

## Sir Dominic Corrigan (1802-1880)

EOIN O'BRIEN

The Charitable Infirmary, Jervis Street, Dublin 1

**Childhood:** Dominic John Corrigan, was born on December 1st 1802 in Thomas Street, in the Liberties of the City of Dublin. The place of his birth was above a small shop in which his father, John Corrigan, sold forks, spades, and other agricultural tools to the farmers coming to the city, many of whom were on their way to work in England. It is often said that Dominic Corrigan was born of humble parents in poor circumstances, and while that is true when comparison is made with his later contemporaries who drew first breath in the almost regal surroundings of Dublin's Georgian houses, we can take it that the infant in Thomas Street was not wanting for any comforts. The father, John, was an Irishman of charm and intelligence who successfully turned his energies to business and farming. He worked a fee-simple property and cottage named "The Lodge" at Kilmainham and seeing the large numbers of country farmers and labourers on their way to England without any implements of their trade, he decided to supply the deficiency. Thomas Street was then a thriving commercial centre, and John Corrigan prospered — so much so, that he bought up properties adjoining his shop on the historic site of the ancient Priory of St. John the Baptist without the New Gate, where, in 1188, had been founded the first hospital in Dublin. Thomas Street was also rich in contemporary history — only four years earlier a few doors down the street from the Corrigans, Lord Edward Fitzgerald had been fatally wounded when resisting arrest by Major Sirr and outside St. Catherine's Church in 1803 one of the saddest and most tragic sacrifices in Irish history was consummated with the execution of Robert Emmet. But the troubles of a nation are not the concern of young children, and, indeed, there is nothing on record to suggest that the Corrigan family was much involved in politics. The impression is one of a happy home in Thomas Street,

Celia, the mother, was descended from the Clan O'Connor, and therefore of royal blood. A strikingly handsome woman, erect and with beautiful hands, is how her grand-daughter was to remember her. There were three boys — Patrick, the eldest, Dominic and Robert, and three girls — Mary, Celia and Eliza. The family was strongly Catholic, and Dominic's sister Eliza became a Carmelite nun, and one of Patrick's daughters and two of his grand-daughters became nuns in America.

For the children Thomas Street in the early nineteenth century must have been an exciting place. In the shop and street Dubliners mixed with their rural brethren; big men these were — driving heavy carts or

four-horse wagons, selling their wares, and bargaining in Irish, the only tongue they knew. Women in brightly coloured shawls and petticoats went from shop to stall purchasing the necessities of the day. The faces of the older women showed the ravages of multiparity and poverty. Half-naked urchins clinging to carts, hawkers crying their wares, and beggars pleading with those wealthier than they to part with alms, were all part of a colourful and tragic scenario. Ballad singers were the entertainment of the day, and the Corrigan children must have been fortunate enough to hear Dublin's most famous ballad singer, the blind Michael Moran, better known as Zozimus.

Educational opportunities for Catholic children at this time were few and inadequate. John Corrigan chose the best available for his son — the Lay College of Maynooth. This remarkable institute opened in 1800 and endured a mere 17 years. John Corrigan would have received a prospectus outlining an educational programme for his son. Fees and stipulations would have been described thus:—

“Young Gentlemen are admitted from the age of ten to fifteen years; each to provide two pairs of sheets, two pillow cases, six towels, a knife, fork and silver spoon, which he is at liberty to take away on his departure from the College. The holy day dress is uniform and consists of a coat of superfine blue cloth, with yellow buttons; waistcoat, buff. Terms — Ten Guineas on admission of which Five will be returned on departure, and Thirty Guineas per annum; to be paid half yearly in advance: Three Guineas washing and repairing. Students who are sufficiently advanced, and who wish to profit of the Royal College course, and continue their education through the higher classes of literature and the sciences, pay Two Guineas to the Professor whose class they attend. Music, Drawing, Dancing and Fencing are extra charges...The President and Masters dine at the same table with the students. During the hours of recreation a master will constantly attend, to prevent irregularities, and enforce an exact observance of order and gentlemanly deportment”. The educational programme included the Latin, Greek, French and English Languages; History, both Sacred and Profane; Geography, Arithmetic, Book-keeping and Mathematics.

