

## James Little

**Born:** 1837  
**President:** 1886 – 1888  
**Died:** 1916

James Little was born in Newry, County Down, on 21 January 1837. He was educated initially at the Academy in Cookstown, County Tyrone, then at the Royal School in Armagh. In 1853, Little decided to enter medicine, having left school at the age of sixteen. He was apprenticed to John Colvan, Physician to Armagh Fever Hospital, and became a pupil of Alexander Robinson, Surgeon to the County Infirmary. After nine months clinical experience, he went to Dublin as a student at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI), becoming a Licentiate there in 1856.

After six months working in Armagh, Little sailed from Southampton on the SS Vera on 20 March 1857, en route for India, having accepted the post of Surgeon to the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Packet Company. Little kept a diary of his three years of service with the Company recording his experiences as a ship surgeon. In February 1858, a ship Little was on, the SS Ava, was shipwrecked on rocks twelve miles off the coast of Ceylon. In his diary, Little records that the passengers, who were refugees from the Indian Mutiny, were evacuated onto life rafts where they spent a cold and sleepless night. In the morning, the rafts made the short journey to shore where all the passengers landed safely. The knowledge Little gained during his time in India was probably the basis for a series of public lectures entitled 'The geographical distribution of disease', which he gave at the Royal Dublin Society in 1873.

Following his return to Ireland in 1861, Little studied for his MD at Edinburgh University, winning the prize in psychological medicine given by the Commissioners in Lunacy for Scotland. He then worked in general practice for two years in Lurgan, County Armagh, which included six months spent supervising the County Infirmary. After a year of postgraduate study on the continent, when he visited various hospitals, Little set up in practice in Dublin and became a Licentiate of the College of Physicians in 1865. He was appointed Physician (1866–1912) and later Consulting Physician (1912–1916) to the Adelaide Hospital where he was responsible for many innovations, including the introduction of hospital medical reports in 1867. Ultimately, Little was Consulting Physician to several of the Dublin hospitals.

He went on to become one of the leaders of his profession, lecturing at the Ledwich School of Medicine from 1868 until 1872 when he was appointed as Professor of the Practice of Medicine in the College of Surgeons. Little was an impressive teacher and confessed that, after his farewell lecture when he resigned in 1883, he locked himself in his study and wept.



In 1896, he was one of the delegates at a meeting with the Chief Secretary for Ireland, Gerald Balfour, at Dublin Castle to discuss the grievances of Irish Poor-Law Medical Officers.

Regarded as the leading physician and representative of the medical profession in Ireland, he was elected a Fellow of the College of Physicians in 1867. Subsequently he held the posts of Censor, Registrar, Vice-President and President (1886–1888). It was said: 'In all matters of difficulty his wise counsels were highly esteemed by the College'.<sup>1</sup> As President, Little received the first visit of a Lord Lieutenant to the College in 1887 and represented the College at Windsor Castle, giving an address there on the occasion of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee.

Little was Editor of the *Dublin Quarterly Journal of Medical Science* from 1868 to 1873. He introduced a series of half-yearly reports in the Journal on the developments in different areas of medicine, which are now seen as an important record of those developments. In January 1872, Little started publishing the journal monthly. He also contributed articles to other professional journals and wrote two textbooks, *First Steps in Clinical Study* (1872) and *Chronic Diseases of the Heart* (1894).

Little was a founding member of the Royal Academy of Medicine in Ireland in 1882, President of its medical section from 1886–1888 and Academy President from 1894–1897. He was the first Irish President of the Association of Physicians of Great Britain and Ireland, and a founding member of the Leinster (later Dublin) branch of the British Medical Association. He was elected a Member of the Royal Irish Academy in 1868, and received honorary degrees from Dublin and Edinburgh. He was Crown representative for Ireland on the General Medical Council (1897–1916) and was appointed Honorary Physician to three successive sovereigns in Ireland. Preferring to be known by his professional title, he declined the honour of a knighthood.

In 1898, Little was appointed Regius Professor of Physic at Trinity College, a position he held until his death. During his term as Regius Professor, Little was an Examiner in medicine and clinical medicine for four years in the College of Physicians. He took a leading role in the commemoration of the bicentenary of the School of Medicine in Trinity College Dublin in 1911.

Little was held in great esteem and affection by his patients and his colleagues, and he developed a country-wide private practice that was possibly the largest in Ireland. Asking 'What is the best qualification of a doctor?', he answered his own question: 'Hopefulness'.<sup>2</sup> During the Easter Rising, he risked his life answering professional calls despite the fact that his house was in the thick of the fighting and fired on repeatedly. His motto with his patients was *Aegroto, dum anima est, spes est*, while there is life, there is hope.

---

<sup>1</sup> W.G.S., 'Obituary. James Little', *British Medical Journal*, 6 January 1917

<sup>2</sup> Helen Andrews, 'James Little', *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (Cambridge: 2010)



# LIVES OF THE PRESIDENTS

In 1872, Little married Anna Murdoch and they had two sons and one daughter. His wife predeceased him in 1914. His health started to deteriorate in July 1916 and he died of heart failure on 23 December 1916, at the age of 79.

A bronze commemorative plaque with a portrait of Little in bas-relief was installed in the entrance hall of the College of Physicians in 1922 by the Members and Fellows. At the unveiling, the Provost of Trinity College said that Little was 'a good man as well as a great physician'.<sup>3</sup>

PO'S

---

<sup>3</sup> 'Memorial to James Little', British Medical Journal, 18 January 1922

