

# *A Character Study* of the Rev. Dr. Francis Alison By Rev. Matthew Wilson\*

Following is the complete *Character Study* of Alison by his former student Matthew Wilson, written about six months after Alison died. [Wilson says in a note that the harsh winter of 1779-1780 delayed getting the *Character Study* to the printer.]

Because of changes in style and usage some of the language and context from 250 years ago needs to be explained, we have provided notes, both in the general introduction below, as well as side notes on the following pages.

## General Introduction

- **Punctuation** in the 18th Century was different. Most notably, the semi-colon was used quite frequently; commas less so. Sometimes they would leave out the end quotation mark. We have reproduced Matthew Wilson's article in its entirety without changing punctuation except where the punctuation was ambiguous. **Highlighted texts** in the original texts are highlighted here, also. Unusual and added helper words are brackets; If longer explanations are needed, they will be found in side notes.
- **Eighteenth Century Writers** often wrote in extended, complex sentences, and just as often, in florid prose. Wilson did both. This might seem excessive to the modern reader, but Wilson deliberately calls his piece a **Character Study** rather than an **Encomium** [see note 5 below] to let the reader know that he is not exaggerating. Some of the extremely long sentences have emphasis added and punctuation changed for clarity.
- **Spelling** was not standardized back then. That would not happen for another fifty years or so until Daniel Webster compiled his dictionary.
- **Lastly, meaning of words and their context have changed** and I have, to the best of my ability, defined unclear 18th century words and meanings.

---

\*Matthew Wilson, a student of Alison's, was Pastor to the Presbyterian Church of Lewes, Indian River, and Cool Spring, Delaware, from 1756 until his death in 1790. **Wilson's *Character Study* is in the Public Domain; the notes and explanatory material are copyrighted (c) 2026, by the Francis Alison Foundation (hereafter "the Foundation") and may not be used without the expressed written consent of the Foundation.**

1) The Letter

To the Printer of the PENNSYLVANIA JOURNAL

S I R,

Desirous (like the Indians<sup>1</sup>) of brightening the chain of friendship. I had the happiness long to cultivate with your father, and began with you before the confusions of war interrupted it:

I beg a place in your patriotic Journal for the Character of **one of the Greatest Men of America**, drawn as briefly as I could, with some hints which may be useful at **this time, when Seminaries of Learning**, while demolish'd by the ungenerous English, are ready to be established, I hope, on broader bottoms, and better foundations, than before. ●●● I boldly prophesy that **Learning**, as well as **Liberty** are first to arrive as the highest possible summit of perfection in the Columbian States.<sup>2</sup>

But in order to [*do*] this the **Seats of the Muses** must be removed to the remotest distances from the proud, immoral; luxurious and effeminate cities to some poor, honest, laborious villages, where the **Lacedaemonian**<sup>3</sup> virtues, with Dr. Alison's unequalled assiduity and most successful method of teaching, the **Belles Lettres**, etc, may be secured by the **Laws of Congress**, and rendered immutable, as those of the Meades and Persians.

I doubt not you will, for this most important purpose, devote a column or two of your valuable Paper to publish this Character as soon as you can, which I could not send sooner, through the severity of the Winter.

I am, Sir, much at your service,  
[*Matthew Wilson*]

**Side Notes:**

- 1) I suspect these were the **Lenape**, who were on cordial terms with the first settlers to Pennsylvania.
- 2) **Columbian States** -the Thirteen Colonies A poetic way of saying "The New World," no longer European-dominated.
- 3) **Lacedaemonian** is an adjective and noun pertaining to ancient Sparta, a prominent Greek city-state. The term is a direct reference to Lacedaemon, the original geographic name for both the city and the surrounding region of the Eurotas valley in the southeastern Peloponnese. In this case the author means a "Spartan" lifestyle with self-control, discipline and simplicity.
- 4) **Law ... of the Meades and Persians**. A Biblical reference from Daniel, chapter 6. A law, once established, which cannot be overturned.

## 2) *The Character Study*

### *The Character of the Rev. Francis Alison, D.D. Vice-Provost of the College of Philadelphia, husbandly and modestly attempted by one of his pupils.*

The death of this great man [on Nov 28, 1779], is just announced to us in a distant state, by Mr. Bradford's impartial Journal with this just and comprehensive character, viz. "*in sum the College has lost a learned and laborious teacher ; the Church of Christ a faithful minister; and society a truly useful and honest man.*" ●●● To this let me only add a few indisputable truths, not in the paint of praetorial and poetic encomiums<sup>5</sup>, but that simplicity and truth which becomes Philosophers and Christians, from my own knowledge for the imitation of others in public office.

