

William Stokes

Born: 1804
President: 1849-1851, 1866-1867
Died: 1878

William Stokes, who was born in Dublin in July 1804, was home-schooled. He then studied at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland and Glasgow University before graduating from the medical school of Edinburgh University in 1825.

Even before his graduation Stokes made a significant contribution to medical literature with the publication of *An introduction to the use of the stethoscope* (1825), which was the first work in English to relate the physical signs detected by the stethoscope to the underlying pathology.

Returning to Dublin, he took over from his father, Whitley Stokes, as Physician to the Meath Hospital. Here he began a lifelong dedication to the care of the poor. During a severe epidemic of typhus fever in 1826, Stokes worked long hours in the hospital and in the community; he contracted the disease himself and nearly died from it.

In 1827, he and Robert Graves (qv) wrote up clinical reports on the fever patients they had treated in the Meath. Together they developed the pioneering system of clinical instruction which was to become the hallmark of the Dublin school of medicine: students were taught at the patient's bedside and were given responsibility for all aspects of patient care under the guidance of the physician.

Stokes married Mary Black, whom he had met in Glasgow, in 1828; they had seven sons and three daughters and enjoyed a happy life together. In 1837, he published *A treatise on the diagnosis and treatment of diseases of the chest*. With many original observations, the book was well received across Europe and it cemented Stokes' reputation as one of the great clinicians of his time. Subsequent works contained excellent descriptions of pericarditis, paroxysmal tachycardia and conditions that became famous as the Stokes-Adams syndrome and Cheyne-Stokes respiration. By the late 1830s, he had a large practice and he received the first of many honours.

In October 1839, he was elected Fellow of the College of Physicians, followed by an MD from Trinity College. Honorary memberships of medical societies and scientific institutions across Europe followed and he was bestowed with honorary LLDs by Cambridge and Oxford Universities.

He was appointed Physician in Ordinary to the Queen in Ireland and became the first physician to be elected to the presidency of the Royal Irish Academy. For many years he was the Crown's representative for Ireland on the General Medical Council.



HERITAGE
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Stokes succeeded his father as Regius Professor of Medicine at Trinity College where he continued his pioneering methods of clinical teaching. He insisted on a broad education for medical students and championed the importance of ethical standards in medicine; he represented Trinity in negotiations that preceded the passing of the 1858 Medical Act.

In 1854, Stokes published *Diseases of the heart and aorta*, which some observers believe he considered to be of greater importance than his treatise on diseases of the chest.

But it was in serving the poor that he achieved the greatest satisfaction while also experiencing some despair. During the great famine, Stokes spoke of 'loving my unhappy country with a love so intense as to be a pain, its miseries...have lacerated my heart'.¹ He worked to improve the conditions of dispensary doctors across Ireland who suffered a death rate of 24 per cent, twice that of army officers at the time.

His poorer patients were instructive in his realising the limits of curative medicine and an appreciation of the significant role of poverty, malnutrition and poor sanitation in determining a person's health. He argued for the recognition of public health as a medical specialty and introduced the Diploma in State Medicine at Trinity in 1870, the first of its kind in the UK.

Stokes lived at 5 Merrion Square where he held open house, encouraging storytelling and music while entertaining men of distinction from every branch of learning. In 1876, his health began to fail and he withdrew from professional life. He saw out his final days at his country house, Carrig Breac, on the hill of Howth. He died in January 1878, having suffered a stroke and is buried alongside Mary in the old churchyard of St Fintans in Howth.

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¹ Quoted in Helen Andrews, 'William Stokes', *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010)

