DURING the first half of the nineteenth century Dublin became the center of a remarkable renaissance in medicine owing to the remarkable ability of its relatively small group of learned physicians. The names of many of Ireland’s physicians of that day are preserved in familiar eponyms, and their philosophy of medical education had a deep and lasting effect on the medical training in schools world-wide, but especially in the United States. Robert Graves has been rated one of the most remarkable medical men of that era.

Robert James Graves, descendant of an English family which had settled in Ireland in the seventeenth century, was born in Dublin in 1797, the son of Richard Graves, a Senior Fellow of Trinity College, who later became Regius Professor of Divinity in that institution. Robert Graves was educated at Trinity and showed such proficiency in his studies that he was awarded a gold medal for scholastic excellence. He was graduated M.B. from there in 1818.

Following graduation, Graves spent 3 years in postgraduate study at the important medical centers of England and the continent. While on this tour he became acquainted with many physicians and physiologists with whom he kept up correspondence throughout his life. It was in Europe that he learned the new teaching technics which he was later to employ in modified form in Ireland.

Graves returned to Dublin in 1821, and in that year was elected to the staff of Meath Hospital, the principal public hospital in the city. He soon set about reforming the system of medical education in vogue there in light of what he had learned in Germany, Austria, France, and elsewhere on the continent.

He began a system of teaching wherein the students actually examined patients, presented histories, reviewed physical findings and treatment with the professor. He abandoned the Olympian attitude of his predecessors and became a friend and councilor to the students. Graves is frequently quoted as saying, “The physicians’ profession is acquaintance with disease and its remedies. It is not chemistry, it is not anatomy, it is not physic, it is not physiology, it is disease.” Graves also insisted that his students attend autopsies in order to correlate the changes found there with the symptoms and signs which preceded death.

Graves’ lectures were very popular and attracted large classes. These were given in English, as he very early dropped the use of Latin in instruction. His lectures were revised each year as he insisted that the student be “fed from a fresh spring.” His collected lectures were published in two volumes, and these constituted a textbook of medicine, used
widely for many years. These went through several English and American editions, with translations into German and French.

Graves is perhaps best known for his description of toxic goiter, which has long been known by the eponym, Graves' disease. However, his description of the disorder was preceded by those of Parry and of Flajani. Graves' graphic description of three female patients with toxic goiter is a masterpiece of medical writing. The sudden and periodic enlargement of the thyroid, the anxious appearance with staring eyes and forcible heart beat, which in one patient could be heard at a distance of 4 feet from the chest, all combine to dramatize the condition.

Graves' lectures contain many references to disorders of the heart and circulation as the following notes indicate:

He made many interesting and valuable observations on the character of the pulse. He is accredited with being the first to time the pulse rate by means of a watch. He observed that the pulse rate is more rapid in the erect than in the horizontal position in health, and that this difference is much greater in disease. This difference, he believed was a useful prognostic sign and could be relied upon in advising patients as to the time when they could safely get up and about. Graves regarded the "dicrotus" pulse as a valuable prognostic sign in many diseases. In fevers, he believed especially that if the pulse was hard and "dicrotus" for several days, the prognosis was bad.

His lecture on the laws of inflammation and the formation of new vessels is an interesting chapter and full of logical deductions aimed at contravening the view, widely held at that time, that obstruction and increased vis a tergo are the only mechanisms responsible for the growth of new vessels. His concept, that the capillaries have a direct influence on the circulation and that dilation and contraction of vessels locally are responsible for the phenomena of inflammation is in line with modern views. He strongly criticized the practice in vogue of his day of bleeding the patient for such conditions as Egyptian ophthalmia (tra-

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wards of Meath Hospital or elsewhere in Dublin.

Grave's regarded diabetes mellitus as a kidney disease, but he knew that patients with this disorder excreted large amounts of sugar in the urine. He used opium in the therapy of diabetes, a remedy still in wide use up to the time insulin was discovered in 1921.

The symptoms, signs, diagnosis, prognosis, and therapy of fevers are extensively covered in Grave's lectures; this is an indication in part of the widespread incidence and severity of such diseases as typhus, typhoid, influenza, and pneumonia at that time. Grave's was a strong opponent of the starvation regimen in vogue up to his time in the management of febrile states. Instead, he advocated "feeding fevers" and often stated that he wished it to be known widely that he supported this dietary management.

He discussed the venereal diseases at length and advocated the therapy of syphilis with baths introduced by the Germans. He accepted this therapy as perhaps less damaging than the use of heroic doses of mercury employed at that time. Grave's knew of the infectiousness of gonorrheal pus and mentioned instances of transmission to the eye of infection from the use of a basin to wash the face which had previously contained gonorrheal matter.

Grave's lectures contain considerable original work on the pathologic and clinical aspects of nervous diseases; attention is drawn for the first time to the "pin hole pupil" of pontine hemorrhage.

Many of Grave's writings were devoted to things other than medical, as shown by the titles of some of his lectures: "Varieties of the Human Race"; the "Hungarian Revolution"; "On the Hock Joint of the Horse"; and on the "Birthdays of Celebrated Living Authors."3

In personal appearance Grave was tall and dark, with expressive features and a very distinguished manner. He was much in demand as a consultant although his practice was not as large as that of Corrigan, who was a contemporary. His wife was Anna Grogan, the daughter of the Reverend William Grogan. He had two sons and four daughters. His descendents still live in County Armagh.

Grave's was made a member of many honorary societies. He was elected to membership in the Royal Society and was made an honorary member, among others, of the medical societies of Berlin, Vienna, Hamburg, Bruges, and Montreal.4

Grave's died at the early age of 57 after a protracted illness and was buried in Mount Jerome Cemetery in Dublin.

A bust in marble, done by John Hogan, was presented to the College of Physicians of Dublin by his wife shortly after his death. In 1877, funds were raised by Irish physicians for a statue of Grave's to be placed in the College of Physicians. Albert B. Joy, a young Irish sculptor, executed the statue.5

I summarize with a quotation from Professor A. Trousseau, whose remarks appear in the preface of the second edition of the Clinical Lectures. These remarks are a high tribute from a French physician of great renown. He describes Grave's as "A perfect clinical teacher, a profound philosopher, an ingenious artist, and an able therapeutist; he commands to our admiration the art whose domain he enlarges and the practice of which he renders more useful and more fertile."

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References

Historical Annotation: Robert James Graves, Physician, Educator, Scientist
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