

## David Mitchell

**Born:** 1909  
**President:** 1969-1972  
**Died:** 1995

David Mitchell was born in Dublin on 3 June 1909, the first of three children to David William and Frances Elizabeth Mitchell (nee Kirby). He was educated at the High School Dublin and at the University of Dublin, Trinity College. He excelled in both institutions winning a succession of scholarships and prizes. David originally set out to study classics at Trinity but his scientific mind guided him otherwise and he transferred to natural sciences and medicine graduating MB BCH BAO in 1933 and MA in 1935.

After a succession of Senior House Officer appointments in the Royal City of Dublin and Dr Steevens' Hospitals, he was awarded the Adrian Stokes Memorial Fellowship in 1937. This allowed him to travel to the John Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, USA where he worked with Professor Maxwell Wintrobe, a renowned haematologist.

Returning to Dublin in 1939 he was awarded his MD degree and then appointed initially as Assistant Physician, and subsequently as Physician, to the Adelaide Hospital, a post he was to hold for the next 32 years. As a physician, he had a broad interest in general medicine. His initial areas of specialist interest were in haematology and respiratory medicine (he published several books on the latter subject), but he subsequently developed an interest and expertise in dermatology. This was an area of medicine both he and his wife Dorothy (née Moore), a fellow physician at the Adelaide and later President of the Section of Dermatology of the Royal Academy of Medicine in Ireland, subsequently practiced almost exclusively.

The Adelaide Hospital had a proud tradition in dermatology with Wallace Beatty, one of the foremost specialists of his time, practicing as one of Dublin's first dermatologists there. Mitchell published several papers in dermatology including those on pigmentation of the skin and hair in the *Irish Journal of Medical Science* and a 'History of Dermatology in Ireland' published in the *British Journal of Dermatology*. He was recognized as one of the foremost teachers of dermatology in Dublin.

The College was to play a large part in the professional life of David Mitchell. He became a Member in 1936 and was elected Fellow in 1938. When he became President of the College in 1969 medicine in Ireland was evolving rapidly. David had to deal with several key issues that required him to exercise his personal qualities of tact, wisdom and determination with various conflicting medical interests and bodies. There was an urgent need to harmonize postgraduate medical education in Ireland and to reform the examination for Membership of the Royal College



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that had been unchanged since the 1880s. As President, he participated in the founding of the Joint Committee for Higher Medical Training, and worked with the sister Colleges in the UK to ensure that the MRCPI was accepted as of equal standard to the MRCP (UK).

In addition to these important matters of medical ‘politics’ Mitchell reformed the College by-laws, instituted a modern management of the College and improved the decoration of the Kildare Street building. The College was fortunate to have Mitchell at its helm during these critical times and his period in office has been recorded as ‘a great presidency by any standards’.<sup>1</sup>

Three years after he completed his term as President of the College he was elected its Treasurer in 1975 and remained in charge of the College’s finances for the next 10 years. This ensured continuity and helped to ‘bed in’ the fundamental changes that he had instituted. Within the College he was widely regarded as a wise counsel and the ‘unofficial keeper of the College conscience’.<sup>2</sup>

The esteem in which he was held internationally was reflected by the fact that he was elected Fellow of the London College in 1974 and the Edinburgh College in 1978 having already been conferred Honorary Fellow of the American College of Physicians in 1970.

In addition to his major contributions to the College, Mitchell also found time to serve as President of the Royal Academy of Medicine in Ireland (1972-75) and as first President of the Medical Council of Ireland in 1979. He was also Chairman of the Board of the Adelaide Hospital and of the Central Council of the Federated Dublin Voluntary Hospitals at a time of intense negotiation and change in the affiliation of the various Dublin hospitals.

Those of us who had the privilege of meeting David Mitchell found him to be a very dignified courteous person who was held in great esteem by his contemporaries.

His medical philosophy and concern for his chosen profession might be summarized in these lines from the Doolin Memorial Lecture he gave in 1970, ‘The hallmarks of a profession are learning, integrity, self-imposed discipline and independence’. He then posed the question that resonates strongly in the current era, ‘We made our professional vow to preserve these standards – can we keep it today?’<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Grant, ‘Impressions of the College’ in David Mitchell, *An interim history of the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland, 1963-88* (Dublin: RCPI, 1992), p.87.

<sup>2</sup> Grant, ‘Impressions’, p.87.

<sup>3</sup> John G Kirker, ‘Obituary David Mitchell 1909-1995, Dorothy Mitchell 1909-1995’, *Journal of the Irish College of Physicians and Surgeons*, Vol. 24, No. 4, October 1995, p.307.

