on his estates. One of the two articles he published in the *Philosophical Transactions* of the Royal Society, concerning the validity of a supposed cure for hydrophobia, further demonstrates Morton's involvement in the study of medicine. The paper well displays his critical and empirical turn of mind: after reading a newspaper story that an Italian cured the illness by administering draughts of vinegar, he wrote to a friend in Venice to ascertain the truth of the story, which turned out to be false.

In 1739 Morton travelled to Orkney to survey his estates there and also to measure a degree of latitude. These lands had been held under form of mortgage from the crown since 1707, by which Morton was sheriff and steward of Orkney and Shetland. During the 1739 visit he was assaulted by Sir James Steuart of Burray, bt, one of the principal Orkney lairds, during a dispute over the amount owed by Orkney landholders to Morton in feudal duties, before the court of session in Edinburgh since 1735, and Morton's investigation as sheriff into Steuart's alleged intimidation of his tenants on South Ronaldsay. Steuart was fined and imprisoned. In 1742 Morton obtained an act of parliament which made the grant of Orkney and Shetland absolute to himself. Morton eventually defeated Steuart's party in court in 1759, but the failure of the campaign left several landholders in Orkney out of pocket. Their hostility, combined with Morton's wish to concentrate on natural philosophy, and increasing prosperity in the islands which encouraged a younger generation of lairds to assert their independence from Morton's authority, contributed to his decision to sell the islands in 1766 to Sir Lawrence Dundas for £63,000.

Morton's politics are unclear, though he was associated with the duke of Newcastle in parliament. In September 1746, during a visit to Paris, he was imprisoned in the Bastille (along with his wife, child, and sister-in-law) for three months for failure to produce documentation to validate his residence. Horace Walpole commented on Morton's 'imprudence' and the *Daily Advertiser* claimed a private cipher was found in his papers with Jacobite connections. (Walpole, *Corr.*, 19.301). Having been released in late 1746, the family did not return to Britain until May 1747, but Morton must have gone back to France a year later, for he reported in the *Philosophical Transactions* (vol. 45) on an eclipse of the sun he observed in Paris in July 1748. He had hoped to make his observations in Scotland, but the

meridian line set by Maclaurin had been destroyed during the rising of 1745–6. Morton's first wife died on 12 December 1748, and on 31 July 1755 he married Bridget (1722/3–1805), eldest daughter of Sir John Heathcote, bt, of Normanton, Rutland; they had one son, John (1756–1818), and a daughter, Bridget (1758–1842).

In the 1750s Morton acted as an intermediary between Robert Wallace and the French *philosophe* Montesquieu, in regard to Wallace's debate over ancient population with David Hume. In 1760, after the death of the Hon. Alexander Hume Campbell, Morton was named lord clerk register of Scotland, and developed plans to preserve the archives. A trustee of the British Museum and member of the longitude commission, he was also one of the commissioners of annexed estates between 1755 and 1760, but never attended a meeting. Having been elected to the council of the Royal Society on 30 November 1763, he was elected president following the death of the earl of Macclesfield six months later. He also filled Macclesfield's place as a foreign member of the Académie Royale des Sciences in Paris. During Morton's presidency of the Royal Society the Greenwich observatory was placed under the society's management, Mason and Dixon were charged to measure a degree of latitude during the course of their famous survey, and preparations were made for the observation of the 1769 transit of Venus for which Morton, in his capacity as a commissioner of longitude, had obtained government funding. Unfortunately, he did not live to see Cook embark, but died at Chiswick on 12 October 1768. Morton was anatomized by Sir John Pringle of Edinburgh, where he was probably buried. He was survived by his wife, who died on 2 March 1805. Of the surviving children of his first marriage, his second son, Sholto Charles (1732–1774), succeeded his father as fifteenth earl, and the younger daughter, Mary (1740?–1816), married Charles Gordon, fourth earl of Aboyne, in 1774.

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NA Scot., corresp., legal and estate papers

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RS

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U. Aberdeen

U. Edin.

BL, corresp. with Lord Hardwicke, Add. MSS 35446–35910

BL, corresp. with Sir Andrew Mitchell, Add. MS 58286

BL, corresp. with duke of Newcastle, etc., Add. MSS 32699–33056

NA Scot., letters to John Drummond

U. Nott. L., letters to Henry Pelham

## Likenesses

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J. Davison, group portrait, oils, 1740 (with members of his family), Scot. NPG [see illus.]

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