The Lay College was a separate institution from the Ecclesiastical College, but the division was not absolute. The influence of the lay students was not always as virtuous as was deemed desirable. The *Evening Herald* of 1807 records that a number of lay students, returning from Celbridge, and finding the evening cold and wet interrupted their journey at a tavern in Maynooth where they sought “warmth, supper and punch”. The latter had a noticeable effect, and when ordered back to the college by the master they did so with extreme reluctance in a mood described as “elate, volatile and giddy”. On their return they proceeded to throw down and break various items. Their ecclesiastical brethren were not always as

virtuous as might be supposed. Indeed, it is ironical that Theobald Matthew later to become Father Matthew of temperance fame, left the college rather than be expelled for organising a feast in a student's room. He was to return many years later as a Capuchin to administer the pledge, and not before his time it seems. In one year eighteen ecclesiastical students were convicted of drinking, and there is a report of "one gentleman, notorious for irregularities, having to be lifted one night at full length to his room".

Dr. Newman says of the lay students — "They were an extraordinary bunch in the Ireland of that time. Their provenance was good as was their subsequent performance in general". Unfortunately the school register has been lost, and it is not possible to identify Corrigan's confreres. In its short existence, the Lay School produced a number of brilliant men. Christopher Fleming — a future President of the Royal College of Surgeons; Joseph De Courcy Laffan — destined to become Physician-in-Ordinary to the Duke of Kent, and a Baronet; Richard Lawlor Shiel — a successful playwright, politician and close ally of Daniel O'Connell, Stephen Woulfe — later to become a barrister, Attorney General, and the first Catholic to become Chief Baron of the Irish Exchequer. Of the staff, one in particular appears to have influenced the young Corrigan. Dr. Cornelius Denvir, later to become Bishop of Down and Connor taught Mathematics and Natural Philosophy. Perhaps the early class experiments in Hydrostatics and in Pneumatics were to form the basis of Corrigan's later interest in cardiac physiology and haemodynamics. Teacher and pupil became close and life-long friends.

**Medical student days:** There was another important influence at Maynooth. When Corrigan had completed his classical studies, his father decided that he should do medicine, and he was apprenticed to the college physician, Dr. Talbot O'Kelly. This prosperous country doctor had a reputation that extended far beyond the environs of Maynooth. He was well pleased with his pupil dresser, who he claimed would rise to the very summit of his profession. As well as assisting O'Kelly, Corrigan attended lectures at the Royal College of Surgeons, the Diggis and Peter Street Schools, the School of Physicians at Trinity College, and the Apothecaries Hall. He received clinical instruction at Sir Patrick Dun's Hospital.

These were the days when crowds of students walked the wards, more in search of fun than knowledge. The interchange between patient and doctor at the bedside was reported to the gathering by a clerk, sometimes in English, more often in indifferent Latin. The standard of medicine was not high, and during war-time doctors were especially scarce. Corrigan recalls an examiner telling a student — "You are wanted immediately for a transport to go with troops to Spain. I will sign the certificate for you but only on condition that you will now take your oath on the Bible, that whether an accident occur or a man gets sick, you will order nothing more than a poultice

or a dose of salts between this and landing". The satirical writer Erinensis did not hold the Irish medical student in high regard; he described the breed as "blue frocked black stocked wellington booted medical dandies, with steel guard chains often without watches to protect — in short, the whole paraphernalia of puppyism". Medical students often had to procure bodies for dissection, anatomy being regarded as a cornerstone of medical education in the nineteenth century. Prior to the Anatomy Act the authorities unreasonably demanded a knowledge of anatomy, but only permitted dissection of executed criminals of which there were not sufficient. Anyone caught removing a shroud was liable to arrest for robbery, and there were worse dangers. Relatives went to great lengths to protect the graves of their dear ones. Armed guards were often employed by the bereaved. In 1830 a full scale gun battle took place in Glasnevin Cemetery between guards and a gang of bodysnatchers, with the latter coming off second best. Strong iron guards, iron coffins, spring guns, and even land mines were other deterrents to the body snatchers otherwise known as resurrectionists, or sack-em-up-men. The principal source of supply in Dublin was the pauper's graveyard known as Bullys Acre, adjoining the Royal Hospital at Kilmainham. Corrigan has described a body snatching spree in his student days. The gate keeper, an old age pensioner in the pay of the medical school, gave them the all-clear by placing a lighted candle in the window of the gate house; "We removed with our hands the recently deposited clay and stones which covered the head and shoulders of the coffin. Then a rope about three or four feet long was let down, and an iron hook on a rope was inserted under the edge of the coffin lid. The student then pulled on the rope, until the lid of the coffin cracked across. The other end of the rope was now inserted around the neck of the dead, and the whole body was then drawn upwards". This nocturnal scene was rendered all the more macabre as the bodies were stripped naked to remove the shroud which in the event of their being apprehended would lead to prosecution. Corrigan's turn to pull a body came. When he lowered himself head down into the hole to attach the rope to the body he heard a loud groan which caused him to retreat hastily, but after a further fright he realised that the groan was the result of the pressure of his body on the chest of the corpse in the coffin. On another occasion the students found the widow of a deceased labourer who had died on his way home from work on the harvest in England, keeping watch over his remains. Corrigan writes — "It needs scarcely be added, that we pledged ourselves to respect the remains for her sake, that we kept our word, and that we made up a small collection to afford her some aid". Despite its short-comings, this nefarious practice worked quite well for a time. there was much discussion in the press as to how to remedy the situation. Ninety-nine gentlemen of Dublin signed a document in which they expressed the wish that their bodies should be devoted "to the more rational, benevolent, and honourable purpose of explaining the functions, and diseases of

