A Glimpse of the Past...

What follows are excerpts from an article written for the first edition of the biannual *Dublin Students' Medical Journal and Graduates' Gazette* in 1961. Walk around the halls of St. James’ and Tallaght Hospitals, and notice the names of the wards, the portraits on the walls. Who were these men and women? They were the men and women who shaped the practice of medicine as we know it. For example, Robert Graves, the world famous Dublin physician, is perhaps best known for the eponymous Graves’ disease, a condition of hyperthyroidism and exophthalmos. William Stokes, of the St. James’ William Stokes Postgraduate Centre, may be recognized by medical students for Cheyne-Stokes respiration and Stokes-Adams attacks, but his contribution to medicine was far greater. The legacy of these men and many others lives on not only in their names and our halls, but in the medicine we want to practice and the atmosphere in which we learn.


Disraeli tells us “One of the greatest legacies of any nation is the memory of a great man and the inheritance of a great example....”

In the Statue Hall of the Royal College of Physicians, Dublin, there stands a marble statue, executed by Foley, of a man “loved and honoured so well, reminding us all of the time when there was laid the foundation stone of clinical medicine in Ireland.” It reminds us of a period of progress, and of one who must ever serve as a beacon to those who strive to elevate the profession of medicine....

William Stokes was the pioneer in that work of progress, and when an Irishman speaks of William Stokes one usually hears undiluted eulogy, for the medical school was enriched by him and the seeds he sowed are multiplying. Stokes’ life and labours show in an admirable way how past experience, and example, can illuminate the works of present time.

William Stokes was born in July, 1804, in Dublin.... He was the second son of Whitley Stokes, one time Fellow of Trinity College, Dublin, Regius Professor of Medicine, Dublin University and Physician to the Meath Hospital.... [Stokes] studied clinical medicine for a short time in the Meath Hospital, and chemistry at Trinity. ...Later, in Edinburgh, he came under the influence of Professor Alison, a humane practical physician, from whom Stokes imbibed a profound love of clinical medicine....

At this time the writings of Rene Laennec (1782-1826), the inventor of the stethoscope and the father of modern medicine, were causing much discussion. In Laennec’s time the whole field of clinical medicine lay before him, fertile but sparsely sown....Stokes realised and recognised the value of Rene’s stethoscope, and while yet a student, published in 1825 a small treatise, which for its limpid clarity, and profundity of thought and expression, brought him persistent fame. The book was called “On the Use of the Stethoscope,” which was not intended “to enlighten such eminent individuals as Bayle, Laennec or Andral about its use, but was designed for the student whether as a tyro first commencing his medical labours, or one more advanced in the Apollian art.” This work was the first systematic treatise in the English language on the use of the stethoscope, and showed that the author had done much pathological and clinical work. He returned to Dublin in the autumn of 1825 and was elected Physician to the Dublin General Dispensary....

At the hospital Stokes became the colleague of the illustrious Robert James Graves who, during his wide travels became acquainted with a system of clinical teaching originating in Germany and perfected by the Italian, Professor Bulfini of Florence. Graves introduced this method of clinical teaching and with Stokes, delivered a series of lectures noted for their depth of thought, which made the Dublin School of Medicine known far and wide. ...

...Up to this time “The student, unassisted, undirected, was left to grope his way as best he could. He was kept at a distance; no one cared to instruct him, to show him how to teach himself....” The impassable gulf which, in that aristocratic era, lay between the student and his so-called teacher was, by Graves and later by Stokes, made to disappear, and for the first time in these countries, the pupil was brought into “a free and friendly contact with a mind so richly stored that it might be taken as an exponent of the actual state of medicine....”

Stokes was an ardent supporter of subjects divorced from medicine — art, painting and sculpture. He encouraged the labours of George Petrie, and by kindly sympathy and encouragement he stimulated the studies of younger people in all branches of learning. He was sympathetic towards Catholic emancipation, and we get a glimpse of his interest in the case in a letter to his wife in January 1829. “The peoples’ minds here are in a great state of political excitement about the Catholic question. The Catholics appear determined to obtain their rights... How blind, how infatuated must those men be who persist in refusing them their rights! The swords may quell them again and again, the gibbets may be loaded and the scaffolds stream with blood, but the voice of millions must be heard at last....”

Asiatic Cholera visited Dublin in 1832, and Stokes collaborated with Mr. Rumley, afterwards President of R.C.S.I., in preparing a report on the
first case. Their report infuriated the people, and it was by a near miracle that Stokes and his companion escaped their pursuers.…

Then in 1837 his monumental “Diagnosis and Treatment of Diseases of the Chest” appeared. This book established Stokes’ reputation as one of the greatest clinicians of his time, and as a veritable model of medical exposition.…

In 1838 Stokes founded the Pathological Society of Dublin, of which the present Royal Academy of Medicine is the lineal descendent, thus conferring to successive generations yet another boon.…

The eponym “Stokes-Adams syndrome” was employed to correlate the conditions described by Robert Adams in 1827, following Stokes’ celebrated account of heart block with syncopal attacks. Stokes also amplified on the observations by John Cheyne in “Rhythmic ascending and descending periods of respiration separated from one another by short pauses” and emphasised the serious prognostic import of this symptom. This periodic form of respiration has since become known as “Cheyne-Stokes Respiration.” In addition to the many honours and degrees which were conferred on Stokes, he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1863, and he was further awarded the rare distinction of order of merit of Frederick the Great (after this order had been made a civil one by Frederick William IV and granted for proficiency in science and art). He twice filled the office of President of the College and was censor and Vice President in 1848.…

In his “Prelection” to the Medical Session in 1855-56, Stokes said “do you look at your profession as a mere means of livelihood, to be reached by a course that can lead only to mediocrity, or will you strive to fit yourselves for the highest place by a full moral and mental culture? You are not going to trade, but to become members of an honourable profession…You are to support the dignity of a noble profession, therefore your moral perceptions must be cultivated and exalted and your conduct shall be based, not so much on the fear of the consequence of wrong, as upon the perfect love of that which is right.”

…Stokes resigned his Physicianship in April 1875—a post he had held for 50 years, and the “conqueror of disease” laid down his arms to enjoy a well-deserved rest…. Stokes died, but his spirit lives on as an inspiration to all clinical teachers…. Long may the union between the never-to-be-forgotten Past and the Living Present continue; no science, no profession, can benefit as much by it as that of medicine.

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