

Dr Robert Stephenson's Address to the Belfast Medical Society on 2nd December 1850

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SUMMARY

Dr Robert Stephenson's presidential address for the 1850–51 session is available online. It offers a more detailed explanation for the failure of the first Belfast Medical Society than do other accounts. It also discusses the revival of the Society in 1822.

INTRODUCTION

A list of presidents for the current society and its two main predecessors has been placed on the Ulster Medical Society's website. It contains links to all available presidential addresses before 1980, the earliest and most interesting historically being Dr Robert Stephenson's which was delivered to the Belfast Medical Society on 2nd December 1850.¹ He had been asked to speak on the revival of the Society in 1822 and was uniquely placed to do so as he was the only survivor of those who had attended the first meeting and had been Secretary to the Society for its first sixteen years. The importance of his address, however, lies not so much in the revival, although that is of interest, as in what he had to say about the failure of the first Belfast Medical Society. This was founded in 1806 as a medical library, ran into trouble about 1814 and ceased to exist in 1818. Its books, chiefly comprising valuable donations from Dr William Drennan and Dr William Halliday, were kept in 'the hospital' which in 1806 would have been the 'Belfast Dispensary and Fever Hospital' in West Street, established in 1799. This charitable institute had been founded in Factory Row in 1797 under the pressure that year of unusually prevalent fever but closed within months when its limited funds were exhausted. An even greater outbreak of fever in 1816 and 1817 led to the accelerated completion of a new 'Fever Hospital' in Frederick Street in 1817, which, in 1845, and under new trustees, became the 'Belfast General Hospital'. (This in turn became the 'Belfast Royal Hospital' and then the 'Royal Victoria Hospital'.)

In 1851, Dr Andrew George Malcolm published his *History of the General Hospital, and the Other Medical Institutions of the Town* from which much of the history above is taken.² Malcolm had been present at Dr Stephenson's address but in his book he chose to be discreet about the Society's trouble saying only that there were 'serious difficulties of opinion among the Hospital attendants' and that the 'demon of discord

invaded its ranks.' Stephenson's knowledge of the difficulties must have come indirectly from others as he could not have experienced them personally (he qualified from Edinburgh in 1817), and it is unlikely that they were recorded in the minutes. (Malcolm said that those up to 1814 were extant in 1851 although they have since been lost.)

THE TROUBLE

Stephenson did not go into details and did not name names but it is clear that the unpleasantness had been building up for some time before erupting. He said that the Society 'became exclusive, chary of its admissions, centralized until nothing remained except the governing authorities.' The ordinary members had left, 'weary of the views, and of the measures of those active in the management.' The authorities (president, officials and council) then fell out among themselves over the medical care of the poor, whether it should be 'by gratuitous attendance, or by officers appointed, and paid by salaries.' As funds were limited and as the cases of sickness claiming relief were 'numerous and pressing' (perhaps related to the fever of 1816–17), the views of the former prevailed. Stephenson said 'That was indeed the season of faction, and party-spirit among the profession in Belfast.' The terms 'faction' and 'party-spirit' could imply the involvement of religion or politics but he offers no other evidence for this and one hopes that he meant only that the argument was hotly contested by both sides. In any event, much bitterness resulted and those holding the second view seceded from the Hospital and 'scattered the books connected with the library' before clearing the library of its contents altogether. Their first thought was to divide the books by lot; the second was to sell them by auction and divide the proceeds among themselves. Legally this might have been permissible but morally it was questionable and after 'strong remonstrance' the books were returned to the donors. This must have been during or after 1820 as Dr Drennan died in that year³ and his books were received by his family. Robert Stephenson said that 'the late Dr Stephenson'—presumably his father, Dr Samuel Martin Stephenson, who died in 1833³—then persuaded Dr Halliday and Dr Drennan's family to return the books to the Hospital, taking responsibility for their safety. It is reasonable to

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suppose that eventually the responsibility for the books was transferred back to the Belfast Medical Society (that is 'the library').

THE REVIVAL

In 1822, Robert Stephenson took the first step towards the revival of the Belfast Medical Society by summoning 'the attending and consulting staff' to meet in the Hospital on the 8th of May but he said that 'only four answered to the call.' Those founders were Drs McDonnell, Forcade, R Stephenson and Mr Moore.⁴ Given the previous difficulties it is not surprising that the revived Society had no council or president, the arrangement being that the fifth person to enter the room at each meeting fulfilled the quorum and acted as the chairman. The first five also constituted a Standing Committee during the ensuing month 'to look after [the Society's] business in any case of emergency, or to give council to the Treasurer, or Secretary in any case of doubt.'

TREASURER AND SECRETARY

Dr Forcade was the first Treasurer and Dr Stephenson the first Secretary and they continued to be re-elected annually until 1835 in the case of Dr Forcade (who died) and 1838 in the case of Dr Stephenson (who retired). Stephenson was highly regarded and his retirement as Secretary was marked by a public breakfast in the Temperance Hotel in Waring Street⁵ and a presentation of the Bridgewater Treatises specially bound and containing the autographs of the members. He in turn had high regard for Dr Forcade saying that he 'would work with the diligence of a clerk on every detail, that could in any way tend to the perfection, and stability of a Society so essentially connected with the mutual improvement, and intelligence of his professional brethren.' The chances of potential troublemakers succeeding must have been considerably reduced with those two holding the only permanent offices.

DR STEPHENSON ELECTED PRESIDENT

In 1850, after twenty-eight years of stability, the Society decided that the existing system of governance was no longer adequate and on 7th October it was recorded: 'Seeing the necessity there is for some recognised head in this body, it is resolved that a member be annually elected by ballot to act for the year as President of the Medical Society.'⁴ The following month Dr Stephenson was elected to that position

and Drs McGee and Malcolm were elected Vice-Presidents. It was further agreed that 'in addition to the President and Vice-presidents six members be annually elected, who shall constitute the Council of the Society....' Dr Stephenson was negative in places in his presidential address, ironically not favouring the changes in the Society which had led to his presidency, and calling its Pathological Museum a 'morbid excrescence'. He later had the address printed by Marcus Ward & Co., Belfast, and every member of the Society was presented with a copy. Very few of these are now known to exist and the Ulster Medical Society is indebted to Dun's Library, Royal College of Physicians of Ireland, Dublin, for providing a scan of their copy with permission for it to be transcribed and placed online.

AFTERTHOUGHT

Malcolm, quite rightly, said of the troubles of 1814 that they were 'a blot upon our medical annals' but every cloud has a silver lining and it is possible that today the Ulster Medical Society is the better for them. William Whitla joined the Ulster Medical Society in 1874 and it is likely that he was aware of the contents of the address Robert Stephenson had given twenty-four years previously. Might the account of the greed displayed have influenced the terms of the trust deed of the (Whitla) Medical Institute of 1902 such that the Ulster Medical Society would not benefit from its sale should it come to that? It is not impossible—in which case we owe our present rooms⁶ to our quarrelsome predecessors of 1814.

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