

Men and Medicine

William Stokes, one of the world's greatest clinical observers and teachers, was born in Dublin in 1804. He came of a family that had emigrated from England five generations earlier and had after that occupied prominent positions in Irish public life. His father Whitley Stokes was Regius Professor of Medicine at Dublin (and also a passionate Irish patriot). Whitley Stokes was known as a brilliant clinician in the tradition of Sydenham—the tradition of bedside observation of patients—and was a highly cultivated man of broad interests. However, according to his son William, his only legacy to the young Stokes was “the blessed gift of rising early.” His father obviously also stimulated his interest in clinical medicine.

William Stokes entered the Meath Hospital in Dublin as a student, transferred to Glasgow, and, in 1825, received his degree at Edinburgh. While still a student he showed his strong clinical bent when he wrote his *Treatise on the Use of the Stethoscope*; this was the first systematic discussion of the subject in English. On his return to Dublin in 1826 he was elected physician to the Meath Hospital and became a close friend of Robert Graves, who was chief physician at the hospital. The two men instituted a system of bedside teaching that made the Dublin School of Medicine one of the most famous in the world. Less than twenty years after graduation Stokes succeeded his father as Regius Professor at Dublin.

The influence of two great clinicians, his father Whitley Stokes and his best friend Robert Graves, largely determined his own interests. His name is best known in connection with Cheyne-Stokes respiration (described in 1845 in his book *Diseases of the Heart and Aorta*) and with Stokes-Adams syndrome (described in 1846 in the *Dublin Quarterly Journal of Medical Science*). His description of attacks of unconsciousness associated with marked bradycardia and not followed by paralysis is an outstanding example of clinical observation and descrip-

tion. However, Stokes was the first to record other now well-known clinical phenomena. His book on the heart and aorta, one of the greatest clinical treatises of modern times, also contained the first account of paroxysmal tachycardia and of “Stokes’ tippet” (or collar), the edema of the neck that occurs in patients with superior vena caval obstruction. (His patient had an aortic aneurysm.) This book, like his earlier *Diseases of the Chest*, was translated and read widely and had

a lasting effect on clinical thinking.

Stokes’ keen powers of observation, his outstanding ability to organize and present data clearly, and his unusual interest in bedside teaching made him one of the leading figures in the academic medicine of his time. These qualities, together with his remarkable sense of humor and his interest in all those whom he encountered either socially or professionally, further increased his effectiveness as a clinical teacher. ■



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