

Music Festival
— in —
Great Irish Houses

(Founder: David Laing)

6th - 14th June 1986

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The Royal College of Surgeons

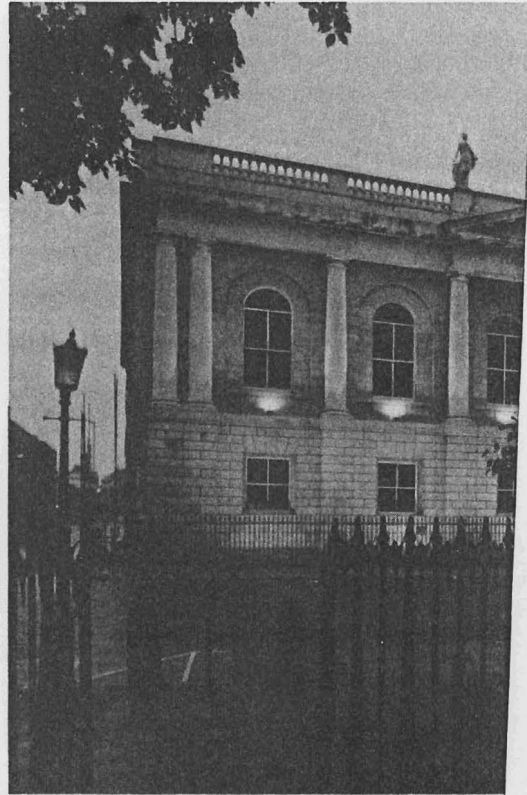
by

EOIN O'BRIEN

IN 11th FEBRUARY 1784, the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland was granted a charter by George III. This gave the surgeons the power to control the practice of surgery and to make provision for surgical education. To appreciate the influence that the College has had on the development of Irish medicine, we must look back to the early days of surgery.

In medieval times the various trades were regulated by a system of guilds, and the surgeons were grouped with the barbers in the Barber-Surgeons Guild. This seemingly strange alliance probably arose at a time when medical treatment was provided in the monasteries. Surgery was then considered an unseemly practice for monks and was delegated to the lay servant who attended to the tonsure. As most of the populace were illiterate each guild had an emblem denoting its trade. The familiar barber's red and white striped pole, based on the practice of blood letting, is still carried by the two most junior members of the College Council on ceremonial occasions.

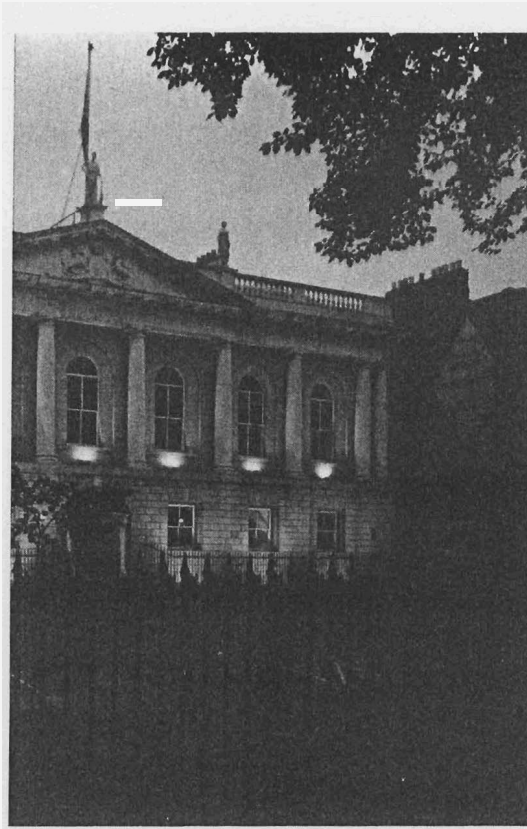
A charter of King James II in 1687 incorporated the surgeons with their old friends the barbers, as previously, but included also the apothecaries and periwig makers. In 1765, a Limerick surgeon, Sylvester O'Halloran, made proposals for the foundation of a separate body to control the training and practice of surgeons and William Dease, another disillusioned surgeon, proposed separation from 'that preposterous union with the company of barbers'. Parliamentary agitation followed and culminated



College at night from St. Stephen's Green.

successfully in the granting of a charter in 1784.

The first honorary fellowship of the newly founded College was granted by an Irish surgeon, Robert Adair, renowned more for his romantic than surgical exploits. He had fled Ireland following a romantic crisis, only to fall in love with Lady Caroline Keppel in London much to the anguish of her parents, who did not deem an impecunious barber-surgeon a suitable paramour for their daughter. Dispatched to Bath, she wrote the verses that began: 'What's this dull town to me? Robin? not near', which Robert Burns later set to the music of Eileen Aroon, and thereby gave the College of Surgeons in Ireland its anthem.



The newly-founded College began life without either funds or premises, but a disused hall in Mercer Street, adjoining Mercer's Hospital, was soon acquired, where the Schools of the College flourished, due chiefly to the demand for army and navy surgeons for the Napoleonic Wars. In 1804 larger premises were considered necessary, and the College was fortunate in having among its members one, George Renny, a surgeon with an astute eye for business, who moreover, as Director General of the Army Medical Department in Ireland, and surgeon to the Royal Hospital in Kilmainham, had considerable influence with the Government. He obtained £6,000 from the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and for £4,000 purchased the old Quaker

burial-ground at the corner of St. Stephen's Green and York Street, where the new College was erected to the design of Edward Parke and opened in 1810.

