

## Centenary

### THE LANCET MAKETH THE MAN?

Sir Dominic John Corrigan (1802–80)

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Dominic Corrigan was born in 1802 in his father's hardware shop in the Liberties of Dublin, and was educated at the catholic Lay College in Maynooth. He studied medicine in Dublin and Edinburgh whence he graduated with his famous contemporary William Stokes in 1825. He returned to Dublin, then in the grip of a devastating fever epidemic, and worked among the sick poor.<sup>1</sup> Lacking those social and political advantages with which Stokes was so heavily endowed, Corrigan's ambition to obtain a hospital appointment in pre-emancipation Dublin was not one to be given much chance of success. We might well ask ourselves in this, the centenary year of his death, how it was that this remarkable young man not only achieved his ambition but also went on to become an outstanding doctor. Much had to do with the character that was the man: ambitious and hard-working, he was a striking mixture of charm and gaucheness, gentleness and ruthlessness, astuteness and naivety, equanimity and petulance, but it was a tenaciousness of purpose and tireless energy that made it possible for him not only to overcome the obstacles that barred his advancement but also to absorb the reverses that would have chastened a meeker temperament. But, as with many successes, close scrutiny reveals the subtle hand of, shall we call it, destiny at some crucial juncture. The course of Corrigan's career was to be influenced significantly when *The Lancet*, under the editorship of the irascible Thomas Wakley, befriended him, and took a deep and lasting interest in his progress.

In a vast laboratory of human misery and suffering that was the Liberties of Dublin, Corrigan studied carefully the manifestations of fever and heart disease, and in 1828 *The Lancet* introduced him to the medical fraternity with a paper on Aneurism of the Aorta: Singular Pulsation of the Arteries, Necessity of the Employment of the Stethoscope.<sup>2</sup> Was it the concluding comment that endeared him to Wakley?

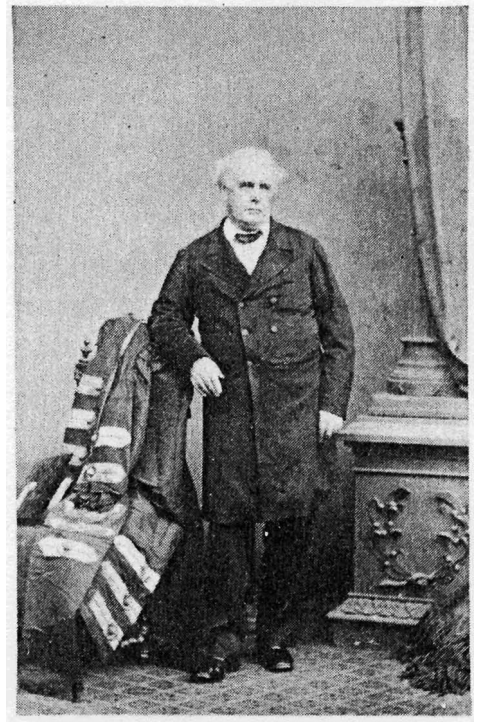
"Whether my observations and opinions be disproved or supported, I shall be equally satisfied. Truth is the prize aimed for; and, in the contest, there is at least the consolation that all the competitors may share equally the good attained."

This paper was followed by one in two parts on cardiac murmurs<sup>3,4</sup> and, in the same year, one of his major works on epidemic fever appeared.<sup>5,6</sup> He warned the authorities that unless the Irish peasant was made less dependent on the potato for survival there would be a blight followed by pestilence and devastation. The editorial columns of *The Lancet*<sup>7</sup> amplified these premonitions:

"May we venture to hope that the enlightened editors of the daily and weekly press, will aid the charitable, scientific, and sanitary labours of Dr. Corrigan by diffusing the results of his valuable experience amongst those individuals who have it in their power to avert both famine and pestilence?"

The authorities paid little heed and the potato blight of 1845 was followed by famine and fever epidemics that claimed over 1½ million lives.

In the *Dublin Medical Transactions*<sup>8</sup> of 1830 Corrigan put forward some controversial views on cardiac physiology. The paper ended thus:



Sir Dominic John Corrigan.

