

Joseph Francis O'Carroll

Born: 1855
President: 1916-1919
Died: 1942

Joseph Francis O'Carroll was born in 1855. He was educated at the Cecelia Street School of Medicine and obtained the licences of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons in 1881, before studying in Vienna. In 1883, he became a Bachelor of Medicine of the Royal University of Ireland, proceeding to the Doctorate in 1889. In the following year, he was elected a Fellow of the College of Physicians, and later became Censor and Examiner.

In 1912, he was appointed Professor of Medicine at University College Dublin. For over 40 years he was one of the Visiting Physicians of the Richmond, Whitworth, and Hardwicke hospitals. He published many papers on heart diseases and diseases of the nervous system. He made many communications to the Royal Academy of Medicine of which he was President of the Sections of Medicine and Pathology.

O'Carroll was part of the increasingly Catholic social establishment. He resided in Merrion Square, with 4 servants, and had a country house in Donegal. He was a staunch supporter of the movement for national independence and contributed generously to every deserving cause. Outside his professional activities he had wide cultural interests, was well read in English and French, and was a Lecturer in English at the old Catholic University.

During the 1914-1918 war, he was Consulting Physician to the British Forces in Ireland with the rank of Colonel. He sadly lost two sons in the Great War. Having been awarded the OBE for his wartime services, he later relinquished it owing to his disagreeing with Auxiliary Police Activities in Ireland. He wrote in October 1920 to the Secretary of State at the Home Office: 'Now that the Parliament of the British Empire by the enactment of the so-called Restoration of Order Act and its subsequent administration has deprived my country of all the guarantees of public and private liberty which are supposed to be the marks of the British Empire, I feel that I can no longer with any self-respect remain a member of the Order.'¹

O'Carroll was described as a slight man, below medium height, with a sad face and pointed grey beard. His classes were large, as befitted a professor, but his delivery was monotonous. He was described as 'a man of acute intellect, careful study and meticulous care in clinical examination, he was quite devoid of pretence or affectation ... His anxiety to be perfectly accurate sometimes led him to express his opinions in so guarded a manner that it was not always easy to follow his

¹ Quoted in 'Dublin Doctor and OBE', *The Independent*, 8 October 1920.



line of thought, but careful attention led one to realise that, complicated as his sentence might seem by conditions and qualifications, his thought was clear and logical'.² He was representative of his time when he told students that 'if you get your Greek right you have learned half of medicine'.³

On 18 October 1916, O'Carroll was elected President of the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland unopposed. Many matters were addressed during his tenure. In February 1917, a resolution was received from the Council of the National Medical Union about mobilisation of the medical profession. In July, the College agreed to hold a Supplemental Final Examination in October for candidates seeking a commission in the Royal Army Medical Corps. During O'Carroll's presidency, several Fellows were granted leave of absence to go to France and for other duties related to the war. One of these, Sir William Henry Thomson, a distinguished Fellow, died when the HMS Leinster was torpedoed in the Irish Channel on 10 October 1918.

In February 1917, it was recommended to institute a certificate of competence in nursing, as advised by the College of Nursing Conference Committee, and to constitute a Board to supervise the education and to conduct the examination of such Irish nurses as seek the certificate. However, it was agreed to be inexpedient and inadvisable for the College in its corporate capacity to be associated with the proposed Irish Nursing Board.

In July 1918, after considerable lobbying during the preceding year, a joint deputation from the Church of Ireland and the Presbyterian Church of Ireland urged the College to establish a branch of the National Council for Combating Venereal Disease for the South of Ireland. While the College approved the aims, it did not seem that these would be best served by being founded by members of the medical profession, but the College was glad to give advice and assistance.

In May 1918, amendments to the Public Health Bill were noted making it obligatory upon local authorities to provide for the medical inspection of school children. In December 1918, a letter of congratulations was received from the Royal College of Physicians of London on the 400th anniversary of the foundation of the College.

O'Carroll suffered bad health for a considerable part of his career. In 1925, he retired from the Chair of Medicine and in 1932 retired from private practice and lived quietly at his country house near Dundrum. He died in 1942 at the age of 87.

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² 'Obituary. Joseph Francis O'Carroll', *Irish Journal of Medical Science*, March 1942

³ F O C Meenan, *Cecilia Street. The Catholic University School of Medicine 1855-1931* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1987), 89.

