

Samuel Gordon

Born: 1816
President: 1875-1878
Died: 1898

Samuel Gordon, the fourth son of Samuel and Jane Gordon, was born on 19 January 1816 at the family home at Spring Gardens, Clonmel, County Tipperary. He was educated at Dr Bell's Endowed School in Clonmel and entered Trinity College in 1832, graduating BA in 1837 and MA in 1841.

Gordon began his medical training as an apprentice to Mr Belton, and then as Clinical Clerk to the Richmond and Whitworth Hospitals. In this position he worked closely with Dominic Corrigan (qv), and this was the beginning of the long-lasting friendship between the two men. In 1843, he obtained the Letters of Testimonial of the Royal College of Surgeons, in 1844 MB and 1877 MD from Trinity.

He initially practiced as a surgeon and was apparently competent and well-regarded. However, his career drifted towards medicine and in 1847 he was appointed as Physician to the House of Industry Hospitals. He became a Licentiate of the College of Physicians in May 1860, Fellow in October 1865 and served as President from 1875 to 1878.

Gordon was clearly a very busy and industrious man. He breakfasted every day before 7 am and by 9am had concluded his correspondence and set about the business of the day. He was Lecturer at the Cecilia Street, Dr Steevens' Hospital and Carmichael Schools of Medicine, President of the Carmichael School of Medicine, President of the Pathological Society of Dublin, President of the Royal Academy of Medicine in Ireland and subsequently President of the Royal Zoological Society of Ireland. In addition to his appointment to the House of Industry Hospitals, he was Physician to the King's Blue-coat Hospital, St. Patrick's Hospital for the Insane and the Coombe Lying-in Hospital.

In addition to his role as a highly regarded Dublin physician, Samuel Gordon was also a very competent and organized individual, highly respected by his peers who elected him to numerous positions - and not all in the medical domain. However, his main and indeed enduring distinction was the decision by the College under his presidential leadership to allow women to take the licensing examination to practice medicine in 1877 - antedating the Royal College of Physicians in London by 33 years.

Societal attitudes to the education of women were changing in the mid-nineteenth century, particularly in liberal middle-class Dublin. Demand for higher education for women in Dublin lead



to the opening of second level colleges for women including Alexandra College for Protestants and Loreto and Dominican Colleges for Catholics which prepared women for third level education and entry to the professions. Women attended the House of Industry lectures and courses in the sciences in the 1850s and when the Royal College of Science opened in 1867 women were admitted as students from the outset. A writer in the Freeman's Journal in 1870 noted that 'Dublin had achieved honour in other countries by its liberality to ladies in connection with the Royal College of Science' and hoped that the Dublin medical schools would follow Paris and admit women as undergraduates.

Three members of the College Council were particularly supportive of the admission of women to the medical profession including the President, Samuel Gordon, the Rev Samuel Haughton, and Aquilla Smith. Haughton was a doctor, a scientist, a liberal intellectual and an ordained Church of Ireland minister who modernised and transformed Sir Patrick Dun's Hospital. He was responsible for promoting the School of Physic Amendment Act (also known as Haughton's Act), which ruled that professorships at the College were open to all religions and nationalities. This implies that Haughton was without religious bias and had an open and inclusive attitude towards medical education. Aquilla Smith was deeply interested in medical education and because of this interest represented the College on the General Medical Council.

The College also appears to have been positively disposed towards allowing women to sit the licensing examination. Licensing fees would be an extra source of revenue to the College and since most women applying to take the examination were unlikely to practice in Ireland, they posed no threat to the Fellows' personal incomes.

Only three of twelve Council members actively opposed awarding the Licentiate to women and in January 1877 Eliza Dunbar became the first woman Licentiate of the College, and the College became the first institution in Great Britain or Ireland to award a woman a registrable license to practice medicine. She was followed shortly afterwards by Mary Pechey, Louisa Atkins, Frances Hoggan and Sophia Jex-Blake. This ground-breaking decision was followed in the mid-1880s by the admission of women undergraduates to the Irish medical schools and between 1885 and 1922 seven hundred and fifty-nine women graduated in medicine from the Irish medical schools.

While it is clearly evident that Gordon was strongly in favour of reform and the admission of women to the Licentiate – leading as President to vote in favour, his personal attitude and motivation are less easy to define. He was, according to his obituaries, an excellent physician and teacher. But more relevantly he had nine daughters and perhaps this, more than any other consideration, would have made him very aware of the importance of inclusivity in education and access to the professions for young women.

Samuel Gordon was married to Sophia Louise Montgomery. They lived initially on Hume Street and subsequently on Fitzwilliam Square. In addition to their nine daughters they had one son Samuel Thomas who became a physician. None of his nine daughters followed him into medicine.



LIVES OF THE PRESIDENTS



Gordon was held in considerable esteem by his peers and his patients. He was very well liked and was described as generous and kind. He worked right to the end and his last official act was to preside at the laying of the foundation stone of the new Richmond Hospital. He died from pneumonia at his home on Fitzwilliam Square on 29 April 1898.

JPC



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