

Bethel Solomons

Born: 1885
President: 1946-1949
Died: 1963

Bethel Solomons was undoubtedly one of the obstetric and gynaecological weather makers of the first half of the twentieth century. Like Sir Andrew Horne (qv) he was alluded to by James Joyce, this time in *Finnegans Wake*, 'In my bethel of Solyman's I accouched their rotundities'¹.

His mother's obstetric history, commencing at the age of 36, was complicated by several miscarriages and the successful removal of an abdominal tumour by Spencer Wells, the most famous gynaecological surgeon in London at that time. Solomons' parents were both English and Orthodox Jews, yet assimilated and identified completely with the Irish Victorian society in which they moved.

Bethel's eighty-year span was filled by a life of wide interests and activities. His early interests, apart from medicine, were acting and rugby football. He was capped ten times for Ireland at rugby.

Solomons decided on a career in medicine and entered Trinity College, graduating in 1907. He considered general practice in England; however, a postgraduate course in the Rotunda Hospital developed an enduring interest in obstetrics and gynaecology. Prior to taking up the post of Assistant Master in the Rotunda, he studied and observed practice in various European centres. On completion of his term as Assistant Master he set up in private practice and was appointed to the visiting staff of Mercer's Hospital. One of his colleagues there was the famous surgeon, Sir William de Courcy Wheeler. In Mercer's Hospital, Solomons insisted on gynaecological practice not being part of general surgery. In his somewhat egocentric autobiography, *One doctor in his time* (London, 1956), he describes surgery on abdominal tumours and ruptured ectopic pregnancies. His practice was successful, as was his prowess as a teacher. He was always teaching and was popular at grinds for postgraduate students.

His *Handbook on gynaecology* (London, 1919) showed the breadth of his knowledge and practice. It also demonstrated his operative techniques and personal modifications of standard pelvic operations. His thoughts were not confined to surgical techniques. He wrote about thromboprophylaxis and in this he was well ahead of his time. He was one of the first advocates of early ambulation in the postoperative period. He authored many clinical papers, wrote

¹ James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939), 542.



Practical midwifery for nurses in 1930 and, between 1925 and 1937, edited three editions of *Tweedy's practical obstetrics*.

In 1926 Solomons was elected Master of the Rotunda and during the ensuing seven years focused his considerable energies on the advancement of that hospital. He recognized the need for laboratory services, X-ray services and specialist paediatricians. A dedicated internationalist, he established the Rotunda as a truly international postgraduate training centre. He was a prominent member of the Gynaecological Visiting Society, from which the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists developed. As a foundation Fellow and third Vice President of that College he insisted that Ireland should be an enduring part of its constituency. He travelled extensively in Britain, Europe and North America.

Solomons was elected a Fellow of the College of Physicians in 1914. There is little evidence that he took an active role in College activities during the ensuing years. However, such was his general eminence in the profession that in 1946 he was nominated together with two others for presidency of the College. He wrote, 'I had never dreamt of being President, and so I said I would take no part in the contest. To my astonishment, my two colleagues refused nomination and so I was unanimously elected'². The Irish Times reported his election as follows; 'Dr. Bethel Solomons who has been elected President of the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland, played Rugby for Ireland ten times'³. Solomons was an active President attending the College every day. The outstanding event during his presidency was a huge reception he gave on the occasion of the International Congress of Obstetrics and Gynaecology meeting in Dublin in July 1947. Over nine hundred persons attended including the Taoisigh, Éamon de Valera. This was the first major congress held in Dublin after the Second World War. At the end of his presidency, on the advice of the College Registrar, T Percy C Kirkpatrick, Solomons presented a silver gilt 'High Salt' cup to the College. The College, at the same time, accepted a portrait of him painted by his distinguished artist sister, Estella.

In addition to his undoubted clinical skills and energy, Solomons was all the more remarkable because of his ability in many other fields. He was a sportsman of note and was on friendly terms with many of the literary figures of the time. He was involved with liberal Jewry and anti-Semitism movements. Bethel Solomons was a professional giant on the medical stage during the first and second quarters of the twentieth century.

JFM

² Bethel Solomons, *One doctor in his time* (London: Christopher Johnson, 1956), 150-151.

³ Quoted in Solomons, *One Doctor*, 151.