Dr. Alison's natural genius and powers of mind appear to every observer, **great and excellent**, beyond the common rate of learned men. His **apprehensions** prompt, quick and clear. His **judgment** penetrating, solid, stable and firm. His **reasoning acute and expert**. How oft have we seen him, in synodical, or other debates, quick as lightning, viewing the case on all sides and forming in an instant, a clearer judgment than most other men after long disputation.<sup>6</sup> So clear and distinct his understanding, that it would penetrate at once into knotty difficulties, with the greatest facility. Nor were his notions only borrow'd from books and systems, or taken on trust but form'd by "reasons comparing balance," as if truth were more connatural<sup>6</sup> to him, much sounder digested, made his own, and inwrought [*i.e., thought through*] in his mind. His **memory** in younger years was admirable too, for as to prepare or commit his sermons in few minutes, which were aways rational; not inelegant; affecting; carrying full conviction to every attentive hearer's mind and agreeable to the sacred oracles; which he could excellently explain and defend against the errors of the **superstitious**, the **enthusiast** and the **libertine**. He had a surprising **readiness and copiousness of speaking** in private or public. His **STILE**<sup>7</sup> [*style*] tho' proper, expressive; clear and concise, yet was nobly negligent. Warm'd with the subject, he could not stoop to the affected eloquence of words. Indeed every man's style in general is almost as peculiar to himself as his **voice** and **features**. He esteemed an

#### Side Notes:

5) "praetorial and poetic encomiums" In ancient Greece and Rome, an encomium wasn't just a casual compliment; it was a highly structured speech. Wilson uses the term "the Character of" rather than an encomium to talk about Alison; therefore, this is a less formalized Character Study of the "great man."

6) "disputation" a highly formalized academic debate where a student defended a written thesis against objections from professors or peers

6) "Connatural." Today we would say "came naturally to him."

7) "STILE" or "style" meant more than "fashion;" rather "*une façon de parler*;" i.e., a way of speaking.

affected style awkward<sup>8</sup>, and thought it better to creep humbly according to nature than attempt to fly on stolen pinions, which he used to call "**prose run mad.**" *Purpureus pannus*<sup>9</sup>, &c. [Horace]

His wit was facetious<sup>10</sup> among chosen friends, and his **fancy** *i.e., his imagination*] vigorous and lively. He did not banish **pleasantry** from his conversation, from which he had superior advantage from his great reading, and variety of story both ancient and modern. But his **wit** was more usually displayed in **keen satire** before<sup>11</sup> vice or folly, for the good of the company.

**His great and accurate learning and acquired knowledge** in the Latin and Greek languages (with some Hebrew) and all the liberal arts and sciences evidenced that he had been taught by very learned and correct teachers. in his own country of Ireland (*and in the colleges of Scotland where he also went for improvement*),<sup>12</sup> Yet he continued a devourer of books, and adding to his rich treasure [*of*] knowledge, thro' all his lengthen'd life.<sup>13</sup>

He could well direct others [*how*] to **select a library**, for [*he*] himself was a living one. He read almost all books of any note, and being an excellent judge and critic, he could recommend the best.

Nor did he look with a careless glance on the **public affairs of his country**, but would speak of them as a man of **prospect and large thought**, before his strength of body and mind were worn out by long and severe afflictions,<sup>13</sup> never failed to implant the **love of civil and religious liberty** deep in every heart of his pupils, near forty years ago.

He had a great aversion to **appearing in print**, so that his friends could never extort any thing from him for the press that I recollect, except a **Synodical Sermon to excite love and union among Christian Churches**,<sup>14</sup> which was recommended by the ingenious Dr. Smith<sup>15</sup>, of another Society. Yet several of his anonymous publications met with public applause, in the Magazines, Etc. Sic.

Dr. Alison was a **man of such Stoic or rather Christian**

#### Side Notes:

8) "*He esteemed an affected style awkward*" literally meant that he viewed the common "affected style" of speaking of his day to be unnatural and therefore not to be used.

9) *literally, "purple cloth." We now call this "purple prose.*

10) Facetious was a complementing his time, meaning "witty" or "amusing."

11) "before," meant "in the face of," thus, Alison showed keen satire against vice or folly.

12) I have reworked this 54-word sentence to make it clearer to the modern reader and also made one phrase an appositive (by putting it in brackets) to further the clarity of the sentence.

13) "lengthened life" and "long and severe afflictions." The average of death of someone born in 1705 was 46 years. The fact that Francis Alison died at age 74 meant that his body was worn out, not only with disease but with stress and the effects of the Revolutionary War.

