

Alan Herbert Thompson

Born	1909
President	1966-1969
Died	1974

Alan Thompson was born into a Quaker family in Wexford. He was educated at Portora Royal School in Enniskillen at the same time as Samuel Beckett, with whom he formed a prolonged friendship. Thompson then entered Trinity College Dublin where he read medicine. He had a remarkable and spectacular undergraduate career winning most of the prizes and scholarships that were available. As a student, he was conferred with an MSc degree for a thesis that he prepared as a result of winning the Hackett Research Prize. He graduated with first class honours and a Gold Medal. He proceeded to an MD degree and was admitted a Member of the College of Physicians in 1932, becoming a Fellow in 1934.

In 1932, he was appointed to the staff of the Richmond Hospital where he acted as Assistant Physician and Pathologist. He no doubt honed his astute clinical skills working in both these disciplines. In 1944, he was appointed Senior Physician to the Richmond Hospital and was also appointed Visiting Physician to the Rotunda Hospital, a post he held for over 30 years. At this time, he gave up working in pathology.

In March 1945, at the behest of the Irish Red Cross he was part of a delegation who met with the French Red Cross with a view to establishing a hospital facility in France. They set up a 100-bed hospital in Sainte Lô, Normandy, which had been devastated during the war. He was Physician in Charge of this hospital and, together with other Irish doctors, nurses and radiographers, provided medical facilities in this area of France. In this endeavour, he enlisted the help of Samuel Beckett to act as a translator, quartermaster and lorry driver for the hospital. For his services to the people of France, Thompson was awarded the Medaille De La Reconnaissance Française.

Thompson was appointed Professor of Medicine at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland in 1962 and was elected President of the College of Physicians in 1966. During his tenure, the College had its tercentenary in 1967. The original Charter was granted to the College by King Charles II in 1667 on the foot of entreaties carried out by one of Thompson's ancestors, James Butler, 1st Duke of Ormonde.

Alan Thompson was instrumental in setting up the common Part I MRCP exam with the UK Colleges and was also involved with the first meeting of Fellows in Belfast at the height of the troubles in Northern Ireland. It could be said, without any doubt, that he was regarded as a general physician par excellence by his students and colleagues. He had a very disciplined and enquiring mind and was extremely astute in his observation of patients. He instilled these



characteristics into his students, emphasising the art of history taking and clinical examination, and deducing from these a working diagnosis. He was very keen, where possible, to take an accurate medical history, including a historical narrative of his patients' socioeconomic conditions. He believed that a social history gives an insight into the health and well-being of the patient. His view was that medicine should be holistic and that the patient should be looked at *in toto* as distinct from a narrow specialist point of view. He always maintained that medicine was part art and part science and he exemplified this by his clinical teaching at the bedside. He was an excellent diagnostician and abhorred gimmickry.

During the tercentenary celebrations of the College he made some pertinent comments with regards to the specialisation and sub-specialisation in medicine:

'Specialisation is a form of restrictive practice, a concentration on a limited aspect of our total commitment. Therein lies both its value and its hazards. It needs but a generation or two generations of this accelerating process to leave the general centre of the profession peopled by the mentally less well endowed, the intellectually mediocre, an imbalance which by its nature will tend to become more and more evident ... That I submit would not be a happy state for a liberal and self-perpetuating profession such as ours.'¹

Outside the medical sphere he was renowned, and much sought after, for his entertaining after-dinner speeches. He was a keen golfer, fisherman and part-time farmer, and enjoyed playing cards and billiards. He was a scholar, philosopher and an intellect, a person interested in the arts as well as other activities. It is regrettable that he never documented any of his intellectual thoughts which today would have given physicians food for reflection.

In his lifetime, he encompassed the true qualities of a physician, the likes of whom I do not think we will see again, especially if we consider the current medical training curriculum.

MPSV

¹ Quoted in David Mitchell, *25 years: an interim history of the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland 1963-88* (Dublin: Royal College of Physicians of Ireland, 1992) 51-2.

