

Sir Christopher Nixon

Born: 1849
President: 1900-1902
Died: 1914

Christopher Nixon was born in Dublin on 29 June 1849. He was educated at Terenure College, where he was amongst the first fifty pupils enrolled after the school opened in 1860. He subsequently studied at the Catholic University School of Medicine, Cecilia Street. He was conferred with the Licentiate of the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland in 1868 and the Licentiate of the College of Physicians of Ireland in 1869 when he was just twenty. At that time, he was appointed to the post of Assistant Physician to the Mater Misericordia Hospital, Dublin where he subsequently gained the position of Physician in 1872. During this period Nixon also developed a successful private practice where he specialised particularly in disorders of the heart and nervous system. He then spent two years in Paris and, on his return, was conferred MB by Trinity College in 1878. He then became Senior Visiting Physician at the Mater Hospital.

In addition to pursuing a busy clinical practice, Nixon energetically devoted much effort to the development of medical education at the Cecilia Street School of Medicine. His first role was in 1873 as an anatomy demonstrator, then proceeding to Professor of Anatomy and Physiology in 1881 and later to the posts of Professor of Medicine (1887) and Dean of the Faculty (1900). Nixon possessed a highly developed appreciation of the requirements for the development of modern, high standard medical education recognising that the understanding of disease processes, their diagnoses and treatments were rapidly progressing and that the teaching of medicine should reflect and encourage development. In 1889, he published a textbook for medical students, *Handbook of hospital practice and physical diagnosis*, which proved to be highly successful. Nixon adopted major curricular changes and recruited high caliber academics into key roles including Ambrose Bermingham as first Professor of Anatomy, Denis Coffey as first Professor of Physiology and E J McWeeney as Professor of Pathology and Bacteriology.

When Nixon became Professor of Medicine the privately funded Cecilia Street Medical School was the second smallest of the nine Irish medical schools, and the examination results of its graduates fared poorly when compared with those of most of the other schools. However, by the mid-1890s the school was attracting more students and its graduates were outperforming the other schools. These achievements were largely attributable to the influence of Nixon and were instrumental in gaining for the Catholic University School of Medicine the long-term objective of incorporation with the government-funded University College Dublin in 1908. He was appointed Professor of Medicine at University College and Vice-Chancellor of the National University.



Nixon had an interest in, as it might be called today, forensic psychiatry. He was Visiting Consultant Physician to the Central Lunatic Asylum, Dundrum and Consulting Physician in lunacy to the High Court of Chancery in Ireland. He was active in promoting the extending of the regulations of the English Mental Deficiency Act to Ireland. He made a major contribution to the Royal Commission on the Care and Control of the Feeble Minded in 1912.

Yet another of Nixon's interests was education in veterinary medicine. He is attributed with leading the campaign which resulted in the establishment of the Royal Veterinary College of Ireland in 1895. This development was seen as being of particular importance to the horse breeding industry. As recognition for his role Nixon was appointed its first President, a position he occupied until his death. In this capacity, he also represented this College on the Council of the Royal Dublin Society.

Nixon was admitted to the Fellowship of the College of Physicians in 1876 and served as Censor from 1881-1883 and again from 1887-1889. In 1900, he was elected President in which capacity he served until 1902. Apart from these milestone dates there is little information about Nixon's contribution to the life of the College. Other than inclusion in the list of Presidents, Widness's history of the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland is entirely devoid of any reference to Nixon. This is in marked contrast to extensive records elsewhere which describe his significant contributions to the Mater Misericordiae Hospital, the Catholic University School of Medicine, the Royal Veterinary College and to public life.

Nixon was probably the most eminent Catholic Irish doctor since Dominic Corrigan (qv). He received many prestigious awards and achieved many distinctions. In 1881, he was successful in the Doctor of Laws degree examination of Trinity College. Subsequently the same institution conferred on him an honorary degree of Doctor of Medicine, as had the Royal University of Ireland in 1885. Nixon served on the General Medical Council from 1897-1914. In addition, he was Physician-in-Ordinary to the Lord Lieutenant and he was also appointed a Deputy-Lieutenant for Dublin. Having been knighted in 1895, Nixon was honoured further by his elevation to Baronet of the United Kingdom in 1906.

He died on 19 July 1914 at his country residence, Roebuck Lodge in Milltown, his city home being on Merrion Square. Requiem mass was celebrated at the Catholic University Church, St Stephen's Green with internment in the vaults of St. Andrew's Church, Westland Row. He was survived by his wife, Dame Mary Agnes and by four of his five offspring. His only son, also Christopher, succeeded to the Baronetcy and he married Louise Clery. In later life he was managing director of the landmark Dublin department store, Clery's & Co.

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