

Bryan Robinson

Born: c.1680
President: 1718-1719, 1727-1728, 1739-1740
Died: 1754

Bryan Robinson, who was President on three occasions, was an influential figure in the medical world of Ireland, Britain and indeed of Europe in the eighteenth century. Along with Richard Helsham (qv), he was one of those influenced by Newton and followed his approach to scientific enquiry. He made a significant contribution to medical literature both by virtue of his own writings and by collecting and publishing the lectures Helsham gave in Trinity College over the course of his long career there.

Bryan Robinson was born, probably in 1680, at Clapham in Yorkshire and after graduating BA from Cambridge (1703) he came to Dublin, graduating MB from Trinity College in 1709 and MD 1711. On May 5 1712, he was elected a Fellow of the College of Physicians.

In September 1716 he became Lecturer in Anatomy in Trinity in succession to Richard Hoyle (qv), but in June 1717 he was 'turned out from being Lecturer in Anatomy and Dr Hoyle elected to same'.¹ The reason for this dismissal is unknown; Kirkpatrick tells us, in his *History of the medical teaching in Trinity College*, that there had been speculation that it was on account of Robinson refusing to reside sufficiently close to the city, but he points out that Robinson is recorded as being a regular attendant at College meetings at this time and therefore unlikely that he was not living close to Trinity. Kirkpatrick speculates that the cause might have arisen from a dispute regarding the management of the school. Robinson has been described as being contentious in his approach to scientific discussion; this was a time when knowledge of anatomy was being expanded, and it is tempting to think that his approach to introducing the new views to the teaching of anatomy in Trinity had something to do with his removal. Whatever the cause of his early removal, it did not prevent him progressing to an illustrious career in the University. He became Public Professor of Physic on 12 June 1745 and so was Head of the Medical School, a position he held until his death in 1754.

Like Richard Helsham, Robinson was a polymath, deeply interested in mathematics and physics as well as medicine. Coakley tells us that among his objects was to develop 'a mathematical theory of everything'.² Besides editing and publishing Helsham's lectures, he wrote several works

¹ Bryan Robinson Card, Kirkpatrick Index, RCPI

² Davis Coakley, *Medicine in Trinity College Dublin*, (Dublin, 2014), p.58.



of his own; Kirkpatrick tells us that he was described by Kurt Sprengel, a late eighteenth /early nineteenth century German physician and medical historian, as being: 'l'un des plus célèbres iatro-mathématiciens de sons temps'.³ He produced a mathematical formula for calculating the velocity of the circulation of the blood, and described the influence of factors such as posture, exercise and emotion on the pulse rate.

He was highly regarded as a physician and when Swift, that towering figure in eighteenth century Dublin, invited his cousin, Martha Whiteway, to live at the Deanery in her second widowhood, one of the inducements he offered was that Dr Robinson will visit you with more ease.⁴ It is believed that he attended Swift's friend, Stella, who left him £15 in her will to buy a ring. He was one of the original Governors of Dr Steevens' Hospital, and was one of the Attending Physicians in 1733, 1737 & 1741. Like Swift, Helsham, Sir Patrick Dun (qv), Richard Steevens (qv) and his sister Grizzell, Robinson was motivated by the desire to look to the public good. He collaborated with Helsham to advise the Corporation of Dublin in relation to the provision of a water supply to the city, using his scientific knowledge for the betterment of his fellow citizens. He also wrote a tract on money and coins (1734), a decade after Swift's *Drapier's Letters*, displaying his interest in the great issues of the day, and his ability to contribute to the debate.

From 1748 until his death in 1754, Robinson was in poor health having suffered a paralysis in 1748 and being described as having an increasingly irascible temperament over these last years, with a 'deficiency in his memory and understanding' being particularly noticeable over the final two years.⁵ On 15 January 1754 he passed away closing a life in which he had greatly contributed to science and to medicine. Robinson's second eldest son, Robert (qv), followed him into medicine. He held the post of State Physician from 1742 – 1770, and would follow his father as President of the College.

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³ Thomas Percy Claude Kirkpatrick, *History of the medical teaching in Trinity College, Dublin and of the School of Physic in Ireland* (Dublin, 1912), p.110

⁴ Dean Swift, edit., *Letters, written by Jonathan Swift, D.D. Dean of St Patrick's Dublin, and several of his friends, Volume V* (London: C Bathurst: 1775), p.387

⁵ Kirkpatrick, *History of the medical teaching in Trinity College*, p.112

