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The Irish School of Medicine: Graves, Stokes and Corrigan

James J. Walsh

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When, just thirty-five years ago, I wrote my first book on the history of medicine, it consisted of a series of biographies and one of the most important chapters of it was on the Irish school of medicine. The three men whose names led the distinguished roll of Irish physicians were Robert Graves, after whom Graves disease is named in the English-speaking countries though the affection is also called exophthalmic goitre or Basedow's disease, by the Germans; Corrigan, after whom Corrigan's disease, aortic regurgitation, is named; and Stokes, whose name is preserved for future generations in medicine in the term Cheyne-Stokes breathing. Stokes and Graves were not Catholics, but they afford a surpassing example of the contradiction of that old saw, "Where there are three physicians there are two atheists." All three of these men of the Irish school of medicine were thoroughly religious, and we have abundant evidence that Stokes and Graves were what would be called extremely pious men. The lives of these men demonstrate that science and faith and even piety may go hand in hand and are not at all necessarily in opposition to each other.

An appreciation of Graves's religious devotion may be had from a paragraph his biographer wrote about him in this regard:

"On the day before his death he desired to partake of Holy Communion with his family. . . . Feeling himself sinking, he asked that a prayer should be said and a petition offered up, suitable to his condition. When the formal prayers were said he seemed to long for something more and when questioned replied: 'I want some prayers that I know, some of the prayers of my youth, some of my father's prayers.' The litany was commenced and he immediately took up the well known words, and when the speaker's voice faltered, touched by the conditions that he saw around him, Graves continued the litany alone and distinctly to the end of the strain: 'Whom Thou hast redeemed with Thy most precious Blood.'"

Most people who read this would be prone to think that prayers so formulated could come only from a Catholic, but Graves was the son of a professor in an Anglican seminary and thoroughly familiar with the prayers of the Church that had come down from the older time.

Even more distinguished than Graves was his colleague and close friend, William Stokes. Stokes's work on diseases of the chest in middle life and his treatise later in life on "Diseases of the Heart and Aorta" stamp him as
one of the great physicians of modern time. His name is assured of immortality in the history of medicine because, linked with that of the well-known Scotch physician who came to Dublin late in the second decade of the nineteenth century, it is associated in the term most commonly used for a form of breathing in serious disease having special diagnostic and prognostic significance. Cheyne-Stokes respiration is a very valuable symptom complex. Even more interesting, however, than Stokes the physician is Stokes the man and all that he stood for in his generation in Dublin during a long life.

Stokes spent himself in labor for the poor and his deep interest in their welfare led him to sacrifice much time in order to organize medical charity for his unfortunate countrymen during the sad years of that awful fifth decade of the nineteenth century when Ireland lost more than one in eight of the population as the result of the famine, and the diseases that followed. Decimation, the taking of every tenth man, represented an awful punishment in military history, but between cholera and typhus Ireland during the mid-century lost many more than this.

Stokes was the first to recognize the disease and sounded the note of warning which saved many lives by calling attention to its perils. Cholera and typhus were the great dangers of the medical men of that time. Here in this country as the result of these intensely contagious diseases doctors lived far below the average length of life of the people generally. I have been shown records which point out that here in New York three generations of physicians in a family were taken off by these diseases between the ages of thirty and thirty-five. This proved to be true in Ireland but in spite of the risk, Stokes devoted himself to the care of his patients and wrote an account of his experiences which is in itself a valuable medical document showing the accurate powers of observation he possessed.

It is curiously interesting to find that a favorite subject of discussion in the Irish medical societies nearly a century ago was a topic which has come to be rather often the subject of discussion in medical society meetings. Dr. Stokes bewailed the fact that medicine did not have its proper place in the estimation of the people and was not able to assert its dignity as a profession in its proper sphere. He discussed also the remedies for this state of affairs and as he was a man of very large experience and eminently broad views as well as sane conservative judgment his opinions are worth while pondering even in the middle of the twentieth century for the practical problems of professional life which he puts forth are still with us. For this reason it seems worth while to give a rather lengthy quotation that would adequately represent his conclusions in the matter. Stokes said:

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"Is it by public agitation and remonstrances addressed to deaf or unwilling ears that these medical abuses are to be corrected? Is it by the demand for class legislation? Or is it by the efforts of one and all to place medicine in the hierarchy of the sciences, in the vanguard of human progress; eliminating every influence that can lower it, every day more and more developing the professional principle, while we foster all things that relate to its moral, literary and scientific character? When this becomes our rule of action, then begins the real reform of those things at which we fret and chafe. Then will medicine have due weight in the councils of the country. There is no royal road to this consummation."

Dr. Stokes continued: "On the one hand, the liberal education of the public must advance and the introduction of the physical sciences into the arts courses of the universities must give the death blow to empiricism; and, on the other, education of ourselves must extend its foundations, and we should trust far less to the special than to the general training of the mind.