"We differ from great men of the past and present day, and our subject has obliged us to criticise closely the labours of others. It is perhaps under those circumstances to be expected, that there may be strong prejudices against us".

*The Lancet*<sup>9</sup> reviewed the work at length and favourably, introducing its protégé with no small degree of pride:

"The name of Dr. Corrigan is already familiar to our readers, and with them we have no doubt that he has acquired considerable reputation."

However, James Hope, writing in the *London Medical Gazette*,<sup>10</sup> disagreed strongly with Corrigan's views, and an anonymous reviewer in the *Medico-Chirurgical Review*<sup>11</sup> castigated Corrigan personally and, worse, heaped invective on *The Lancet*:

"It seems that Dr. Corrigan was hardy enough to publish a memoir on the bruit de soufflet in the *Lancet*, and, what is yet more worthy of admiration, he is sufficiently simple or confident to refer to it. We know not what Dr. Corrigan may think, nor do we particularly care, but this we will say, that such a mode of coming before the public is not calculated to win the ears of the respectable part of the profession, in England. The acquaintance of the costermongers of St. Giles's is not a good passport to society in St. James's, and so such writers as Dr. Corrigan will discover."

*The Lancet* went into battle. First Hope was censured severely for putting his name to a review in which by speaking in the plural he gave to his strictures an authoritative mien that was quite unjustified; this he might be excused by virtue of inexperience, but not so his choice of journal ("the filthiest vehicle that ever sprung from the prostitution of typography"). As for the anonymous reviewer in the *Medico-Chirurgical Review*—well, his paper was an example of "the prerogative of criticism degraded to an unexampled condition of moral prostitution".

To readers of *The Lancet* (and there were few doctors of any substance who could afford not to peruse its trenchant columns) Dr Corrigan of Dublin was now a familiar, even

colourful, medical personality. When he applied for the post of physician to the Charitable Infirmary in Jervis Street, he was successful in the face of strong competition and no doubt he attributed much of the success for this, the most significant step in his whole career, to the papers *The Lancet* had published and the attention it had focused on his work.

Corrigan published only one other paper in *The Lancet*.<sup>12</sup> He gave his most famous paper on aortic regurgitation to the journal of his alma mater.<sup>13</sup> However, he returned to *The Lancet* again during the great famine which he had predicted back in 1829. Ironically protégé and mentor, though at one in ideal, were at variance on an important issue. Corrigan, as a member of the Government appointed Central Board of Health, had been party to what was regarded as a derisory five-shilling-a-day award to doctors working in the famine areas. However, much of the profession's anger was caused by the Government's failure to consult with the Royal Colleges, and Corrigan, who was not a member of any college, was a most appropriate target for its opprobrium. Unwisely he selected this moment to seek honorary fellowship of the Kings and Queens College of Physicians, and his determination to achieve his aim did not appeal to *The Lancet*,<sup>14</sup> which, moreover, anticipated that his election would be misinterpreted by the public as the profession's approval of the five-shilling-a-day award:

"Sir Henry Marsh, in his turn goes to the College and seconds the nomination of Dr. Corrigan . . . while the whipper-in of the College, who is one of the physicians to the Lord-Lieutenant, appears to be employing all his leisure hours in influencing, by threat or promise, those members of the corporation who are too poor or too dependent to resist. Moreover, so important is this step considered, that, as the corporation is very small, men are about to be brought from England and their expenses paid, in order to vote for this job . . ."

Corrigan was black-beaned, an ignominious redress that hurt him deeply, but not for too long. He entered the College as a licentiate, became its president on five occasions—a feat not since equalled—and built for it that which it had hitherto lacked, a college hall. The Government showed its appreciation for his service by making him physician-in-ordinary to Queen Victoria, and later a baronet of the Empire.

When Corrigan died in his 79th year he had achieved a reputation and eminence as a catholic Irishman, humanitarian, physician, and parliamentarian that was remarkable in the Ireland of his time.

The *Journal of the Irish Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons* has devoted a special issue (vol. X, 1980, no. 1, edited by E. O'Brien) to the Corrigan centenary.

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