Clark, Sir James, first baronet (1788–1870), physician, was born on 14 December 1788 at Cullen House, Banffshire, where his father, David Clark (1751–1836), was butler to the earl of Findlater; his mother was Isabella Scott (1756–1812), daughter of John Scott of Glassaugh. James, the elder son (there was also a daughter), received his early education at the kirk session school at Cullen, but when his parents moved to nearby Kilmillock he transferred to Fordyce parish school, in 1799. Unlike his schoolfriend John Forbes (1787–1861), he did not attend Aberdeen grammar school; he is, however, listed in the class of 1803–7 at King’s College, Aberdeen. Clark left there without a degree to become articled to a lawyer in Banff, while considering a career in the church or in medicine.

Having decided on medicine Clark went to Edinburgh, where he qualified as a member of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh in 1805. He then entered the medical service of the Royal Navy and, after one year’s training at Haslar Hospital, joined the armed schooner Thistle as assistant surgeon. He survived the wreck of this ship on the coast of New Jersey in 1811, and was promoted to full surgeon, but he suffered misfortune again on his next vessel, La Colombi, which was also wrecked, at Jamaica in 1813. He next served in the two frigates Chesapeake and Maidstone on the North American station where, in conjunction with W. E. Parry (1790–1855), he carried out experiments on the temperature of the Gulf Stream.

At the end of the Napoleonic wars Clark was put on half pay, and he next entered the University of Edinburgh, where he graduated MD in 1817 with a thesis entitled De frigaris effeectibus in corpus vivum. Clark dedicated it to the Revd John Stephen, whose home Clark had visited in Nassau when on shore leave in the Bahamas while serving in the navy. The Revd Stephen had an only daughter, Barbara (d. 1862), with whom Clark fell in love and later married in Rome in 1820; they had one son, John Forbes Clark (1821–1910).

After graduating at Edinburgh, Clark commenced his observations on the influence of climate on disease, particularly tuberculosis (TB), which was at that time pandemic. In 1818 he accompanied a patient suffering from TB to the south of France, Lausanne, and Florence. A visit to the Necker Hospital in Paris introduced Clark to the use of the stethoscope, which he introduced into his own clinical practice. Clark’s continental experience inspired his first publication, which he dedicated to his ‘affectionate friend’ John Forbes. Medical notes on climate, diseases, hospitals, and medical schools in France, Italy, and Switzerland appeared in 1820. An extended version, The influence of climate in the prevention...
and cure of chronic disease, was published in 1829; it had the merit of giving advice on a subject about which very little information was then known; this ran to a third edition in 1841.

By about 1819 Clark had settled in practice in Rome, where he lived near the piazza di Spagna. Many of his patients were wealthy English expatriates, but he also treated the poet John Keats (1795–1821), who had arrived moribund with advanced pulmonary TB to live with Joseph Severn (1793–1874) in an apartment by the Spanish Steps. Clark looked after Keats devotedly during the last four months of his terminal illness, but he has since been criticized for his failure to diagnose TB (Taylor, 215). Another point of view is that Clark was too kindly to tell the brutal truth to the dying poet (Longford, 82).

Clark moved to London in 1826 and was admitted a licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians in June of that year. He was then appointed physician to St George’s Infirmary. At first he lived in George Street, Hanover Square, and his initial progress was slow. Clark wrote articles for Forbes’s journal, the Cyclopaedia of Practical Medicine, between 1831 and 1835. In 1832 he was elected a fellow of the Royal Society. His major work, A Treatise on Pulmonary Consumption, was published in 1835 and concentrated on the preventive aspects of infectious TB; it was aimed as much at the general public as at the medical profession and was highly recommended by The Lancet. There were several English editions as well as translations into foreign languages.

During the summer season Clark visited the spa towns and universities of Germany acting as physician to Prince Leopold (1790–1853). This liaison resulted in Clark’s appointment in 1835 as physician to Leopold’s sister, the duchess of Kent, at the English royal court. Clark’s appointment caused consternation in the Royal College of Physicians, the Fellows of which looked on the appointment of a northern graduate very much as the breach of bishops might resent the intrusion of a Dissenter (Lancet, 66). However, Clark immediately made his mark at court by insisting that the young Princess Victoria’s window at Kensington Palace must always be kept open whenever the room was empty. This must have impressed the princess for, on her accession to the throne in 1837, Clark was not only made physician-in-ordinary but also was created baronet, of Tillypronie. Clark became a trusted physician and close friend and adviser to the queen and Prince Albert.

Clark’s practice increased steadily, but he became unpopular owing to his conduct in the case of Lady Flora Hastings, in 1839. The growth of a fatal abdominal tumour had led to the erroneous suspicion that she was pregnant and Clark was called upon to express an opinion upon her condition. He prevaricated, finally deciding to wait and see. The resulting controversy nevertheless damaged his reputation. Clark was also criticized for failing to diagnose Prince Albert’s fatal attack of typhoid in 1861; but in fairness to Clark, the prince consort was also attended by Sir William Jenner (1815–1895), an eminent authority on typhoid and typhus fevers. Significantly, Queen Victoria blamed neither doctor, even remarking that ‘good old Clark is here every day’ (Cromwell, 24). Clark was deeply affected by the untimely death of the prince consort and a further blow was the loss of his wife, Barbara, in 1862.
Clark was awarded an honorary degree by King's College, Aberdeen, in 1848, and he was elected assessor to the senate of King's in 1856. He also served on the senate of the University of London from 1858 to 1865. In medical education Clark stressed the importance of bedside clinical examination. Two letters on medical reform in 1842 and 1843 were directed at the rationalization of medical qualifications, but his suggestions were not generally accepted. He served as a member of the General Medical Council, from its inauguration in 1858 until 1862, and on several royal commissions including that on military hygiene in the aftermath of the Crimean War. He introduced Florence Nightingale to Queen Victoria, thereby associating the queen with the nursing reforms at St Thomas's Hospital. He was also one of the founders in 1845 of the College of Chemistry, and he enlisted the aid of Prince Albert when it ran into financial difficulties in 1852. In addition Clark was interested in phrenology; he joined a phrenological society in London in 1832 and knew both Andrew and George Combe, later arranging for the latter to read the heads of the royal family.

In 1860 Clark retired from practice; having lived in London in Brook Street, Grosvenor Square, from 1841, he now moved to Bagshot Park in Surrey, which had been lent to him by the queen for the duration of his life. He was made KCB in 1866. During his final years he produced an excellent biography of the former medical superintendent of Hanwell Asylum, John Conolly (1794–1866), which was published in 1869. The writing bears the unmistakable direct style of the author. Clark supported Conolly's humane methods of treatment of the insane through the abolition of all forms of physical restraint.

Clark had suffered an attack of typhoid fever in 1827, from which he never fully recovered. In 1868 he suffered a severe bout of bronchitis, which debilitated him. He was contemplating a visit to Scotland as his health improved in warmer weather, when he succumbed to gastric bleeding and died peacefully at Bagshot Park on 29 June 1870. His son, John Forbes Clark, succeeded to the title of Tillypronie, a Scottish estate of 800 acres, purchased some years previously by Clark, who used to describe himself in his native accent as the 'wee cock lairdie' (Cormack, 26).

Clark's death left a large gap in the ranks of the medical profession. It was said that he had little originality of intellect (Lancet, 67), but that this was offset by his disregard for popularity and by his outstanding wisdom, skill, and humanity as a physician. Above all he was to be remembered for his devotion to the welfare of the queen and the royal family, especially the prince consort, whom he advised regularly on matters of medical science and education.

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