

Alexander Gordon (1818–1887)

President of the Belfast Medical Society

1855–56

President of the Belfast Clinical and Pathological Society

1860–61

Brief Account of the Life of Alexander Gordon
by
Sir Ian Fraser

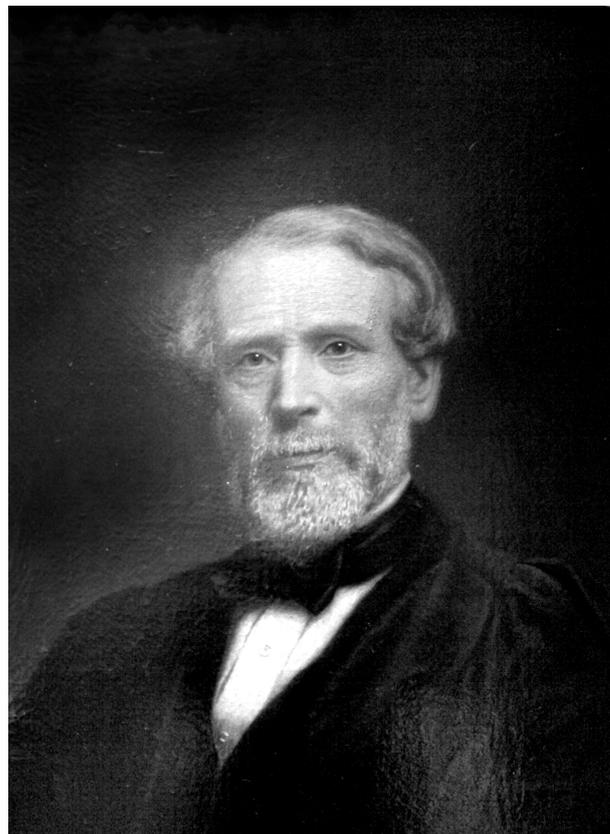
Sir William Whitla spoke on one occasion of Professor Gordon as “the most illustrious of Irish surgeons, a man of world wide fame, an original genius, a man with an inventive, creative mind”. When Gordon died someone said “he belonged to a past generation which we hope will never become extinct”.

Whitla saw a great deal of Gordon as he was the professor’s assistant in many private surgical operations; in fact Whitla at one time had the idea of becoming a surgeon. It must have given him great pleasure when Gordon’s daughter in 1904 bequeathed this painting of her father to the Ulster Medical Society. She had just come back from America after the death of her husband Dr. Stallard who had been a professor of medicine in the University of California.

Alexander Gordon was certainly an interesting man. He was the first professor of surgery in Queen’s and had held the chair in the Inst. Medical School for a short time. He held the post for 37 years from 1849 retiring only a short time before he died, at the age of 59. We may note that his successor Professor Thomas Sinclair filled the position of Professor of Surgery for exactly the same number of years—37.

Gordon had a great knowledge of anatomy: in fact he was appointed professor of surgery while still a demonstrator of anatomy. It is said that even to the very end he would go to the Anatomy Department for one hour before giving a lecture. During his time in the anatomy department he made a collection of healed fractures, These mounted specimens are quite unique and are equal to any collection in any part of the world. In an era when there was no radiology the expert bone setter was a valuable person and Gordon of Belfast had just as great a reputation at that time as H.O. Thomas of Liverpool.

Although he did his main undergraduate studies in Belfast he finally qualified in Edinburgh. He quickly amassed a large private practice; he was known for the smallness of his fees—it was said that this represented his humility rather than his merit. He rather glorified in being untidy and his famous hat was well known. On one occasion he was asked by the senior physician to see in consultation an important member of the aristocracy. When the physician called to collect Professor Gordon the latter appeared at the



door in his usual disreputable hat, the physician suggested that he should put on a better one. Gordon went back into the house, and after considerable delay, a top hat was brought out on a tray by the butler with a note which said “I see it is the hat you want and not the man” .

Although normally gentle in nature he could when roused be very irascible, and on such occasions his language could have graced any sergeant’s mess, The students loved him and called him Old Alick, although the less reverent on account of his beard called him “Jasus”—he knew about this and on one occasion when he was opening a deep and painful abscess in the arm of a rough farmer the latter used this word as an expletive, to which Gordon at once replied “you are not allowed to say that; it is only the students who are allowed to call me that”.

His name became internationally known owing to the invention of the Gordon splint. This splint was said to set and hold the common Colles fracture of the wrist at a time when radiology did not exist to

Alexander Gordon

show the true position of the bones, He is remembered in the Whitla Medical Building not only by his portrait but also by the sculpted head which, with the other three heads, is now in the entrance hall of our new building.

He had two children, a boy who became rather a neer do weel, and a daughter who in his later years when he was almost blind, became his amanuensis. Sadly he and his wife did not get on well.

To get away from the hurly burly of town life he bought a country home on the edge of Strangford Lough near Comber where he spent many happy days. In a secluded spot it was used later on one occasion in April, 1914 when guns were brought from Germany to equip the U.V.F. in the famous gun running incident. The house was used as a temporary hiding place for these weapons until they were finally distributed. It remains today much as it was in his time. It is told that on one occasion, looking like a tramp, he stopped to speak to a man breaking stones who told him among other things that he had a very painful shoulder. Gordon had a look at it, did something to it and gave him some advice. Some months later on his way to town in his gig and well dressed for a special occasion he saw the stone breaker and stopped to ask him how he was. The man did not recognise him and said he was very well thanks to the help that he had got from an old tinker some months before. Gordon was always delighted to tell this story against himself.