

Sir William Josiah Smyly

Born: 1850
President: 1904-1906
Died: 1941

William Josiah Smyly was a member of an important and well-known Dublin medical family. He was born on 14 November 1850 at 13 Merrion Square. He was educated privately by tutors until the age of 17 when he entered Trinity College Dublin to study medicine.

His father, Josiah Smyly (1804-1864), was a distinguished surgeon at the Meath Hospital and was elected Vice President of the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI) in 1863. By virtue of this, he was President-elect of the College but was denied the presidency by his untimely death from pneumonia in 1864. He had married 19-year-old Ellen Franks and they had 11 children. Both Josiah and his wife were highly religious people; Ellen being involved in many charitable works especially with the poor and destitute. She was the foundress of Mrs Smyly's homes and schools.

William's brother, Sir Philip Crampton Smyly (1838-1904) was, like his father, a distinguished surgeon, again at the Meath Hospital and he was elected President of the RCSI in 1878.

Entering the rough and tumble of the Trinity medical school must have been somewhat of a shock for the protected and privately educated William. He was, however, quite resourceful and, of course, well connected. He combined his medical studies with an apprenticeship to Sir George Porter, who had in his youth been Josiah Smyly's apprentice.

However much the shock of entering medical school might have been for the 17-year-old William, the shock of attending the Rotunda Hospital a couple of years later must have been considerable. The hospital was in a run-down state, the poverty of the patients was extreme and the training and professionalism of the staff, particularly the nursing staff, was very poor. It was the time when nurses and patients slept in the same open ward.

William graduated from Trinity with an arts degree and a medical degree in 1872. He also, in the same year, obtained the Diplomas of the Irish Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons. Some years later he obtained a Doctorate of Medicine and was elected to the Fellowship of the RCSI. He was interested in a career in obstetrics and did not confine his medical education to Ireland, travelling to Vienna to study obstetrics and gynaecology.

He returned to Dublin and was appointed Assistant Master to Lombe Atthill (qv) at the Rotunda. Following the completion of his Assistant Mastership he was appointed, in 1882, as gynaecologist



to the City of Dublin Hospital on Baggot Street. He practiced there for seven years until he was appointed Master of the Rotunda Hospital.

When Smyly commenced his Mastership in 1889 things had greatly improved at the Rotunda. Smyly concentrated on patient care and on the education of midwives. He was responsible for the appointment of the first Lady Superintendent and is generally credited with putting the care of women on an improved professional basis. He was regarded as a good, calm and self-possessed clinician. It was said of him by his assistants, 'that he was never in doubt as to what he should do, never careless in the use of the best means at his disposal, he neither took advice nor gave it'.¹ Following his Mastership, and in accordance with the 'musical chairs' type of arrangements regarding hospital appointments, he became gynaecologist to the Adelaide Hospital.

He became a Member of the College of Physicians in 1882 and was elected a Fellow two years later in 1884. This obliged him, according to the rules of the day, to resign his Fellowship of the Surgical College. He was elected President of the College of Physicians in 1904, succeeding another obstetrician who also had served as Master of the Rotunda, Sir Arthur Macan (qv). It was during Smyly's presidency, although the process had already started, that the 1905 Letters Patent to the College and subsequent review of the By-Laws was granted. Smyly was knighted during the second year of his presidency.

He married Eleanor Tweedy, a member of another noted Dublin medical family. They had six children, and lived at 58 Merrion Square South. His retirement brought many honours including Honorary Fellowship of the College of Obstetricians (subsequently Royal) in London. He also played the violin to a high standard. He died, much revered, in 1941 at the age of ninety-one.

JFM

¹ John Bengius Lyons, *Brief lives of Irish doctors 1600-1965* (Dublin: The Blackwater Press, 1978), 91