14) Alison firmly believed in the **unity of all Christians**. He knew the leaders of most of the denominations in Philadelphia; he worked hard to unify the **Old Side/New Side** controversy in the Presbyterian church in the colonies.

15). **Rev. Dr. William Smith**, was an Episcopalian Priest and Loyalist. He was the first Provost of the Pennsylvania Academy/College of Philadelphia. At that time Alison was Vice Provost and professor of the Classics and Natural Sciences. Smith and Alison were on opposite ends of the quest for independence (Smith against, Alison for). Their shared passion for education, however, allowed them to find ways to work together for the sale of the students,

virtues, he could in nothing **prevaricate** with his own fettle<sup>15</sup>, so that he came over [*to America as*] a **poor man** to the wilds of America, **rather than accept the rich emoluments of a establishment kindly offered** him by his [Episcopalian] friends [*who were then*] in power, with an infringement of his conscience. Yet, he continued a strict friendship with worthy men of the Episcopal communion.

He was a man of warm and steady friendship, and so scrupulous his **fidelity**, his **word was as sacred as an oath**. He hated all **dissimulation**<sup>16</sup> and hypocrisy and could seldom forebear affronting those he esteemed guilt of it, whether in high or low life.

He was **exceeding punctual in his appointments**, even when too arduous for his declining constitution, and his compliance with his word, if possible was punctual as the returns of day and night. Hence he often censured young men for want of public spirit. And hence his friends knew it was in vain to urge his stay with them beyond his appointed hour.

His **hospitality and charity** were large and diffuse to proper objects, especially to youths, whom he hoped to improve for the service of God and their country. For of the school of poverty he well knew that great men could only be form'd, as own ancient Greece or Rome. He greatly despised luxury and dissipation in young men, whom he referred to as the most **useless drones** and the **most contemptible burdens** of the earth. "*Fruges consumere nati*,"<sup>17</sup> etc,

And after he accepted a Professorship in the College of Philadelphia he often lamented, that **he could not in the city** advance the interest of learning. **as in the country**. This was the true reason why he, labour'd for, and obtained a **charter and fund** for an Academy at New.Ark [i.e., Newark, DE. This academy would eventually become the University of Delaware], which he esteemed a suitable, healthy collage, not too rich and luxurious, where real learning might be obtained.

His **greatest ambition was to do good**, [*coming*] from a largeness of soul which comprehended at once the various interests of his **God**, of the **world**, his **country** and his **friends**; ready to serve them all to his utmost.

15) "could in nothing prevaricate with his own fettle<sup>15</sup>" Because Alison was of such "fettle" (ordered) judgment, he could not lie.

16) "dissimulation" = "The practice of professing beliefs, feelings or virtues **that one does not possess**," in this case, a simulation of goodness."

17) "*Fruges consumere nati*," **This is a quote from Horace, which literally means** "we are born to consume," i.e., to exhibit hedonism. (We would now call this consumerism).

But that “**he might not be exalted above measure,**”<sup>18</sup> by these great **abilities** and **virtues**, he was ever afflicted and **kept humble by his temper**, which was **very choleric**, and gave him great trouble to refrain, yet he would often refrain it to admiration, when he was warned of something expected to ruffle it; however, though on some unexpected occurrences it would carry him too far, yet he would make ample amend, by doing greater favors to those who had taken in dudgeon [*i.e., taken offense at*] the keenest of his satire; **at the same time this occurred,**<sup>19</sup> his temper greatly stimulated youth to correctness and learning.

Reader, cast a veil on the **afflictions and misfortunes** of this great Man, and thank Heaven if you are more happy. I only add, his children<sup>20</sup> are blest with fine geniuses, that may be greatly useful to their country, if they imitate their Father's virtues.

The most important part of the Doctor's character, is yet to be mentioned, **his indefatigable labors and assiduous application** in promoting a **liberal education**<sup>21</sup>, and good learning in America.

Many men of learning had before come over to **America**, and some had made some feeble, unsuccessful attempts to teach youth here; hut it must be owned by all, they had not Dr. Alison's **talents, resolution, perseverance or success**. It is certain [*that*] he was **the first who introduced real learning**, not only **Latin and Greek**, with great exactness, but also **diffused the knowledge of all the liberal arts and sciences**, which enlarge and improve the mind; not only through

Pennsylvania but in all the neighbouring States, so that almost all men of **real learning**, in these-parts of the world, who are **natives** of the country, were either taught by him, or his **pupils**, or their **Scholars**; as not only the Honorable the Secretary of Congress [*Charles Thompson*], and Chief Justice of Pennsylvania [*Thomas McKean - who also was the president of the continental congress*], Dr. Ewing, George Reed, Esq., etc, etc, &cc. But many, who have filled with honor the first places in the **Churches, Colleges and Republic, Army, Law and Medicine**, of whom, many of the finest talents have withdrawn from our world before their venerable master.