"When medicine is in a position to command respect be sure that its reward will be proportionally increased, its status elevated. In the history of the human race, three objects of man’s solicitude may be indicated: first, his future state; next, his worldly interests; and lastly, his health. And so the professions which deal with these considerations have been relatively placed: first, that of divinity; next, that of law or government; and, as man loves gold more than life, the last is medicine. But, with the progress of society, a juster balance will obtain, conditionally that we work in the right direction and make ourselves worthy to take a share in its government, not by coercive curricula of education; not by overloaded examinations in special knowledge which are, in comparison to a large mental training, almost valueless, but by seeing to the moral and religious cultivation and the general intellectual advancement of the student."

If one turns to the address on medical education by President Hutchins of Chicago University published in the Journal of the American Medical Association for April 29, 1939, it is surprising to find how many ideas the two men have in common.

What Sir John Moore, himself one of the most distinguished of the physicians of the next generation in Dublin, said of Stokes at the bedside sums up very beautifully his medical career:

"Those who have seen Dr. Stokes at the bedside of the sick know how gentle, how refined, how kindly was his bearing toward the patient. Amid all his ardor of clinical observation and research, he never for one moment forgot the sufferer before him — no thoughtless words passed his lips, no rough or unkind action ever ruffled the calm confidence reposed
in him by those who knew his skill and care. In many eloquent lectures delivered at the Meath Hospital, he inculcated those Christian lessons of charity and thoughtfulness; and so by precept and example he strove to teach the duties of a true and God-fearing physician."

At least as great as his two colleagues of whom I have just written was Sir Dominic Corrigan, distinguished for his original observations in heart disease, a special type of pulse being named after him. Quite unlike the other representatives of the Irish school of medicine, Corrigan was the son of a poor shopkeeper who barely made a living for his family. In spite of this Corrigan secured his higher education at Maynooth, an institution which we now associate entirely with ecclesiastical students but at that time had a department for secular students quite apart from ecclesiastical. The physician who was in attendance at Maynooth for the students won Corrigan's admiration, and proved to be the decisive factor in the young man's determination to study medicine.

After several years of medical study in Dublin, which was looked upon as a medical center of distinction, Corrigan went to Edinburgh. The prevailing custom of the time was not to make medical studies in one school only, but to absorb the teaching of several schools and especially of their most distinguished teachers. At the age of twenty-three he received his degree of Doctor of Medicine and then returned to Dublin to practice. Here the best that he could secure was the appointment as physician to the Jervis Street Hospital. This was a small institution and had but six medical beds, yet it was here that Corrigan succeeded in making a reputation for himself by his observations in cardiac diseases. Small as was the experience that could be thus secured he succeeded in less than five years in revolutionizing the teaching with regard to diseases of the aortic valve in the heart.

Corrigan lived a long and busy life up to the age of nearly eighty and received many distinctions in the course of his activities. He was thoroughly appreciated by his colleagues in the medical profession. He was elected president of the Royal Zoological Society of Dublin and also of the Dublin Pharmaceutical Society. He was five times elected president of the College of Physicians in Dublin, an unprecedented honor. There is a magnificent statue of him done by the Irish sculptor, Foley, which has a very prominent place in the home of the Dublin College of Physicians.

Corrigan was eminently successful as a teacher of medicine but he was deeply interested in education in all its phases. He was created a Baronet partly as a reward for his services as Commissioner of Education, a post he held for some time. He was a member of the English Parliament for five
years and was defeated for re-election by the liquor interests because he insisted that the greatest evil the Irish people were suffering from was an over-indulgence in arduous spirits. For this reason he had devoted himself to the enactment of the Sunday Closing Bill.

Those were the days that, as we have said, tried men's souls when epidemics of intensely fatal disease swept through the countries of the world. Corrigan was the first to point out the distinction between typhus and typhoid. When either of these diseases swept through the city and country, these members of the Irish school of medicine devoted themselves to the care of their patients, though it was an intensely perilous procedure. No wonder they were considered to be intensely charitable toward their fellow men when unlike so many others who fled from the danger involved, they stayed with their patients and did all they possibly could for them. No wonder, too, that some of their students and assistants felt it their duty to do likewise so as to afford the best care that could be given to people who could not fly from the danger but had to stay and attend to their business and their folks.

Corrigan's self-sacrificing devotion during the famine years made him famous. He came to have one of the largest practices that any physician in Dublin, or for that matter in any city in the world, has ever enjoyed, if enjoyment it can be called! His office was always crowded with patients who would have taken up all his time if allowed to do so. In order to secure opportunities for his other work, for his lectures, for his hospital visits, and for his pathological investigation, he had a back entrance made to his home through which he could steal out unrecognized, even though there were many patients waiting for him.

Late in life after his return from Parliament he took up his practice again but it was only a very little time before the same state of affairs with regard to his practice developed once more. It seemed almost as if every sick Irish man and woman, no matter how far away they lived, wanted to have the opinion of Dr. Corrigan. He had also a large consultant practice, but he was known to be a very different man from the ordinary type of medical consultant. As one of his younger colleagues said: "He never wore the supreme air of a consultant." He was always simple and unassuming in his manner, ready to listen to what had developed in the illness, and above all to what had been found in the case before he was called in. He had none of that superciliousness that was supposed to characterize the high-grade consultant physician in the British Isles half a century ago.

The present generation of Catholic physicians can well be proud to be able to claim so fine an exponent of all they stand for, as one of their own.