

Robert Graves

Born: 1796
President: 1843-1845
Died: 1853

Robert Graves was born on 28 March 1796, at the family home on Holles Street, Dublin. His father, Richard Graves, was a distinguished Old Testament scholar, clergyman and Regius Professor of Divinity at Trinity College. Robert's mother, Eliza Drought, was the daughter of the previous holder of this academic chair.

Graves achieved first place in the entrance examination to Trinity College in 1811. He enjoyed a brilliant undergraduate and graduate career earning the Gold Medal and BA in 1815. Graves then opted to pursue a medical degree in Trinity, which was associated with the recently opened Sir Patrick Dun's Hospital, greatly improving the teaching of clinical medicine in Dublin. Graves' considerable academic prowess was recognized by his teachers and particularly Robert Perceval (qv), Professor of Chemistry, and James Macartney, Professor of Anatomy and Chirurgery. They advised Graves to travel to European cities to visit eminent hospitals and clinics and they provided him with introductions to world leaders in medicine. In 1818, Graves was conferred with his MB, and shortly after he embarked on what would prove to be two years of apprenticeship-type training in the leading European hospitals.

At that time Germany was the country where the practice of medicine was most advanced. In Gottingen, Professor Stromeyer was General Inspector of Apothecaries where he introduced Graves to the novel concept of bedside teaching, which Graves would bring back to Ireland and thence to the English-speaking world. Perhaps it was in Berlin that the seeds were sown of Graves' career-long interest in infectious diseases. Hufeland, who was a prolific author, probably provided the inspiration with his particular interests in typhus, cholera and all febrile illnesses. In Berlin, Graves also met Behrend who was a leading authority on syphilis which was then widespread and incurable, but could be modified.

Graves returned to Dublin much enriched by the experience and the exposure to several of Europe's leaders in medical practice, education and organization. He had been recognized for his brilliance as a student and now his reputation was further enhanced. In 1822, Graves was appointed Physician to the Meath Hospital, where he was noted for his exceptional industry in treating patients, and he introduced bedside teaching. In 1824, he co-founded the Park Street Medical School and in 1827 was elected King's Professor in the Institute of Medicine, Trinity College. There he established a programme of 4 o'clock lectures, delivered each weekday in term time which drew huge attendances and further embellished the unrivalled regard in which he was held. In 1832, he was co-founder of the Dublin Journal of Medical Science which has since



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evolved into the Irish Journal of Medical Science. Graves was the founding Chairman of the Pathological Society of Dublin in 1838. He was noted for being charismatic, decisive, confident and theatrical on hospital rounds, in lectures and on social occasions.

He could also be heroic, for example when he led a group of five doctors in response to the Lord Lieutenant's appeal for medical assistance to counteract a typhus epidemic which was decimating Galway. He was also formidable and impetuous. William Stokes (qv), who was at various times Graves' student, colleague, competitor and biographer, recounted that his wit could be deeply offensive and his sarcasm reckless.

In the early 1840s, Graves became more serious and introspective and withdrew from activities that had been his main interests, and he failed to achieve other goals. In 1841, he resigned his professorship and, in 1843 at the age of 46, resigned from the Meath Hospital which had been central to his life in medicine. The same year Graves was elected President of the College of Physicians.

There were other highlights during this period. Throughout his career he had been a prolific author, his main interests being fever and infection particularly typhus and cholera. He championed the concept of contagion and promoted nutrition and hydration in the treatment of febrile illnesses. Graves suggested that his epithet might state 'He fed fevers'. In 1843, he published a large and very successful text book entitled *A System of Clinical Medicine* (Dublin, 1843) based on his lectures given at Sir Patrick Dun's Hospital, which contained over 30 chapters on fever and infection. Yet it is not for his contribution to the treatment of febrile illness that he is remembered today as he had hoped, but for a disorder now recognized to be autoimmune thyrotoxicosis and known throughout the English-speaking world as Graves' disease. In 1835 Graves published a series of three case reports entitled 'Newly observed affection of the thyroid gland in females' in *The London Medical and Surgical Journal*. It was Trousseau, who in his major text book published in 1862, who coined the term 'Maladie de Graves'.

The reasons behind these changes in Graves' personality from flamboyance to cantankerous introspection are not known. Graves was no longer the undisputed leader, where he had once dominated. In 1845, he applied for the Regius Professorship of Medicine in Trinity College, but the appointment went to William Stokes. Graves hoped to serve again as President of the College of Physicians in 1849, but once more Stokes was preferred. Whatever the reasons he withdrew further from the medical and social life of Dublin. He died at his home on Merrion Square in 1853, aged 57 years.

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