

James Foulis Duncan

Born: 1812
President: 1873-1875
Died: 1895

James Foulis Duncan was one of the leading asylum doctors of his generation and a notably prominent figure in Irish medical circles in the mid nineteenth century. Duncan lived and worked during a period of intensive asylum-building in Ireland. In 1813, while the Richmond Asylum was being built in Grangegorman in Dublin, Alexander Jackson and Reverend James Horner opened a small private asylum in Finglas, County Dublin. After the Richmond opened in 1814, with Jackson as physician, Jackson sold Farnham House to James Duncan, a Scottish doctor, in 1815. James, a keen hunter, athlete and traveller (he visited Syria and Algiers) was, from 1816, the resident physician at the asylum. He died in March 1868, aged 82 years.

His son, James Foulis Duncan, born in 1812, spent much of his childhood at the Finglas asylum. It was an unusual upbringing but one that Duncan valued greatly. He later recalled that his father did not keep a table separate from the patients and that some of the patients were the best and noblest people Duncan ever met. He described them as being of gifted intellect and high attainment; some even gave the young Duncan his first instruction in Latin, mathematics and science.¹

Building on this unusual but effective educational foundation, Duncan was awarded an MD by Trinity in 1837 and became First Physician to the staff of the re-opened Adelaide Hospital in Dublin in 1858. Throughout his later career at the Finglas asylum, Duncan displayed several notable and interesting qualities: he was acutely socially aware, especially of the effects of poverty on health, and supported the use of scientific comparisons to test treatments (in language that pre-dated ideas about clinical trials in medicine).² He was highly religious in his views on many matters, including mental ill-health, as evidenced in his 1852 publication, *God in Disease, or, The Manifestations of Design in Morbid Phenomena*. From a clinical perspective, Duncan championed active medical and psychological treatment of insanity, and Farnham House remained in the Duncan family for over 50 years, providing just such treatment.

Duncan himself achieved considerable prominence in his profession and, in 1875, became President of the Medico-Psychological Association (MPA), an organisation of asylum doctors across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland that had been founded in 1841. In his

¹ James Foulis Duncan, "President's Address at the Annual Meeting of the Medico-Psychological Association, held August 11th, 1875, at the College of Physicians, Dublin," *Journal of Mental Science* 21, 95 (1875): 313-338.

² James Foulis Duncan, *Medical Statistics, Their Force and Fallacies: A Lecture Delivered in Park Street School of Medicine, November 4th, 1846, Introductory to the Course on the Theory and Practice of Physic* (Dublin: McGlashan, 1847).



presidential address, Duncan emphasised the changes occurring in Irish asylum medicine, placing particular emphasis on his view that treatment in asylums should be directed by doctors, which was a controversial issue at the time. Duncan advocated for improved medical staffing of the asylums and for better education for the doctors involved in the committal process.

More broadly, Duncan denounced a great many features of nineteenth century life, including increased use of machinery, the employment of children in industry, and the loosening of family bonds. All of these factors contributed, he felt, to the apparent increase in rates of insanity in Ireland. Duncan was not, however, a man to be easily defeated not even by great, unstoppable forces of history. His proposed solutions were rooted in education: medical education, public education and, most especially, moral education of the young which, he contended, held the greatest hope for preventing mental disorder.

Duncan's presidency of the MPA was a significant achievement: it was an important organisation in the development of the profession of psychiatry in Ireland, introducing the Certificate in Psychological Medicine in 1885 and adding legitimacy to asylum doctors' search for professional recognition and prestige during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Duncan was a good example of these developments, as he served not only as President of the MPA, but also as President of the College of Physicians. He generally typified a certain model of the nineteenth century asylum doctor: enterprising, powerful, prolific and keen to promote asylum medicine in the eyes of other doctors and the public. Duncan died on 2 April 1895 at the age of 83 years, many years after retiring from active medical practice. His obituaries in the *British Medical Journal* and *Medical Press and Circular* noted the professional esteem in which he was held, as well as his devotion to the promotion of religion and his reputation as a man of charity.

Ultimately, Duncan embodied a disquieting paradox that lay at the heart of Irish asylum medicine throughout the 1800s. While Duncan's heartfelt, fluent and humane rhetoric was both scientific and compassionate, it co-existed with the growth of an increasingly large, custodial system of asylums ranged across the country; and while Duncan explicitly promoted efforts to prevent mental disorders, he lived during a time when the number of asylum beds - and thus inpatients - rose to a genuinely alarming level that would take several generations to remedy and resolve.

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