

Robert James Rowlette

Born: 1873
President: 1940-1943
Died: 1944

Robert Rowlette was strongly of the view that the medical profession, in addition to its duty to the individual, had a duty to ‘protect and improve the health of the community, both in general and in particular’.¹ He worked tirelessly towards this end, practising as a doctor and as a politician in both the Dáil and Senate. He was also an editor, an author and an athlete.

Born in Carn Cash, County Sligo, on 16 October 1873, Rowlette was the son of Matthew Rowlette, a farmer, and Kezia Rowlette (née Hunter). He was educated at Sligo Grammar School and subsequently entered Trinity College Dublin in 1891 where he studied arts and medicine. He graduated in 1895 with a senior moderatorship in ethics and logic. He served as President of the University Philosophical Society and his inaugural address on the limitations of government presaged his later political career. He was Vice President of the Historical Society, winning a gold medal for oratory in 1899.

His student years in Trinity were further enriched by his athletic prowess – he was a first-class long-distance runner and a member of Dublin University Harriers. He retained a lifelong interest in athletics, becoming President of the Irish Amateur Athletic Association (IAAA) from 1908 to 1920, and he was Honorary Physician to the British Olympic team at Antwerp in 1920 and to the Irish Olympic team in Paris in 1924 and Amsterdam in 1928. He was *The Irish Times* representative at Amsterdam contributing despatches from the games. Notably, when the Irish Free State came into being, Rowlette was prominent among those who attempted to heal the breach between the IAAA and the Gaelic Athletic Association.

Rowlette graduated MB and BCh in 1898 and MD in 1899. After graduation, he held a variety of posts including Lecturer in pathology in Queen’s College Galway from 1904 to 1909. He was pathologist at the Rotunda Hospital from 1905 to 1919, and at Dr Steevens’ Hospital from 1904 to 1909. Other appointments included Consulting Physician to the Royal Hospital for Incurables and to Stillorgan Convalescent Home and the Royal National Hospital for Consumption, as well as to the British Colonial Office. He served as a physician in Jervis Street from 1910 to 1919 and subsequently was a physician in Mercer’s Hospital from 1919 until his death. He was appointed Professor of Pharmacology in the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland in 1921, but five years later

¹ Robert J Rowlette, ‘The relation of the medical profession to the public’, *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, vol. xiv no. 5, 1927/28, 68-86.



he resigned to take up the position of King's Professor of Materia Medica and Pharmacy at Trinity College.

Rowlette was involved at a prominent level in many medical bodies and institutions. He was admitted as a Licentiate and Member of the College of Physicians in October 1911, and a Fellow in 1913. He was elected President of the College in 1940 on a three-year term. He was President of the Royal Academy of Medicine in Ireland and served as a member of the Medical Registration Council from its inception. He was also a member of the Irish Public Health Council (1919-25), and President of the Irish Medical Association from 1932 to 1936.

In October 1933, Rowlette was elected to the Dublin University Seat at Dáil Éireann. He was the first Deputy to enter the Dáil without taking the Oath of Allegiance to the King – this oath had been abolished the previous May. In 1934, section 17 of the Criminal Law Amendment Bill proposed the prohibition of the import and sale of contraceptives. Robert Rowlette and Oliver St John Gogarty opposed this section arguing that it would lead to a rise in abortion, infanticide, and venereal disease. They also argued that contraception was necessary when the life or health of a woman would be endangered by further pregnancy. Their arguments were to no avail. When university representation in the Dáil ended in 1937, Rowlette lost his seat; however, he was soon afterwards appointed as university representative to the Senate, serving from 1938 to 1944. In 1942, Rowlette was involved in public controversy when the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin, John Charles McQuaid, famously opposed the formation of an Irish national anti-tuberculosis league. Rowlette was chairman of the Provisional Executive Committee which was promoting the league.

Throughout his professional life, Rowlette was a prolific writer and an editor. In 1903, he began his apprenticeship in the *Medical Press and Circular* assisting the Irish editor Dr Henry Jellett. In 1909, when Jellett resigned, Rowlette was appointed Irish editor until the abolition of that office in 1936 consequent on the formation of the Irish Free State Medical Union which opted to establish its own journal. Inevitably, Rowlette became the first editor of their journal. For many years, he was Dublin correspondent of *The Lancet*. In 1939, Rowlette wrote a history of *The Medical Press and Circular 1839-1939*. He was elected a member of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland in 1919, was a council member, and a frequent contributor to the society's journal.

During World War I, Rowlette served in France with the RAMC as a lieutenant-colonel, and was mentioned in despatches. During World War II, he was involved in air-raid casualty preparations in a joint scheme between Mercers and St Bricin's Military Hospitals.

Unsurprisingly, his obituary in at least one medical journal attributed his death, in 1944, to over work. Rowlette was survived by his widow Gladys, daughter of Robert Camper Day and by his son Edward, who was in the Rhodesian Medical Service.

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