human beings". A Mr. Boys wished to be made into "essential salts" for the enjoyment of his female friends. "When my breath or spirit shall have ceased to animate my carcass perform the operation of vitrifying my bones, and sublimating the rest, thereby cheating the devil of his due, according to the ideas of some devotees among Christians, and that I may not offend the delicate olfactory nerves of my female friends with a mass of putridity, if it be possible, let me rather fill a few little bottles of essential salts therefrom and revive their drooping spirits".

Corrigan having completed his basic training in Dublin went to Edinburgh in 1824. The Edinburgh School had attained an unique reputation in the early years of the nineteenth century, and many Irish students went there to graduate. A letter from Edinburgh suggests that Corrigan was not all that happy there — "Since I have come to Edinburgh, the blue devils have a good deal annoyed me; removed from all my old friends, and my examination each day drawing nearer, most of my time passes uncomfortably enough. Coming before the professors here, a perfect stranger to them, I dreaded that they might be more strict, and reasonably so, on me than on one of their pupils. This had at least the effect of making me study much harder than otherwise I might". He need not have worried, as he goes on to relate. "My examination lasted about two hours and was, I think as fair as if I had studied under themselves. Happening, and indeed principally on account of my intimacy with Father Denvir, Professor of Natural Philosophy in Maynooth, to have been well prepared in Chemistry, I answered pretty well there". The young Corrigan shows considerable insight into academe in his concluding comments. "Each Professor — thinking his own branch the most important — when announcing to me the result of the examination, told me it would be very pleasing to all the professors if all my countrymen came as well prepared before them." Dominic Corrigan graduated from Edinburgh in 1825 with his famous contemporary, William Stokes, and both returned to Dublin.

**The Early Years:** There were now two courses open to Corrigan. He could become a dispensary doctor, or he could set his sights on attaining a position on the staff of one of Dublin's Hospitals. Because of his background and religion, the former option would have seemed the more sensible. However, Corrigan was not easily daunted, and he had determined to reach the top of his profession. William Stokes had every advantage that Corrigan lacked. His family were of good standing. His father, Whitley, was Professor of the Practice of Medicine at the College of Surgeons, a Fellow of Trinity, and Physician at the Meath Hospital. Through him William had access to a social, political, and medical world from which Corrigan would have been excluded. Within a year William Stokes's father resigned from the Meath Hospital, and his son duly succeeded him. William Stokes had already shown remarkable promise. While a student at Edinburgh, he had seen the great value in Laennec's discovery of the

stethoscope and he published the first work in English on the instrument.

Corrigan on his return set up practice at 11 Upper Ormond Quay. Here he tended the sick-poor of the city. After a year he was appointed Medical Inspector to St. Catherine's Parish, where he saw first hand the ravages of epidemic fever in Dublin. He carefully studied the diseases that afflicted his patients, and he began to publish his observations. In 1829, no less than three papers on heart disease appeared in the *Lancet* bearing the humble address of 11 Upper Ormond Quay. Such was the quality of one of these papers that it merited editorial comment. He was appointed physician to the Sick-poor Institution in Meath Street in 1826, and here he was able to observe the clinical manifestations of fever, and he saw what charitable voluntary effort could do for the sick-poor of the city. He published a number of papers on fever, in which he advocated that dispensaries should provide food as well as medicine. He warned the authorities that the potato crop was failing, and that the consequences would be disastrous. The government paid little heed.

