

Charles Willoughby

Born: c.1630
President: 1675-1677
Died: 1694

Charles Willoughby was an eminent Irish physician, educated in Oxford and Padua, who pursued an interest in science as well as medicine.

He was the son of Sir Francis Willoughby, a Major-General in the army of King Charles I, who had been knighted in 1610 at Dublin Castle by the Lord Deputy, Sir Arthur Chichester. Sir Francis was a member of the Provincial Council of Munster and Governor of Galway from 1636 to 1641. Charles was possibly born in Cork, but an exact birth date has not been found. His early education is also uncertain – he may have been a graduate of Trinity College Dublin but his name does not appear in the College records. Described as ‘of Trinity College, Dublin’ he graduated with a BA at Oxford University in 1649 and was elected a Fellow of Merton College in that year, gaining an MA in 1652. He studied medicine at the University of Padua in Italy, graduating with an MD in 1663/4. Padua was home to the world’s first botanical garden founded in 1545 and on his return from Italy, Willoughby presented a collection of botanical specimens to Merton College. Willoughby was incorporated in Oxford in 1664 based on his Padua degree. In 1667, he was nominated in the Royal Charter of King Charles II as one of the first fourteen Fellows of the College of Physicians. He was elected as President of this College in 1675 and served as Treasurer of the College from 1677 to 1683. In 1683, he was elected a Member of the Royal Society, London.

His Irish medical practice appeared to have been extensive. However, he did not seem to be fully satisfied that he had achieved his potential as, in 1682, he wrote to the Lord Lieutenant, the Duke of Ormonde, stating that his ‘liberall and universall’ education rendered him suitable for a ‘superior sphere than the managery of a glyster-pipe (an instrument for relieving constipation); a trade of so much slavery that I never intended to follow otherwise than for want of better employment’.¹

The following year, Willoughby became, effectively, the first President of the Dublin Philosophical Society which was, in the words of William Molyneux ‘regulated by one chief, who is chosen by the votes of the rest, and is called *Arbiter Conventiois*, at present Dr Willoughby (the name

¹ Quoted in K.Theodore Hoppen, “Willoughby, Charles”, *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2010)



'President' being yet a little too great for us).² Molyneux wrote these words in 1683 soon after the Society was formed. It is a measure of Willoughby's intellectual prominence that he was elected to this position. He was an active member of the society, contributing papers to the mathematics and physics section including *On a Mirage seen at Rhegium in Italy: and on Winds* as well as *Lines of Latitude and Longitude*. He spoke to the medical science section on 'Hermaphroditism'.

T Percy C Kirkpatrick, the College's prodigious compiler of biographical information, notes in a pamphlet published in 1923, that Willoughby was not conspicuous during the period 1687 to 1690. He may have left Ireland for a time during the Williamite War but was back in Dublin in 1690. In that year, Willoughby published a paper entitled *Observations on the Bills of Mortality and Increase of People in Dublin: the Distempers, Air, and Climate of this Kingdom; also of Medicines, Physic, and Surgeons and Apothecary's*. Kirkpatrick's pamphlet includes the text of this paper together with a commentary on the paper by Archbishop King, and three letters written by Willoughby to King.

In the new Charter granted to the College in 1692, Willoughby was nominated as a Fellow and named as one of four Censors. He framed a by-law whereby those who came late to College meetings would be punished – this was introduced in July 1694 but by its second reading, in September of that year, Willoughby was dead. The President and Fellows ordered that every Fellow in town was to attend the funeral the next day wearing a gown. If any Fellow did not appear, he was to be fined a crown for the use of the College.

Willoughby bequeathed his property, Newtown, County Dublin, to his niece Katherine Willoughby with an annual charge of ten pounds to Edward and Jane Phillips. Edward Phillips, who was his servant, was also to receive his clothes. Willoughby asked that his body be interred in St Andrew's Church, Dublin.

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² Letter from William Molyneux to his brother Thomas 30 Oct 1683 quoted in W.R. Wilde and Owen Lloyd, "Memoir of the Dublin Philosophical Society of 1683", *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy (1836-1869)*, Vol. 3, 160-7.