18) A literary reference to St. Paul's “**thorn in the flesh**”: “**And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations**” given to St Paul “**a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure.**”. 2nd Corinthians 12:7-10 (NKJV)

19) We have substituted the phrase “**at the same time this occurred**” to clarify Wilson's original word “while”

20) **Alison and his wife, Hannah Armitage Alison** had six children, two who died in infancy. His family is discussed elsewhere in francisalison.org.

21) A **Liberal Education** is not political but rather philosophical, a wide-ranging view of the world, combined with critical thinking.

He first opened a **seat of learning in New London, Chester County**, of great and deserved renown in those days. (I think it can not want much of 40 years since) on the most generous and broad bottom, for all denominations of Christians equally; which was **visited, examined and encouraged by the Synod of Philadelphia**, sometimes every year until Colleges were erected, where youth resorted<sup>22</sup> from all the cities provinces and colonies around.

His **public spirit** was coextended with his life; not only anxious to promote **his own Seminary** of learning, he [*also*] sent such of his pupils, as he could recommend, to **teach public schools**, wherever he could influence; ~~also~~ [*i.e., and*] **to be assistants** to other teachers then beginning the important task [*of teaching*] and **be tutors in other schools and colleges** [when erected]<sup>23</sup>, who thought themselves happy to get some of his pupils to put matters and scholars, on the Doctor's most correct and successful methods of teaching.

From Dr. Alison the **love of learning**, "**cached by a happy contagion of his virtue**," spread through the new world, and founded all the **colleges and academies around**; which I hope the rage of war<sup>24</sup> will never extinguish.

Permit me to offer a few hints, respecting his **first synodical seminary**<sup>25</sup> which may be imported by all other teachers of youth in his first Seminary, though he had often great numbers under his cares and frequently **two or more assistants**, yet **his own attention to every class and every student**, seemed nevertheless unremitting. [*i.e., unabated.*]

The great Mr Locke, and many since have **objected against losing** "several years gaining a critical knowledge of dead languages, Latin, Greek and Hebrew, while our own tongue, is neglected., etc." ... But had Mr. Locke known so happy a Plan of teaching as Dr. Alison's, he would have found that **no time was lost, for while the Latin and Greek were in teaching**, we were not only taught the English grammar by comparing it with the Latin; with the **principles, difficulties, beauties and defeats** of our mother tongue; **but also we were taught to write and speak correct English**, nay, while the **Latin and Greek grammars** were accurately taught and exemplified in every lesson of our classes, every part of the **Belles Lettres**, as the **Pantheon** or heathen mythology, rhetoric and figures, geography and maps, chronologies, and **Gray's Memoria Technica, Kennet's Roman and Paster's Greek Antiquities** and ancient

22) "resorted" - to "take resort in", that is, to get away from everything else, in this case, to learn..

23) brackets were not in the original but rather added for clarity.

24) The War for Independence would not end for another three and a half years (Sept. 3, 1783).

25) When we think of seminaries today, we think of schools to prepare clergy. A seminary in those days was a place to train people for professions.

customs; **Vertet's Roman** revolutions and other history (which we were not only obliged to read but answer any questions out of them he chose to interrogate) and besides all these, **characters, actions, morals and events** were taught, explained by him in every lesson.

As **knowledge and composition, or writing and speaking**, are the **greatest ends of a liberal education**, we received the greatest advantage from his critical examination every morning of our **themes** English and Latin, **epistles** English and Latin, **descriptions** in verse, and especially our **abstracts** or **abridgments** of a paper from the Spectator; or Guardian (the best standards of our language) **substantially contracted into one of our exercises**.

When languages were accurately taught, we entered on a course of **philosophy, instrumental, natural, and moral**, in all which the Doctor contented not himself with giving, only lectures; he also examined us daily, and obliged us to write abridgments, for ourselves, of the greatest utility.

When we came to read **Juvenal**, our declamations began, which we wrote and delivered by memory...And after logic, our syllogistic disputations.

I cannot stay to speak of his obtaining the Widow's Fund, his writings and improvements on agriculture for the good of farmers, whom he called the best members of society and every scheme of greatest public utility, which were his daily employ.

From this too short and defective character {study}, it is plain **Dr. Alison was the principal father of learning and learned men** and like Prometheus, Cadmus, or even Apollo of old, deserves perpetual remembrance,. as one of the greatest public benefactors, on whose urn every grateful Son of Science will drop a tear.