

## OCCASIONAL NOTES

### THE MAN BEHIND THE EPONYM

Sir Dominic John Corrigan (1802-1880)

THE name Corrigan is familiar to medical students and doctors the world over. Indeed, in Victorian days Corrigan's contributions to clinical medicine were acknowledged by a host of eponyms — *maladie de Corrigan*, *Corrigan's cirrhosis*, *Corrigan's sign*, *venous Corrigan*, *Corrigan's button*, and *Corrigan's hammer*<sup>1</sup>; and in the town of Arcachon near Bordeaux, *Allée Corrigan* bore testimony of the citizens' gratitude to him for extolling the climatic benefits of their seaside resort. Nowadays little is known of the man behind these eponyms, and it is timely to reappraise the achievements of this remarkable Victorian.

Dominic John Corrigan's first task, after qualifying in Edinburgh together with his famous contemporary William Stokes in 1825, was to obtain a hospital appointment.<sup>2</sup> Coming as he did from an artisan Catholic background in the Liberties of Dublin was a grave disadvantage in preemancipation Ireland. However, Corrigan was a prodigious worker, and in his practice among the sick he studied the clinical manifestations of fever and heart disease carefully. A series of papers, published mostly in the *Lancet*, secured for him the appointment of physician to the Charitable Infirmary in Jervis Street. Shortly afterward his famous paper on aortic regurgitation appeared in the *Edinburgh Medical and Surgical Journal*.<sup>3</sup>

Corrigan did not stay long at the Charitable Infirmary. This institute had been founded in 1718 by six Dublin surgeons and had remained dominated by surgeons in the Georgian and Victorian periods; physicians were given little say in its government. When a vacancy arose in the Richmond Hospital in 1840 Corrigan was appointed, and he joined his colleague Robert Adams (of Stokes-Adams disease), who had made a similar move some years earlier. Here he was given charge of the Hardwicke Fever Hospital. When the Great Famine began in 1845, the government appointed him to the Central Board of Health that was established to organize the relief of famine and fever. The Royal Colleges resented the fact that the government had not sought their advice, and when the board approved a 5-shilling-a-day award to doctors working in the famine areas, the medical profession, led by the colleges, decried the offer as ridiculous and selected Corrigan as the main target for their displeasure. Robert Graves led a vitriolic personal attack on his younger colleague, and it was not long before the press joined in, declaring that since Corrigan had "felt the pulse of an Excellency . . . a new light has burst on him and closed his mouth."

Corrigan unwisely chose this time to seek an honorary fellowship in the King's and Queen's College of

Physicians, and predictably he was blackballed. With characteristic determination he sat for the licentiate examination and was duly elected to full fellowship and shortly afterward to the presidency of the College. He held this post for five successive years — a feat not since rivaled. During his term of office he built the college hall in Kildare Street.

Corrigan not only assisted the government in fever and famine relief but also advised on planning for lunatic asylums and served as a commissioner of national education. These services were duly rewarded: he was appointed Physician-in-Ordinary to Queen Victoria in Ireland and then named a Baronet of the Empire in 1866.

He had a passionate interest in education, both medical and general. He was an excellent teacher, and his clinical lectures published in the *London Medical Gazette* and the *Dublin Hospital Gazette*<sup>4</sup> show a deep empathy for the qualities essential to the development of the clinician. As a member of the General Medical Council for 21 years he pressed uncompromisingly for the standardization of medical education and assessment.

However, it was to general education at both the school and university levels that Corrigan directed most of his energies. He knew only too well the difficulties that beset Catholics in obtaining even the most basic education in Victorian Ireland. He had been fortunate in going to the best Catholic school then available, the Lay College at Maynooth, a remarkable institute that lasted merely 17 years. As a commissioner for National Education and as a member of the Senate of the Queen's University and later its vice-chancellor, he did much to advance the cause of educational facilities for Catholics. However, he reserved his greatest effort for his later years. At the age of 68 he was elected a Member of Parliament for the City of Dublin, and in the Houses of Parliament at Westminster he stated courageously the case for Catholic education in Ireland: "There is seen in Ireland," he declared "what is not seen in any other country — even in the most despotic country in Europe, that sixty professors of Arts and Sciences are the mere nominees of the viceroy." He warned that the lack of educational facilities was a source of deep sectarian discord: "While Trinity College is left in possession of at least fifty thousand pounds a year won by oppression and confiscation from Catholics — the Catholic Educational Institutes derive nothing from the State." Westminster listened in shocked silence; at home many of his colleagues found his strictures highly offensive, but to the Catholics of Ireland he epitomized all that education and integrity stood for.

Corrigan died of a stroke in his 79th year, on February 1, 1880, and his body was interred in the family vault in Dublin.

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### REFERENCES

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