

Bryan Gerald Alton

Born: 1919
President: 1974-1977
Died: 1991

Bryan Alton was born in Dublin on 5 May 1919, the son of Norman and Mary (nee Hayes) Alton. Bryan was an only child and his father died when he was five, so he was absorbed into the family life of his uncle Larry Masterson, a general practitioner. His education was at St Mary's College Rathmines and subsequently at Castleknock College. He then attended University College Dublin (UCD), graduating in 1943 with a first class honours degree and gold medals in medicine, surgery and obstetrics. He married Winifred Tempany, a consultant anaesthetist at Temple Street Hospital, in 1950 and they had six children.

Bryan was appointed to the consultant staff of the Mater Hospital eighteen months after qualifying. Although initially a dermatologist, he had an interest in cardiology and learned the technique of right heart catheterisation at the Karolinska Institute. He performed the first one in Ireland, at the Mater Hospital, on a patient who went on to have the first mitral valvotomy in Ireland, performed by John Corcoran. Thus, he played a significant initial role in establishing the Mater as a cardiac centre, leading to future developments in cardiology, cardiac surgery and intensive care.

Bryan's main interest was gastroenterology and, with the return of Joseph Barnes from Africa, he left dermatology to pursue a career in gastroenterology. He was a founding member of the Irish Society of Gastroenterology in 1964, with Oliver Fitzgerald, Patrick Fitzgerald and Peter Gatenby; he became the third President of the Society in 1967. His undergraduate lectures at UCD in gastrointestinal physiology were lucid, clear and well-illustrated, and were amongst the best of the pre-clinical curriculum. He chose not to pursue an academic career track, instead devoting his energies to clinical practice and medical administration.

In 1967, he was appointed a Member of the Consultative Council by Sean Flanagan, Minister for Health, to report on the organisation and development of the hospital system. This led to the Fitzgerald Report – 'Outline of the Future Hospital System'. In 1965, he was elected Senator representing the National University of Ireland constituency, and served in the Senate until 1973. He was elected President of the College in 1974.

Alton was an energetic and liberal man with a wide perspective. He could see far beyond the contemporary boundaries of Dublin medicine and was aware of the changes and developments in international medical practice. The Mater Hospital was the main focus of his energy, and he was a passionate promoter of the hospital and its staff. When money was in short supply he set



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up the Mater Hospital Pools and, subsequently, the Mater Foundation. These raised millions of pounds for the hospital, allowing for improved services and new facilities.

He was elected Chairman of the Mater Medical Board in 1972 and served until 1981. He used his influence and connections, including his friendship with Charles J Haughey, Minister for Health from 1977 -1979, to push for the development of the hospital. Under his Chairmanship the hospital prospered and expanded in an atmosphere of collegiality and purpose. Four additional and internationally trained radiologists were appointed to the Radiology Department between 1974 and 1979. In 1978, the first free-standing gastrointestinal endoscopy unit in Ireland was planned and opened by John Lennon. Similar progressive changes occurred in other departments, and he was instrumental in the appointment of an immunologist to the pathology department, a very innovative step at the time.

Alton was a meticulous man in everything that he did. His handwriting was clear, legible and stylish. He had a keen sense of personal identity, was always immaculately dressed and wore a diamond tie pin. He was interested in cars and drove Bristol, Alvis, Lagonda, Bentley and Rolls Royce cars, which were always immaculate. He had sophisticated tastes with a wide spectrum of interests including fine art, antiques, porcelain and precious metals. He was elected Master of the Company of Goldsmiths on three separate occasions in recognition of his knowledge of, and interest in, precious metals.

On a personal level, he was a kind man and a sympathetic doctor, warm and engaging with a relaxed sense of humour. He was never arrogant or aggressive but was encouraging, generous, and highly persuasive and in this way usually achieved his objectives which were inevitably to help a patient or improve the Mater Hospital in some way. He had a reputation for not requiring more than a few hours' sleep and was usually in the hospital at 7.30am, or earlier, just finishing a Cuban cigar, presumably lit hours earlier. His intelligence, endless energy, early starts and long days meant that he achieved far more than most during his very productive life. He died on 18 January 1991.

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