

The Cover

Operation in a Dublin drawing-room in the Georgian era

A watercolour, probably painted by a medical student in the Library of the Meath Hospital. Photograph by D. Davison, kindly reproduced by permission of the Meath Hospital. The cover is sponsored by Hoechst.

Surgical practice in Georgian Dublin was extraordinarily primitive by today's standards. Patients suffered indescribable anguish and agony as the surgeon resorted to barbaric remedies, often for hopeless conditions, and the outcome of major surgery was almost invariably fatal.

Many accounts of surgery in contemporary journals bear testimony to the sheer barbarism of some of the procedures attempted without anaesthesia, but none convey the hopelessness of eighteenth-century surgery as vividly as the drawing by a student who was present at an operation for the removal of a malignant tumour from the left breast and armpit of one named Richard Power in a Dublin drawing-room on 28th July 1817. The surgeon performing the operation is Rawdon Macnamara (President of the College of Surgeons in 1831), who was at the time only two years qualified, and most probably apprenticed to Sir Philip Crampton, depicted in the blue coat and hunting boots. Crampton's boast was that he could swim across Lough Bray, ride into town and amputate a limb before breakfast. Even if patients survived the pain and calamity associated with major operations, infection almost certainly claimed the victim, as it did the unfortunate Power within a few days.

The painting is described on the reverse in a handwritten note probably by Sir Lambert H. Ormsby, surgeon to the Meath Hospital: "This sketch represents an operation in the pre-anaesthetic days when patients were frequently strapped down on chair or couch to prevent movement, and their excruciating cries (with pain) were heart-rending to those who had to witness such operations under such conditions. The operation depicted is the removal of a malignant tumour from the left breast and armpit of a man named Richard Power who was operated on 28th July 1817 and died 11th August 1817. The operator was Rawdon Macnamara (primus) who was surgeon to the Hospital for 27 years and died in 1836. He was President of the Royal College of Surgeons in 1831. The gentleman depicted in blue coat and hunting boots represents the late Sir Philip Crampton, Bart., who was surgeon to the Hospital from 1798 to 1858". The picture was originally presented to the Medical Board by Rawdon Macnamara, Secundus, in 1884.

(Photograph and details from: *A Portrait of Irish Medicine: An Illustrated History of Medicine in Ireland*: E. O'Brien, A. Crookshank, G. Wolstenholme. Ward River Press, Dublin. 1984.)

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