

Sir Abraham Yarner

Born: 1622
President: 15 February 1672 – 1674
Died: 1677

Sir Abraham Yarner, born in 1622, became the first elected President of the College on 15 February 1672. He had previously been the third name on the list of founding Fellows, following that of President for life John Stearne (qv), when the College was granted a Royal Charter by King Charles II in 1667.

Yarner's thoughts on his election to this high office, and whether he ever conceived that his name would head a list of over 140 men - and eventually one woman – remain cloaked by the mists of time. A dip into the historical record however reveals a man whose very presence in Ireland was the result of one of the less edifying chapters in Irish history; but whose subsequent behaviour in his position as a respected 'Doctor of Physick' laid the foundation for an all-inclusive and progressive College which would thrive in the centuries after his death.

In 1641, Yarner first appears in the historical records in Ireland not as a man of healing but in fact almost quite the opposite. He entered the country as Captain of the King's horses in the vanguard of the Royalist army sent by King Charles I to suppress the native Irish Rebellion of 1641. Nor was he an innocent bystander, tending to the wounded in a medical tent. The records of his early years in Ireland contain no mention of any practice of medicine, but rather detail a number of skirmishes and sieges including the relief of the siege of Birr Garrison in 1641 and a violent encounter with 'rebel' forces at Kilrush. In the latter encounter the future College President was shot in the forehead 'but not much hurt more then the raising of his skin'. He subsequently wrote an account of this battle entitled *Captaine Yarner's account of the Battaile of Kilrush upon the 15th day of Aprill by my Lord of Ormond*, published by Coules and Badger of London in 1642 – a publication which brings a new clarity to the phrase 'publish or perish'!

The then Captain Yarner rose through the ranks and ended his military life as Lt Colonel Abraham Yarner, Muster-Master General of the King's horses in Ireland. He was rewarded, presumably for his military endeavours, by the granting of a title over confiscated land around Rathnew in Wicklow. He was also granted a coat of arms in 1644, and was made a Freeman of Dublin in 1650 'by free and special grace'.

Viewing these events through modern eyes it is difficult to believe that this professional soldier could also successfully pursue a medical career, but in his subsequent career as a doctor Yarner also seems to have thrived. It seems that, for Irish medicine at least, the alien invasion force had



a happy side effect – bringing with it a critical mass of scientifically-minded medics at a crucial juncture in Irish medical history where John Stearne (qv) was attempting to advance the practice of precisely this brand of scientific medicine. As James Kelly records, ‘the arrival of William Petty and Abraham Yarner in Ireland meant that two men who were au fait with English medical structures and schooled in the scientific practices that John Stearne wanted to advance were in positions of important power in the Cromwellian administration’¹. They had initially set up a Fraternity of Physicians which pursued their then revolutionary view of medicine based on dissection and experiment and, in 1667, King Charles II granted a Charter to John Stearne and thirteen Fellows to establish a College of Physicians. Sir Abraham Yarner was the third name on the list of Fellows, and following Stearne’s death (the only means by which his position could be vacated at that time) Yarner became the first elected President of the College in 1672.

In his position as a senior physician, Yarner displayed a talent for bridge building despite his previous prominent role in the ‘English Army for Ireland’. He made a point of being inclusive and collegial, and is credited with fostering an *esprit de corps* among the Dublin medical fraternity of the time. He included Catholic doctors in invitations to philosophical and scientific gatherings and an effusive letter of thanks from one such physician, Dr Thomas Arthur (who had lost much of his medical practice during the Irish Rebellion), is illustrative. Arthur thanks the ‘most loving and able Dr Yarner’ for the help given him when ‘tossed about with the storm of war and cares’ and states that the kindness shown ‘will remain stored in the depths of my heart’. As Mary Ann Lyons also writes, Yarner’s actions demonstrated that ‘bonds of professional affinity among physicians transcended religious, political, and even cultural interests and identities’.²

As far as the details of his medical practice are concerned, not much exists in the historical record. Yarner was one of a group of physicians to attend at a post-mortem the details of which were published as *The Doctor's observations on my lady's death 27th of July 1671*. The Westport papers contain a bill from an apothecary for an emulsion prescribed by Yarner to the sum of 4s.9d. He was chosen, along with Sir William Petty, as one of two eminent physicians to investigate the bona fides of a seventeenth century ‘quack’, Father Finachty, who claimed to have a miraculous gift for curing the ill and was suspected of using exorcism.

Sir Abraham Yarner, Knight of the Realm, Freeman of Dublin, ‘Doctor of Physick’ and the first elected President of the College, died on 28 July 1677 and was buried the following day in St Michan’s Church. It seems that this London soldier had become a benevolent and highly-respected Irish physician, elected to high office by his peers, and who began the tradition of collegiality which remains a hallmark of the College to this day.

¹ James Kelly, “The emergence of scientific and institutional medical practice in Ireland, 1650-1800” in *Medicine, Disease and the State in Ireland, 1650-1940*, ed. Elizabeth Malcolm and Greta Jones (Cork: Cork University Press, 1999), 23

² Mary Ann Lyons, “The role of graduate physicians in professionalising medical practice in Ireland, c.1619-54” in *Ireland and medicine in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries*, ed. James Kelly and Fiona Clark (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 36-7.



LIVES OF THE PRESIDENTS



JMcD

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