

Sir John Thomas Banks

Born: 1811
President: 1869-1871
Died: 1908

The Banks family moved from Aylesbury in Buckinghamshire to Ardee in County Louth in the early eighteenth century. Around 1750, a branch of the family settled in Ennis, County Clare. The grandfather and father of our subject, both named Percival, went on to become much admired medical practitioners in Ennis. John's father (Percival junior) had the unusual claim of being the youngest of 24 children! He undertook his medical training in France and following his move back to Ennis he was appointed as a surgeon to the County Infirmary and enjoyed a full and productive medical life in that role.

His son, John, also turned to a life in medicine and attended Trinity College, graduating in 1837. He went on to earn his MD from Trinity College in 1843, and was elected Fellow of the College of Physicians in the following year. His medical career continued to advance rapidly and he was appointed Physician to the Richmond, Whitworth and Hardwicke hospitals, the so-called House of Industry Hospitals in 1843. He worked alongside many remarkable contemporaries including Sir Dominic Corrigan (qv), Robert Adams and William Stokes (qv). He excelled in clinical bedside teaching and as his teaching reputation grew so did his popularity with students and colleagues alike. Over the following years he was granted visiting privileges to several of the leading Dublin teaching hospitals to include Sir Patrick Dun's, the City of Dublin, the Coombe, and the Royal Victoria Eye and Ear.

As Visiting Physician to the Richmond Lunatic Asylum, he developed a particular interest in matters of mental illness and this enthusiasm continued throughout his professional life. He is retrospectively credited with promoting the teaching of modern psychiatry and he later arranged for its inclusion as a mandatory and integral part of the undergraduate medical curriculum. Although he did not generate a prolific bibliography, one of his papers stimulated interest. This was his treatise on the mental condition of Ireland's most famous Dean, Jonathan Swift, which was published in the *Irish Journal of Medical Science* in 1868. He was an ardent supporter of the College of Physicians and was elected President in 1869.

Banks was appointed to the prestigious post of Regius Professor of Physic at his Alma Mater, Trinity College, in 1880. He served in that role until failing eyesight and advancing age dictated his retirement in 1898. During this period of his professional life, he garnered many distinctions and honours. He was appointed to the Senate of the Queen's University (later the Royal University of Ireland) and he represented that institution at the General Medical Council for many years. The Royal Academy of Medicine in Ireland was formed in 1882 and he was chosen to be



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its foundation President. When the British Medical Association visited Dublin in 1887, he was elected President of the Association for that year. In the early part of the decade he was appointed as Physician-in-Ordinary to Queen Victoria in Ireland, in which role he continued after King Edward VII's accession to the throne in 1901.

And then an intriguing and mildly amusing interchange began. In the early 1880s her Majesty offered Banks a knighthood but he declined the honour. The offer was repeated on many subsequent occasions but was declined each time. This led *Punch Magazine* to surmise that Banks had telegraphed his decision to Buckingham Palace on each occasion in the following cryptic manner: 'Declined with thanks, John Banks'. Eventually, in 1889, Banks did accept his knighthood as Knight Commander of the Bath.

Outside of his profession he was at the centre of an extremely active social circle. He was justly regarded as the pre-eminent leader of the sparkling social landscape of Dublin in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Contemporary descriptions are of a gentle, intelligent and elegant man who was also cultured and affable and enjoyed universal popularity. He lived his entire life in his Georgian townhouse, No. 45 Merrion Square, where he held regular, enviable dinner parties. These were attended by celebrities of the day and his many guests over the years included all the Irish Viceroy's, as well as renowned international visitors to Dublin. He married Alice Wood Wright in 1837 and they had one child, a daughter, Mary. Sadly, the Banks were pre-deceased by Mary in 1898 which caused immense grief to her parents. Lady Alice Banks died the following year and Sir John Thomas Banks passed away nine years later in 1908 at the great age of 97 years.

JD

