

John Van Lewen

Born: 1684
President: 1734-1735
Died: 1737

John Van Lewen was born in Mallow, County Cork. His father, Robert or Guisebert (d.1725), was a surgeon of Dutch origin who accidentally settled in Ireland. John was educated at the school of a Mr Mulloy in Cork and he matriculated at Trinity College Dublin on 18 June 1701 at the age of seventeen. Three years later he entered the medical school in Leiden where Hermann Boerhaave was a member of the teaching staff and later rose to fame as Professor of Botany and Medicine. In 1705, Van Lewen enrolled at nearby Utrecht where in August of that year he successfully defended his thesis *Disputatio Medica Inauguralis, De Emeticis seu Remediis Vomitoriis* and was awarded MD. Van Lewen dedicated his thesis to John Perceval, a Cork native, member of the Irish House of Commons and the Privy Council, later Viscount Perceval of Kanturk and Earl of Egmont.

On his return to Ireland in 1705, Van Lewen married Elizabeth Corry whose mother had died in childbirth. Elizabeth was raised by her aunt, the widow of Sir John Meade, her estranged father being in France. In her *Memoirs*, Van Lewen's daughter, Laetitia Pilkington, wrote that prior to his education abroad her father made such an impression on her mother's heart, being altogether considerate and good-natured, that she waited with constancy for his homecoming. Soon after his return, Van Lewen became Licentiate of the College of Physicians in 1707. His BA and MB eventually came in 1729, followed three months later by his Trinity MD and elevation to Fellowship of the College of Physicians. Soon afterwards he served as College Registrar (1731-1732) and intermittently as one of its Censors over the following years. He was elected President by a unanimous vote on 18 October 1734.

Van Lewen established a successful career as a physician who practised midwifery and, according to Laetitia, 'There being but one man-midwife in the Kingdom: my father made himself Master of that useful Art, and practis'd it with great success, Reputation, and Humility.'¹ It was confirmed in Gilbert's *History of Dublin* that John Van Lewen was the only accoucheur in Dublin in the early eighteenth century. Being popular with pregnant ascendancy women and their husbands he prospered and eventually, in 1730, took up residence in fashionable Molesworth Street. Van Lewen's attendance at midwifery cases was most unusual at the time as 'by physicians the practice of midwifery was considered until the closing years of the eighteenth century to be

¹ A. C. Elias (ed.), *Memoirs of Laetitia Pilkington*, (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1997), Vol one, 12-13



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fitting only for women or surgeons.² Yet a Dublin newspaper reported in March 1734 that ‘The Right Honourable Lady Mountjoy was safely delivered last Friday by Doctor Van Lewen, President of the College of Physicians.’³

John Van Lewen died at the age of 53 on Saturday morning 1 January 1736 from complications of an injury; a sharp table knife had slipped and pierced his side in an unfortunate accident at his home in October 1735. In the April after Van Lewen’s death the College passed a resolution ‘that no man for the future shall have a License to practice Midwifery and Physick together’⁴ that would have enormous consequences for the College, Trinity and the eminent man-midwife and second Master of the Rotunda Hospital, Fielding Ould.

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² J. D. H. Widdess, *A History of the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland 1654-1965* (Edinburgh; E. & S. Livingstone, 1963), 65.

³ *Dublin Evening Post*, March 1734

⁴ A. C. Elias (ed.), *Memoirs of Laetitia Pilkington*, Vol two, 368-70.

