

Fleetwood Churchill

Born: 1808
President: 1867-1869
Died: 1878

Fleetwood Churchill was an important figure in Irish medicine, particularly in obstetrics, in the middle part of the nineteenth century. He was elected President of the College in 1867 on a two-year term, and was of importance in the establishment of the College in its current building on Kildare Street.

Churchill was born in Nottingham, England, in 1808 the third of four sons and one daughter of Fleetwood Churchill and Hanna Churchill (née Page). He was educated at home by his mother and was, at the age of 16, apprenticed to a general practitioner in Nottingham and a surgeon in London. His studies were international, travelling to Dublin and subsequently to Paris, then graduating MD from Edinburgh in 1831.

In 1832, he returned to Dublin to study obstetrics and gained a Licentiate of the College in the same year. He established himself in private practice and rapidly became the leading figure in Dublin obstetrics. In addition to a large practice he had an altruistic view on the subject and with a colleague, Robert D Speedy, established the Western Lying-in Hospital on Arran Quay in 1836. This new hospital provided much needed care for the poorest of women but it closed, for unknown reasons, in 1853.

Churchill was a fantastic teacher and a popular lecturer in obstetrics at the various Dublin medical schools. In 1856, he was appointed King's Professor of Midwifery in the School of Physic in Trinity; but he resigned from this post eight years later due to the increasing demands of his huge private practice.

Churchill was a prolific writer of essays, scientific papers and textbooks. Many of his textbooks were widely used in Ireland and abroad. He used original data and statistics in his written works and all his books were based on original and recorded observations. He wrote for both obstetricians and midwives. In 1850, he published a third edition of his *Diseases of Children* which was probably his most famous work. This won international acclaim and was translated into many languages including Chinese. The Chinese edition became popular and greatly influenced, for the better, obstetric and midwifery practice in that vast country. He recorded all his own cases and in 1872 published in the *Dublin Journal of Medical Science* his experience and observations of attending 2547 women in labour. He also produced a range of his own instruments including a modification of the obstetric forceps and craniotomy instruments used when the baby was dead in utero.



He had, in addition to his clinical and academic work, a great interest in public health and proved to be a pioneer of sanitary reform. He was founder and subsequently chairman of the Dublin Sanitary Association. He was associated with, and honoured by, many professional bodies. He was a Fellow of the Obstetric Society of Dublin and twice President of that group (1856, 1864). He was also active in the Dublin Pathological Society. He was elected President of the obstetric section of the British Medical Association in 1874 though illness prevented him taking up this post. He was a Council Member of the Irish Medical Association and an honorary member of many foreign medical societies. In 1851, he was awarded MD from Trinity, and was elected to the Royal Irish Academy in 1845.

He was much involved with the College of Physicians, and was elected an Honorary Fellow in 1848, a Fellow in 1851, and President in 1867. Some years before, during the presidency of Dominic Corrigan (qv), the premises in Kildare Street were purchased. All Fellows were asked to provide funds in the form of a £50 debenture at 4% interest. Churchill donated his £50 as a gift.

Churchill was a bibliophile, amassing a vast collection of books on gynaecology, obstetrics and paediatrics which he presented to the College on retiring. The collection comprises over six hundred rare books and is an important part of the Dun's library. In return, the College presented him with an address written in the most flattering terms. The Fellows also commissioned a portrait of him painted by Sir Thomas Alfred Jones. This wonderful portrait which captures such gentleness and sensitivity now hangs in the Dun's library.

Churchill married Jane Rebecca Ferrer in 1832 and they lived at 15 St Stephens Green. They had eleven children, one of whom became a practitioner of midwifery. Churchill was a modest, kindly, charitable and deeply religious man. He suffered from severe arthritis and cardiac problems. When he retired in 1875 he went to live with his daughter and son-in-law, William Edward Meade, the rector of Ardtrea, County Tyrone. He died on 31 January 1878 at the rectory and is buried in the local churchyard. His death produced much sorrow in Irish and British medical circles including a long and detailed obituary in the British Medical Journal.

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