What sort of a man was this Doctor Corrigan of Dublin? In appearance he was tall, and erect with a commanding figure and intellectual countenance. A contemporary tells us that his face showed great enthusiasm and power, and yet beamed with kindness. He was a man of great physical energy, and his daughter recounts that being an expert horseman he took great pleasure from "leaping and riding a bare-backed horse fearlessly". As his reputation grew he was given advice on how to succeed in practice by his colleagues. He should attend flower shows, charitable bazaars and afternoon teas frequently. It was deemed desirable that he should develop a harassed demeanour. It was imperative that he arranged to be called away from church and parties on urgent business. These ploys might have been feasible, but the suggestion that he should take to driving a smart hansom at speed through the streets, did not suit his principles anymore than his pocket. At this time he became depressed by his colleagues' obsession with the monetary aspects of medicine. However, we are told that he found solace in reading *The Lives of Eminent British Physicians*, and he decided that hard work would ultimately lead to excellence and success.

In 1829 he married Joanna Woodlock the daughter of a wealthy Dublin merchant. There were to be six children — three boys and three girls.

#### **The Charitable Infirmary:**

In 1830 at the age of 28, Dominic Corrigan, in the face of much competition was appointed Physician to The Charitable Infirmary, Jervis Street. One year later he was appointed to the prestigious position of Consulting Physician to his alma mater the Catholic

College of Maynooth. The Charitable Infirmary was the first voluntary hospital to open in the British Isles. It had been founded in 1718 by six Dublin surgeons. It opened in Cook Street, moved shortly afterwards to Andersons Court, then to Inns Quay, and in 1786 the former Town House of The Earl of Charlemont, number 14 Jervis Street was purchased and a new building was erected in 1804. The ground floor of the new building, which was entered by a double flight of granite steps, contained a surgery, board room and apothecary's department. All the upper rooms were wards, except two. In one of these the matron lived, the other was for performance of operations. A feature, unusual for hospitals of that period, was the provision for semi-private patients. The building remained until 1877, when the hospital which now stands was erected.

In the Charitable Infirmary, Corrigan was permitted to share four of the hospital's 75 beds with another physician. In these beds he studied carefully cardiac disease, and in 1832 he published a paper on "Permanent Patency of the Mouth of the Aorta, or Inadequacy of the Aortic Valves" in *The Edinburgh Medical and Surgical Journal*. This paper was to guarantee his medical fame. Before long the disease he had described was referred to as "Corrigan's Disease", Corrigan now became a leader of the Dublin School of Medicine which flourished for a brief period in the mid-nineteenth century — the so called "Golden Age of Dublin Medicine". Dublin took its place in medical history with Leyden, Edinburgh, Vienna and Paris as a prestigious centre of learning and influence. In the Meath, Graves and Stokes were introducing the form of bed-side teaching with which we are all familiar today. In addition they were writing on the diagnosis and pathology of illness with a clarity that was refreshing, iconoclastic and characteristic of the school.

As Corrigan's reputation grew so too did his practice. In 1832 he moved from Ormond Quay to 13 Bachelors Walk, and in 1834 in a flourish indicative of considerable prosperity, he moved to number 4 Merrion Square West, the house now bearing the number 92. Here he joined the elite, not only of the medical profession but of society in general. In this illustrious ambience his practice thrived. It is estimated that he earned more than any other physician of his time. The income from his fees was said to be not less than £9,000 per annum for many years, but scrutiny of his fee books suggests that £4,000 a year is a more accurate figure.

Corrigan had his problems at the Charitable Infirmary. The hospital having been founded by surgeons was run very firmly by the surgeons. Physicians had merely an advisory role in the hospital's main activity, namely surgery. Corrigan's efforts to obtain equal status for the physicians were turned down, and in 1840, he applied successfully for the post of Physician to the House of Industry hospitals, incorporating the Richmond, Whitworth and Hardwicke Hospitals and generally known as the Richmond Hospital.

**The Richmond:** Corrigan was not the first to take this course — Robert Adams had moved from the Charitable Infirmary and John Cheyne from the Meath Hospital to the House of Industry. In his new appointment, Corrigan's major efforts were directed towards fever, a subject on which he was now regarded an authority. In 1846 he published an interesting little paper in which he advocates what he called counter-irritation for cases of chronic rheumatism. Small iron discs were heated to a dull red heat with a spirit lamp and applied over the affected area. Known as 'Corrigan's Button' the instrument was popular for many years.

