

Samuel Jemmat

Born: c.1675
President: 1717-1718, 1726-1727
Died: 1752

Samuel Jemmat, who was President on two occasions in the early eighteenth century and also a contemporary of luminaries such as Richard Helsham (qv), Bryan Robinson (qv) and Jonathan Swift, has unfortunately left little trace in historical records. Most that can be gleaned about him comes from accounts of legal proceedings which took place in connection with what must be one of the most bizarre tales ever recorded in the English-speaking world. The life story of James Annesley is said to have been the inspiration behind the novel *Kidnapped* by Robert Louis Stephenson. Certainly, the central story line of the novel is closely aligned with features of James Annesley's life.

Annesley claimed he was the son of Lord Altham, a peer who led a particularly blame-worthy life of dissolution and debauchery. He told a tale of having been neglected by his father, of living as a street urchin and of having been kidnapped by his uncle and sent into slavery in the American Colonies to enable the uncle to inherit the estates and titles on his father's death, and of eventually escaping back to Ireland. The central point was whether or not he was a legitimate son of Lord Altham, and this in turn led to the trial for perjury of Mary Heath, a midwife, who had given evidence as to whether or not Lady Altham had been pregnant at the relevant time. In this case, Samuel Jemmat was called as a witness, and the account of the trial gives some information about him. Also, the circumstances of his death are closely linked to a later trial in connection with this saga.

Samuel Jemmat was the son of Reverend Samuel Jemmat, vicar of St Nicholas Church in Warwick and also Master of Lord Leicester's Hospital in Warwick (a retirement home for ex-soldiers, founded by the Elizabethan nobleman, Robert Dudley, Earl of Warwick). Young Samuel attended Eton from 1687 to 1688; he later went to Oxford, aged 17, and took his BA in 1695. He obtained the degree of Doctor of Physic in 1711, and became a Fellow of the College of Physicians the same year.



What he did between 1695 and 1711 is unclear, but the notes to the trial of Mary Heath describe him as being ‘a gentleman of a Sussex family’ who had ‘in his younger years practised as a physician in England’; the same note goes on to say that he had come to Ireland in connection with some ‘private affairs’, and that he met with ‘such encouragement, as induced him to continue there’.¹ Unfortunately, there is no information regarding the date on which he came to Ireland. However, he evidently established himself rapidly as a respected and well-regarded member of the medical profession in Ireland, being elected President of the College of Physicians in 1717 and again in 1726. Other than this, there is little or no trace of his career, or details of his activities.

In 1740, on 22 July, he resigned his Fellowship with the consent of the College, and was admitted to the list of Honorary Fellows; why he resigned is not stated, but the biographical note attached to the account of the Mary Heath trial states that for many years before his death he was afflicted with a ‘complication of diseases’, and it is reasonable to suppose that health reasons lay behind his resignation.²

The London Magazine, Vol XXI, 1752, carries a notice of his death on 4 October that year on his arrival at Bristol on his way to give evidence for James Annesley in one of the last trials connected with Annesley’s legal odyssey in pursuit of his claimed patrimony. One glimpse into his character is given by the circumstances of his death. The biographical note stated he suffered in his later years from several diseases, including severe problems from ‘gravel’ sufficiently severe to confine him to bed most of the time. It says that, when he realised the importance of his evidence to James Annesley’s case, he insisted on travelling, despite the late season of the year, his own advanced age and the objections of his family (who obviously feared the effects of the journey on his health).³ In the event, he died on the second night after landing in Bristol and so never got to give the evidence for which he had made such a heroic effort to deliver.

Despite the paucity of information and the consequent difficulty in assessing his personality, his determination to see justice done, even at great cost to himself, allows one to regard him as fitting easily into the milieu of eighteenth century Dublin, of Swift, Helsham, Robinson, Grizzell Steevens and other fascinating people, the influence of many of whom has persisted to this day.

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¹ T B Howell, *A complete collection of State trials*, Vol. xviii (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1816), 66

² Howell, *A complete collection of State trials*, Vol. xviii, 67

³ Howell, *A complete collection of State trials*, Vol. xviii, 67

