

Robert Robinson

Born: 1713
President: 1748-1749, 1760-1761
Died: 1770

Body snatching, the aetiology of gigantism and the championing of the independence and rights of the College of Physicians are very notable events in the history of eighteenth century Irish medicine in which Robert Robinson played a leading role.

Robinson was born in 1713 in Dublin, the second of three sons of Bryan Robinson (qv), physician, and Mary Robinson. Robert entered Trinity College Dublin in 1729 at the age of 16 and graduated with an MA in 1734 and MD in 1740. He was appointed Lecturer in anatomy in Trinity in 1741, a post he held until 1761.

Robinson was appointed State Physician in 1742 with an excellent salary at the time of £200 a year and he had a large practice. His post was renewed in 1761 though he resigned the office in 1770 sometime before his death. As State Physician, he held the office of Physician at St Patrick's Hospital which was founded in 1747 following the death of Jonathan Swift in 1745. Swift, Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral, a noted satirist and patriot, had left twelve thousand pounds to 'build a house for fools and mad'. Robinson was also a Governor of this hospital and, like his father, he also attended Dr Steevens' Hospital as a Physician. He was elected a Governor of Dr Steevens' Hospital in 1750.

Robinson was elected a Fellow of the College of Physicians in July 1740. As he was the son of a Fellow and the then President of the College, he was excused the fees of admission to Fellowship of the College.

Robinson was associated with a most notable feat in the annals of body snatching in Ireland. In May 1760, the famous giant Cornelius Magrath died following a fall on the stage in the Theatre Royal. Magrath was described as being at least 7 feet 5 inches (2.26m) tall and had hands the size of a large shoulder of mutton. Robinson was very interested as to the cause of his gigantism and it is reported that he encouraged his medical students to steal the corpse whilst pointing out that if they took nothing but the corpse they would not be answerable to the law. The story holds that a body of students duly attended the wake, plied the deceased's friends and relatives with alcohol, and then removed the body in the ensuing confusion. The following day, when Magrath's relatives arrived in Trinity College and angrily demanded the body back, Robinson informed them it had already been dissected by his zealous students and, in exchange for a sum of money, he



kept the body. A large pituitary tumour was found and Robinson is reported to have given a public demonstration at a later date. The skeleton of Cornelius Magrath remains in Trinity today.

Robinson twice served as President of the College of Physicians, elected in 1748 and 1760. He championed the rights and independence of the College in the face of a jurisdictional dispute with Trinity, which by custom allowed the College to examine their candidates for the MD. In 1760 Fielding Ould, a practising midwife, sought this degree from Trinity. The College of Physicians refused to approve Ould for the MD, arguing that bestowing an MD on a midwife would be an affront to their professional dignity. The board of Trinity then decided to enact their own examination process, utilising their own teaching facilities and academic staff. Robinson refused to act as instructed by the Trinity board and was subsequently dismissed from his anatomy post.¹

Robinson married Elizabeth, the only daughter of Thomas Lyster of Lysterfield, County Roscommon. They had one daughter, Elizabeth, who married Frederick Trench of Woodlawn, County Galway and who was later created Baron Ashtown.

Robert Robinson died in 1770.

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¹ Turlough O’Riordan, ‘Robert Robinson’, Irish Dictionary of National Biography (online edition)