The new building, striking in its simplicity, 'the pride of Irish Surgery, and the terror of many a candidate, whose fate often depends upon its decrees', once again soon proved inadequate for the needs of the College. In 1828, the old college was incorporated in a new building, an architectural achievement performed with remarkable skill by William Murray in consultation with Francis Johnston. Whereas the contemporary satirical writer Erinesis had been able to write of the earlier building: 'solid and substantial, no gew-gaw of the sculptor's art disfigures the simplicity of its style', the sculptor John Smyth was now commissioned to adorn the pediment of the new building with the figures of three Greek deities. Aesculapius, the God of Medicine, Athena, the Goddess of Wisdom and War and Patroness of the Useful Arts, and Hygiea, Goddess of Health.

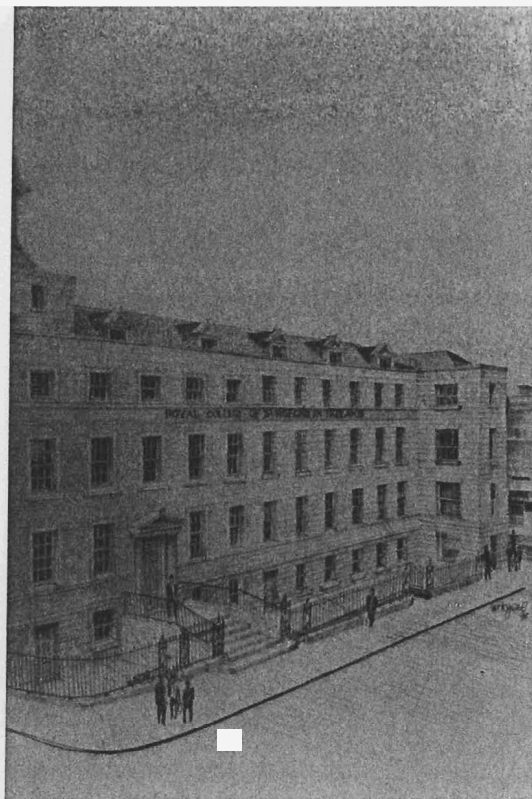
Entering the College through the main door on St. Stephen's Green the visitor is faced by the statue of William Dease, a Georgian surgeon, the first of many fine pieces of sculpture in the college. This statue by Thomas Farrell was not executed until 1886, a fact that belies the anecdote, so popular among medical students, that Dease, a member of the Society of United Irishmen, on hearing of his impending arrest committed suicide by severing his femoral artery, and that simultaneously a crack appeared on the leg of his marble statue along the anatomical course of this blood vessel.

The fine plasterwork on the ceiling of the Board Room of the College is elaborate, yet tasteful, and from the windows there is a pleasing view of the park of St. Stephen's Green and its surrounding (alas much depleted) Georgian architecture. The College's finest portraiture is to be found here. The magnificent full-length portraits of George Renny by William Cumming, and James Henthorn by Martin Creggan,



Artist's impression of Mercer's Hospital with new extens

hang over the mantelpiece and the portrait of Abraham Colles, (remembered eponymously in medicine by Colle's fracture of the wrist) also by Creggan, hangs in the Board Room. We may pause to wonder at the deep indentation in one of the copper finger-plates on the entrance door, to the Board Room and perhaps be surprised to learn that it was from a bullet fired through the window during the occupation of the College by Constance Markievicz on Easter Monday, 24 April 1916. The rebel countess daughter of Sir Henry Gore-Booth, was arrested and sentenced to death when she surrendered the College, but this sentence was later commuted to penal servitude for life.



ension.

The College Hall with its minstrel gallery, once an examination hall, is now used for hosting more enjoyable functions. Its walls are hung with portraits of former presidents, among which is Sarah Purser's portrait of Robert MacDonnell, a surgeon to the Charitable Infirmary who gave the first transfusion of human blood in 1865. His father had been the first in the country to perform surgery under anaesthesia (in the Richmond Hospital in 1847), and his grandfather, James, had founded the Fever and General Hospitals in Belfast in 1817.

The new College building erected in 1976 provides modern lecture facilities, conference halls, well-equipped laboratories and recreational facilities for the College's

800 students. The research laboratories and post-graduate surgical facilities together with the faculties of Radiology, Anaesthesiology, Nursing and Dentistry are also accommodated in this building. As in the past the College is once again faced with the need for expansion. When Mercer's Hospital became vacant after its closure in 1983, the College purchased the building that had once been the location for its own modest origins, and set about its development to provide facilities for the ever-increasing demands of medical research. The new development will also accommodate a contemporary medical library, and a department of general practice with the first chair in this discipline in Ireland. A residence for the College's students, and a medical museum will also be incorporated in the building that once housed the voluntary hospital founded by Mary Mercer, a Dublin doctor's daughter.

The College in catering for the needs of medicine in the future, also takes some pride in its contribution to the preservation of Dublin's medical architecture. The recent restoration of the Colles Room, the Albert Theatre, and the College façade together with refurbishment of all its reception rooms has been financially costly but aesthetically rewarding. The Mercer's development project when completed will have restored another part of our Georgian heritage for posterity.

Castletown House

