

Robert Collins

Born: 1800
President: 1847-1849
Died: 1868

Robert Collins was born in 1800. He obtained the MD degree of Glasgow in 1822. His Licentiate from the College of Physicians was conferred in 1824. The following year he married Barbara, daughter of Joseph Clarke who was ex-Master of the Rotunda Hospital. In 1826, Collins became Master of the Rotunda. He became an Honorary Fellow of the College in 1839 and Treasurer in 1842. In 1847, he received the MD of Trinity College Honoris Causa, and the same year was elected President of the College of Physicians.

Many diverse issues were addressed during Collins' presidency. An emergency meeting was called on 16 March 1848, during the Famine, 'to consider the propriety of presenting to the Lord Lieutenant a declaration of loyalty to the Crown and of confidence in his Excellency'. The reply on behalf of the Earl of Clarendon noted that 'advantage has been taken of the recent suffering and present privations to stimulate a misguided multitude to acts of violence' which would only aggravate the general distress suffered by these same classes.¹ In August 1849, a deputation from the College presented a congratulatory address to Queen Victoria at Dublin Castle on her visit to Ireland.

During Collins' time a committee was appointed to consider the propriety of taking steps to have the religious test then imposed upon Protestant members of the College removed. Another meeting considered the expediency of imposing fines on Fellows for absence from College meetings. A resolution adopted by the Pharmacopoeia Committee that the Wine Gallon be discarded and replaced by the Imperial Gallon and that Avoirdupois be substituted for Troy pounds and ounces was approved. In July 1849, a letter was received from the Board of Governors of Sir Patrick Dun's Hospital stating they were obliged to close the hospital because of insufficiency of funds.

The building of a College Hall with suitable appointments was agreed, but it was not until July 1860 that the College bought the premises of the Kildare Street Club. Collins, as President, travelled to London to give evidence on behalf of the College on a proposed Medical Registration Bill.

During Collins' seven years as Master of the Rotunda 16,391 patients were delivered with 158 deaths, a maternal mortality rate of 0.96%. On his appointment he found the Rotunda Hospital

¹ College Journal – Vol. VIII (RCPI/2/1/1/10)



in a very unhealthy condition. More women died in childbirth from puerperal fever than from any other cause. Attempting to control puerperal fever, Collins reduced admissions by encouraging women to remain at home where they had supplied to them gruel, whey and medicine. He emphasised the principles first introduced by Joseph Clarke stressing the importance of cleanliness and adequate ventilation in the hospital; Collins' approach to prevention was eventually so successful that there were no maternal deaths from puerperal fever during his last four years as Master. He did not accept the commonly held belief that puerperal sepsis was transmitted through foul air.

Robert Collins was one of the first to recognise the importance of the stethoscope in obstetrics. John Creery Ferguson introduced him to this after learning the technique on a visit to Paris in 1827. By 1830 the stethoscope was being used almost daily in the Rotunda to auscultate the foetal heart. The Lancet contains a report from the Rotunda on the diagnosis of twins in November 1830; distinct foetal heart beats were heard in the abdomen of a 30-year-old woman.

Late in 1829 a Government Commission was appointed to inquire into the state of the hospitals in Dublin and to which the governors of the Rotunda replied. The Governors pointed out the great loss of income that followed the Acts of Union in 1800; before then the entertainments organised in the Rotunda had produced a yearly income of £3460 which had by then fallen to £1760. In addition, the tax on sedan chairs, which had been granted to fund the hospital by an Act of Parliament in 1785, had become totally unproductive.

In 1833 Collins went into private practice focused on the safe birthing of children and, in addition, published several books outlining his medical techniques. He published a report on his experience as Master in 1835; this was an elaborate report and an analysis of clinical activity. These reports, first introduced by Joseph Clarke, were similar to the very useful annual Maternity Hospital Clinical Reports which continue to this day.

Collins died at 4 Ely Place, Dublin on 10 December 1868.

TC



HERITAGE
CENTRE

ROYAL COLLEGE OF
PHYSICIANS OF IRELAND