

Robert Perceval

Born: 1756
President: 1799-1800
Died: 1839

Robert Perceval was undoubtedly an influential but controversial figure in late eighteenth century medical activities in Dublin. On his death in 1839 he was acknowledged as being a 'father of the medical profession in Dublin'.¹ Whilst he had prospered personally during his career, he had also tried valiantly to improve the practice and teaching of medicine. He was deemed to have been a very astute and well-connected politician and prepared to go to great lengths to achieve his goals.

Born in Dublin on 30 September 1756, he was the son of William Perceval, a Dublin solicitor. Perceval graduated BA from Trinity College in 1777. Following this he studied medicine in Edinburgh graduating MD on 24 June 1780 with a thesis on the physiology of the heart *De Corde*. He then travelled to France, becoming influenced by the chemistry of Lavoisier. Like many of his contemporaries he was also educated in Leiden and saw the urgent need for a proper teaching hospital in Dublin to prevent aspiring Irish students from going abroad for training.

On returning to Dublin he was appointed lecturer in chemistry at Trinity in 1783 and professor in 1785. He was admitted MB and MD by Trinity College in 1793. Perceval was one of the founders, with James Cleghorn, of the Royal Irish Academy in 1785 and served as its first secretary. He was also one of the founders of the Dublin General Dispensary in Temple Bar and served as physician. He was elected a governor of Dr Steevens' Hospital on 8 December 1796. He was an ardent campaigner for the reform of the dreadful conditions in which prisoners were incarcerated at the time and promoted this work through the Prison Discipline Society.

One of the major problems for the education of medical students in Dublin during the eighteenth century was the lack of a teaching hospital. Perceval was acutely aware that if Dublin continued without one it could not hope to compete for students with places like Edinburgh and Leiden. There had been previous attempts to found a hospital in association with the College of Physicians but with little success. However, a major disagreement arose between Perceval and

¹ John Widdess, *A History of the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland, 1654-1963* (London: F & S Livingstone, 1963) 156



Edward Hill (qv) who was Professor of Botany (and also President of the College on 6 occasions between 1782 and 1813). Perceval urged the College to set aside funds from the Dun's estate to build a clinical teaching hospital. Hill was resolutely opposed to this and argued that the money should be spent on a Garden of Physic. Such gardens were an indispensable part of most of the great European teaching centres. Hill's idea of a garden was not well received, particularly by Perceval who believed it would be a waste of scarce money.

Hill, in turn, criticised Perceval and described him as 'a self-sufficient, vindictive gentleman, singularly obstinate in his own opinions'.² Throughout this time Perceval continued to advocate strongly that all available money from Dun's bequest should be used to build a substantial teaching hospital and Trinity supported his proposal. The scheme was opposed by Hill and by the College of Physicians who were adamant that some funds should be protected to develop a Physic Garden. It transpires that Perceval and his supporters had not only vision and persistence, but also political friends in high places and as a result of their influence and persuasion, the School of Physic Act of August 1800 was passed. This stipulated that £1200 from Sir Patrick Dun's estate would be used to build a new teaching hospital and this would be named after him. This was a significant step forward for the medical profession in Ireland. For more than 150 years, Sir Patrick Dun's hospital was to play an important role in the education of thousands of medical students.

Perceval's action in influencing the passing of the School of Physic Act 1800 gained for him the censure of the College of Physicians. He had been elected President of the College on 4 Nov 1799. However, he had to resign both this and his Fellowship as a consequence of a clause in the School of Physic Act, forbidding professors to hold the Fellowship. He was elected an Honorary Fellow on St Luke's Day 1800.

In 1819, he was also appointed Physician-General to the Forces in Ireland but was forced to relinquish this most prestigious post after only a year due to ill-health. During the visit of King George IV to Dublin in 1821, one of the important medical guests at the King's Reception was the ailing Robert Perceval. Despite his infirmities, he lived to the age of 83 and died on 3 March 1839. Perceval had married Anne, daughter of W Brereton of Rathgilbert in 1786. They had one child, William, born in 1787.

Perceval had been a 'stern critic of the way in which the College had run its affairs for a long period in its early days, but time had mellowed the barbs of his not entirely justified criticisms

² Widdess, *History of the Royal College of Physicians* 96



and he had become a much respected figure within the medical profession'. On hearing of his death the College immediately adjourned the day's activities and paid their respects to the memory of a 'former President, Fellow of the College and Father of the medical profession in Dublin'.³

Though a physician in considerable practice for many years, Perceval did not publish any medical work. He did present some papers on chemistry to the Royal Irish Academy. In later years he devoted himself to the study of theology. He will be remembered chiefly as being the principal mover in the passing of the School of Physic Act of 1800.

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³ Widdess, *History of the Royal College of Physicians* 155-6