Eighteen-forty-seven was to prove a year of mixed fortunes. A year earlier as the country was gripped by the Great Famine forecasted by Corrigan, the authorities in panic appointed a Central Health Board to advise the Government how to deal with the emergency. This board consisted of Corrigan, the Surgeon General, Sir Philip Crampton, then President of the Royal College of Surgeons, Sir Robert Kane, a fellow of the College of Physicians, more renowned for his work in chemistry and industry than in medicine, and a government appointee, a Mr. Twistleton. The Board proved impotent in the face of the awful epidemic which swept through a starving nation. However, little comment would have been made about the Board's activities were it not for a controversial directive from the government based apparently on the Board's recommendations to pay dispensary doctors five shillings a day for treating fever victims. With doctors falling victim daily to the epidemic, this award was received with incredulity and anger. Eleven hundred doctors signed a memorial protesting to the government. The press with one exception took the profession's side. Then in November 1847, Robert Graves sent a thirty page letter to William Wilde, editor of *The Dublin Quarterly Journal of Medical Science*. In this he castigated Corrigan in personal terms that would in a later age have been answered by a writ for libel. He said that most if not all the blame for the five shillings a day award must go to Corrigan, if for no other reason, but that he had so diligently attended the Board's meetings. In a five month period Corrigan had attended no less than 87 meetings, Crampton 42, Kane 2, and Twistleton 12. Graves was furious that the Royal Colleges had not been asked to nominate representatives to the Central Health Board, this in spite of the fact that Crampton was President of the College of Surgeons and Kane a fellow of the College of Physicians. "But" he says "Dr. Corrigan may be excused from becoming a little giddy when he ventures into the same car with Sir Philip, and, to the amazement of all suddenly finds himself at an altitude so elevated, that his companion, although a veteran aeronaut, betrays distinct evidence of alarm". Graves maintained that the Board should have resigned rather than accept the ignominious remuneration. He deplored Government involvement in matters of charity — "The moment that charity ceases to be the sole guardian of the sick poor — the moment

that public boards, government officials, and local committees take into their hands the superintendence and administration of medical relief — that moment mammoth interferes and spoils the goodly work.”

**The College of Physicians:** Corrigan unwisely chose this year to apply for Honorary Fellowship of the College of Physicians. He was ignominiously black-beaned, because of his involvement with the health board, but he maintained that there were sectarian motives. Some small truth there may have been in this, but the College, as the *Lancet* pointed out, by granting him fellowship would have condoned the government remuneration. The profession had voiced its disapproval. The government conscious of the effort that Corrigan had put into the Central Health Board, showed appreciation by appointing him Physician-in-ordinary to Queen Victoria in Ireland, an unusual appointment for a Catholic.

Corrigan did not take kindly to reverses. He had been determined to enter the Kings and Queens College of Physicians, as the College of Physicians was then called and enter it he would. To date he had not had much success in fulfilling his ambition. In 1841 he had applied for the Kings Professorship but was in the good company of William Stokes when both were rejected. In 1855 he sat humbly for the examination of Licentiate of the College, and having achieved this there was nothing to stop him from becoming a full Fellow which he did in 1856. Three years later he was proposed for President by William Stokes and he defeated Sir Henry Marsh by 13 votes to three. He was to occupy the Presidency for five consecutive years, a feat not since equalled.

When Corrigan became President he may have looked back with some dismay at the manner in which the college had managed its affairs over the two hundred years since its foundation in 1654. It had failed to improve and maintain medical standards as well as might have been expected. It had violated and squandered much of the large legacy of its chief benefactor Sir Patrick Dun. It had become involved in much unnecessary litigation, acting as defendant for both sides on one occasion. It had managed to lose through neglect and indifference, almost all of the Dun library which would be a priceless legacy today. In 1811 the College visiting the Dun estate in Waterford for the first time found that two hundred acres or so had disappeared. It had moreover on occasion misappropriated funds in payment to its officers, and on one occasion in purchasing claret for the President. However, these days were now past. The College had to its credit survived difficult times, and it was, if by virtue of nothing other than its charter and a council that comprised some dynamic fellows, ready for a move forward when Corrigan became its President.

The College had never managed to acquire a permanent home during its two hundred years existence. In the eighteenth century it met in

