

William Smyth

Born: Unknown
President: 1704-1705, 1708-1709, 19 Dec. 1710-1711, 1719-1720, 1721-1722
Died: 1732

William Smyth received his MB from Trinity College Dublin in 1688 and MD in 1692. In the interim, he had been one of the 'Chester Refugees', those Protestants who temporarily fled Ireland in 1688-89.

Unfortunately, the Trinity records do not contain details of Smyth's age on entry, his father's name or his place of birth. A variety of other sources do, however, shed some light on his family background. Smyth appears to have had two brothers: Brent (d. 1743) and Charles (1678-1720). The former is designated 'captain' in some documents and 'esquire' in others. Charles entered Trinity in 1694 at the age of sixteen and later became a clergyman. His matriculation record states that Charles had been born in Dublin and was the son of a clergyman named James Smyth. According to *The Crofton Memoirs*, this James was married to one of the three daughters of Brent Moore. Moore belonged to a family that had prospered following its settlement in Ireland during Elizabeth I's reign, its most prominent representative being the earl of Drogheda. If these details are accurate, then William Smyth was the son of Rev. James Smyth and his wife, and he was probably born in Dublin.

In 1692 Smyth was named a Fellow in the new Royal Charter granted to the College of Physicians. Thereafter, he was an energetic member of the College rarely missing a meeting and diligently paying the requisite fines when he did. Apart from his five terms of office as President, he also served as Registrar in 1696, Vice-President in 1706-07 and 1712-13, and he completed several terms as College censor. He was keen to contribute case histories to a collection that the College sought to compile in the 1690s. He was also frequently dispatched around the city on College business, for example to retrieve Mrs McCormack's copy of her midwifery license or, following the death of Dr Charles Gwither, to recover 'a box of Anatomical Instruments belonging to ye Colledge of Physicians'.¹

In March 1694 the College was obliged to investigate when Mrs Elizabeth Hemming died after taking the 'Jesuit's bark' prescribed to her by Smyth for a 'distemper'. Richard Somner, an apothecary on Dame Street, duly furnished details of the prescription and Hemming's mother, Elizabeth Steevens, also provided evidence. Fortunately for Smyth, his peers concluded that 'the

¹ College Journal Transcript - Vol. 1, RCPI/2/1/4/1, p. 95.



Quantity of Jesuites Bark she took could not only doe her noe prejudice but that if she had taken thrice that quantity it could not possible do her any harme.²

Of greater interest, perhaps, is Smyth's friendship with Jonathan Swift. In June 1712 Swift mentioned Smyth in one of his letters to Mrs Dingley. Smyth had evidently been providing him with medical advice as he wrote, 'Now I am against Dr. Smith. I drink little water with my wine, yet I believe he is right.' In London, Swift also acted on Smyth's behalf in forwarding a query to George Moulton FRS, a prominent apothecary and 'chymist'. As he explained to Dingley, 'Moulton, the chymist, is my acquaintance. I sent the question to him about Sir Walter Raleigh's cordial, and the answer he returned is in these words; "my service to Dr Smith; it is directly after Mr. Boyle's receipt." That commission is performed; if he wants any of it, Moulton shall use him fairly. I suppose Smith is one of your physicians.'³ Further surviving evidence shows Smyth and Swift assisting each other in various ways, as Smyth lobbied on Swift's behalf for a clerical appointment, and Smyth pressed Swift to secure a position in the customs administration for one of his sons-in-law. Smyth's daughters Ann and Elinor both married clergymen, the brothers Elias and Caleb Debutts. A third daughter, Catherine, married a Mr Hawkins, probably the man that Swift was asked to assist in finding a post.

The settlement drawn upon the marriage of Ann and Elias in 1718 provides the most detailed picture of Smyth's property holdings. These included a forty-year lease granted to him by Trinity in 1712 for a 'piece of ground formerly called the Dunghill' on College Street. Smyth's own marriage to his wife Catherine had brought him forty-six acres of land at Augherskea, just west of Dunshaughlin in County Meath. Catherine had inherited this lease from Ignatius Plunkett of Derrypatrick, County Meath, who must have been a close relative of hers.⁴ Smyth lived with his family in St Andrew's Parish. In his will, made in 1728, he asked to be buried in the parish churchyard in his 'dear mother's grave'.⁵ This wish was presumably complied with following Smyth's death in 1732.

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² College Journal Transcript - Vol. 1, RCPI/2/1/4/1, p. 14.

³ *Works of Swift*, (Dublin, 1772), xiv, 196-7.

⁴ Registry of Deeds, Memorial No. 18517.

⁵ Irish Medical Wills Notebook iii, TCPK/5/3/1, p. 5.

