

James Cleghorn

Born: Unknown
President: 1805-1806, 1806-1807, 1811-1812, 1816-1817
Died: 1826

James Cleghorn graduated from Trinity College in 1784 with a BA. Following some international travel, he took his MB in the summer of 1787 and gained an MD in 1793. He was admitted a Licentiate of the College in January 1792, was elected Fellow in 1793, and President in 1805, 1806, 1811 and 1816.

Cleghorn came from a medical family; his uncle, George Cleghorn, from Edinburgh, served as Professor of Anatomy at Trinity from 1761 until 1790. James, had little interest in anatomy but was nonetheless elected to the position of Professor on 16 April 1790, in the room of his deceased uncle. He stated that he had studied under multiple prominent professors in Ireland, had studied in London, and visited hospitals in Paris and Montpellier. Cleghorn was re-elected Professor on 6 May 1797, but two years later an assistant, Mr Hartigan, was appointed owing to Cleghorn's poor health. On 24 July 1802 Cleghorn resigned the chair.

In addition to his Trinity appointment Cleghorn was, on 6 May 1797, appointed State Physician (at a salary of £365 per annum), a post he retained until his death in 1826. As a result of that appointment, Cleghorn became an *ex officio* member of the board of St Patrick's Hospital. He also acted as Visiting Physician to the hospital.

St Patrick's Hospital had been founded several decades earlier following the bequest of Jonathan Swift. The hospital expanded significantly, admitting growing numbers of patients. Reports from the early 1800s indicated difficulties providing treatments and concern about lengths of stay. Such concerns were by no means unique to St Patrick's and, in March 1817, Robert Peel, Chief Secretary, persuaded the House of Commons to set up a select committee to consider the need to make greater provision for 'the lunatic poor in Ireland'. The committee considered all such establishments, including St Patrick's, and concluded that 'the extent of the accommodation which may be afforded by the present establishments in the several counties of Ireland' was 'totally inadequate for the reception of the lunatic poor'.¹

The committee received a letter from James Cleghorn, dated 17 March 1817, with interesting information about St Patrick's Hospital. Cleghorn pointed out that recent years had seen 'very considerable improvements' at St Patrick's which, by that time, housed 96 'paupers' and 53

¹ Select Committee on the Lunatic Poor in Ireland, *Report from the Select Committee on the Lunatic Poor in Ireland with Minutes of Evidence Taken Before the Committee and an Appendix* (London: House of Commons, 1817), 3.



‘boarders’. Cleghorn was ‘fully aware of the advantages to be derived from dividing the different description of insane persons into classes, according to the nature and stage of the disease’, but noted that ‘the original construction of Swift’s Hospital does not admit of their separation, as it consists of six very long corridors or galleries, each containing twenty-eight cells’.

Cleghorn was at pains to point out the infrequent use of restraint at St Patrick’s: ‘The system observed in Swift’s Hospital, before I was concerned in it, was of the most humane kind; and it has always been my object to avoid any other coercion or restraint but what was required for the safety of the patients and those around them. The strait waistcoat and handcuffs are seldom resorted to, and we prefer the latter to the former, as being more convenient for cleanliness, and not so heating; occasional confinement to the cell is the principal restraint which we employ.’

Cleghorn reported, with satisfaction, that he had ‘succeeded, last spring, in prevailing on the governors to take a lease of the ground on the east side of the hospital, containing two acres and a half, and affording a good view into the Phoenix Park, where the greater number of the patients are at liberty to walk about and to take exercise’. Many were also ‘employed, with their own consent, in working the ground, and have been much happier and freer from their malady in consequence of it’.

Cleghorn addressed the distressing allegations regarding the transport of mentally ill persons to Dublin from elsewhere in Ireland. He had heard ‘it rumoured, that it is intended to have either provincial or county asylums for lunatics and idiots: such a design is founded in wisdom and humanity, and will be a great relief to the pressure on the establishments in the capital’. This rumour was correct and, having taken account of the evidence of Cleghorn and others, the 1817 Committee duly recommended that ‘there should be four or five district asylums capable of containing each from one hundred and twenty to one hundred and fifty lunatics’.²

Cleghorn was elected a life member of the Dublin Society in 1815, and served on the chemistry and mineralogy committee from 1816 to 1823. He died in 1826 having spent much of his busy medical career championing gentler, more humane treatments for mental illness, in sharp contrast with the harsh, custodial approaches of the past.

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² Select Committee on the Lunatic Poor in Ireland, *Report from the Select Committee on the Lunatic Poor in Ireland with Minutes of Evidence Taken Before the Committee and an Appendix* (London: House of Commons, 1817), 4, 45-47.

