

William Boxwell

Born: 1875
President: 1937-1940
Died: 1943

William Boxwell was one of the few pathologists to have served as President of the College of Physicians. He was born in India, where his father was Chief Commissioner in the Indian Civil Service, and he was educated at Shrewsbury School, Shropshire. Following his BA in Trinity College Dublin where he was awarded a classical scholarship, he read medicine there, graduating in 1903. He became a Fellow of the College of Physicians in 1908, and continued his family's long association with the Meath Hospital on his election there as Physician in 1911. He was awarded his MD in 1912.

Following service in the Royal Army Medical Corp in World War I, Boxwell was appointed Professor of Pathology and Bacteriology in the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI) in 1918. He combined this with his practice in the Meath, and his colleagues noted his capacity for work. He served as Censor and Examiner for the College of Physicians, and reluctantly accepted the office of President in 1937. His cousin Henry Stokes, another grandson of William Stokes (qv), served as President of the RCSI during Boxwell's period of office in the College of Physicians (1940).

Boxwell followed the interest of Arthur White, his predecessor as RCSI Professor, in vaccines and used them in his practice. His grandfather is credited with introducing the stethoscope to Irish medical practice, and Boxwell's main instrument of research was described as his 'well-worn wooden stethoscope'.¹ Recognising the utility of biochemistry and physiology in clinical practice, he supported the successful election of William Jessop (qv) as Physician to the Meath. Jessop, Professor of Physiology at RCSI, was not an experienced clinician and the appointment raised a few eyebrows. Boxwell wrote little, but collaborated with Francis Carmichael Purser (qv) on *An Introduction to Medicine* (Dublin, 1924). He notes that they requested wide margins from the publisher so that 'readers may have ample room to jot down matters of interest which they acquire from other sources'.² The text stresses the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to disease, but in general it is very much a book of its time.

Boxwell was an influence on Dorothy Stopford Price, who carried out post-mortems at the Meath for him. Her research was on the subject of tuberculosis, which Boxwell's book stated caused

¹ Obituary – William Boxwell, *Journal of the Medical Association of Ireland*, 1941, 74

² William Boxwell and Francis Carmichael Purser, *An introduction to the practice of medicine* (Dublin: The Talbot Press, 1924), vi.



between 12% and 15% of deaths in Ireland. Stopford Price would pioneer the use of the BCG vaccination for tuberculosis in Ireland.

Boxwell was described as a shy, modest but good-humoured man, preferring the company of students and small groups, and avoiding publicity. He found public speaking stressful: 'almost a torture'.³ His interests included literature, fishing and music, his wife Edith de Vere French being a distinguished pianist. They had no children.

William Boxwell died suddenly at his home at 2 Upper Hatch St on 22 May 1943; he had left a dinner party to finish some work in his laboratory before returning to his house. In addition to his clinical acumen, his erudition, wit and kindly nature were commented on in his obituaries, with William Doolin noting his 'sturdy, pugnacious loyalty' to the Meath Hospital.⁴

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³ In Memoriam – William Boxwell, Irish Journal of Medical Science, June 1943, 184-6

⁴ Ibid

