

EVERY BRANCH OF BIOLOGY: THE DUBLIN UNIVERSITY BIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION AND ITS PREDECESSORS

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The Dublin University Biological Association – popularly known as Biosoc, or, more traditionally, the Bi – has played an important role in the life of medical students at Trinity College, Dublin since the latter half of the nineteenth century, and continues a centuries-old tradition of Trinity medical students coming together for learning, entertainment and scholarship. This article discusses the history of the Association and the societies that came before it, and gives an account of its activities up to the present day.

In his 1912 history of medical education at Trinity, Percy Kirkpatrick mentions a minute in the Register of the Board of Trinity College on 2 May, 1801, stating “that a medical society under the control of the Board may be permitted to meet in College.”¹ However, no other records remain regarding the proceedings or constitution of this early society, so we do not know how long its activities continued. Some years later, the Board once again granted permission for a medical society to meet in College, shortly after Trinity’s Professor of Anatomy and Surgery, the celebrated anatomist James Macartney, had been appointed to the Board. A minute in the Register dated 26 November, 1814, reports, “A Society for Medical Students (under the sanction of the Professor) having applied for permission to hold their meetings in the Lecture Room in No. 22. The Terms were granted to them during pleasure.”¹ For some reason, the Board withdrew this permission

18 January, 1822, and no further mention of the society is made in the Register. According to Prof. Alexander Macalister’s biography of Macartney, it continued to meet for some eight years thereafter – only gradually coming to an end as quarrels with the authorities came to beset the later years of Macartney’s professorship.¹

In January 1853, a zoological society was founded by Robert Ball, curator of the College’s zoological museum. Its scope was later broadened to include Botany, and it was titled the “Dublin University Zoological and Botanical Association”, with its aim being “the advancement and diffusion of Zoological and Botanical Science in general, and to encourage and promote the study of Natural History among the Students of the University.”¹ It was open to graduates of Dublin, Oxford or Cambridge, and undergraduates at Trinity College. However, its

membership was in practice mostly limited to graduates, with only a minority of physicians or medical students. No records exist for the society after 1862; its demise, and that of the Dublin Natural History Society, left a gap for a society catering for students of natural sciences at Trinity.

In November 1867, the Rev. Dr Samuel Haughton, who was then Registrar of the School of Physic (as Trinity's medical school was then known), a Fellow of the Royal Society and Vice-President of the Royal Irish Academy, recommended to the Board that they "accede to the request of the Medical Students to be permitted to meet for the discussion of Medical Questions".¹ The Board agreed to this, on the proviso that "the regulations of such meetings [be] previously submitted to the Board for their approbation", and it appears from extant records that the first meeting of this body, duly constituted as the "Dublin University Medico-Chirurgical Society", was held in late 1867 or early 1868.² The name of the Society's first president is lost, but the second and third were the Regius Professor of Surgery, Robert Adams, and the Regius Professor of Physic, William Stokes, respectively, which may illustrate the high regard in which this society was held by its contemporaries. The Auditor of the Society's third session, Francis C. Crosslé, delivered an address on "Quacks and Quackery" at the inaugural meeting on 26 November 1869, and commented on the Society's role and aspirations in College life:

"There is [...] a further advantage to be derived from thus meeting annually together; viz. that we, the junior members of the profession, are here afforded an opportunity of assuring our seniors and the public that as a scientific and corporate body, we are determined to uphold the status of the calling we have adopted; nor can I look upon the spirit that animated the founders of this Society as aught else than the legitimate offspring of such a determination."²



The Society seems to have been well supported, with 14 Vice-Presidents and 136 ordinary members by 1869, but, curiously, no further records or papers exist after this time. It is unclear why the society disappeared. A clue may come from another comment made by Crosslé, that the medical nature of the Society's activities meant that, "unlike our elder sisters, the College Historical, the Undergraduate Philosophical and the Theological Societies," discussions and meetings needed to be kept closed within the academic medical fraternity, and the Society's council resolved that "our annual meeting should, in future, be divested of that public character which is now naturally associated with the opening meeting of the different societies which are annually held in the Dining Hall." Stephen P.J. Reid commented in 1974: "This forms an interesting contrast with the practice of today, just over one hundred years later. While the ordinary meetings of the year maintain their specific and in some cases specialised approach, the current trend is for the opening meeting of the "Bi" to be based on subjects of more than just medical interest. This has resulted in audiences being more variegated, which must be better for a society than an isolationist policy. The role of such a policy in the [Medico-Chirurgical] Society's disappearance remains unknown."²

Every Branch of Biology: The Dublin University Biological Association and its Predecessors

The current Association was established in 1874, under the guidance of Professor of Zoology Alexander Macalister, and the other Professors of Natural Science.¹ From the very beginning this was essentially a students' society, unlike formations that had come and gone before. (A separate group, the Biological Club, had been founded in the interim in 1872, with its membership limited to graduates. It soon moved its meeting-place from No. 30, Rotten Row [a now-demolished range of buildings on the site of the present Graduates' Memorial Building] to rooms on Brunswick Street, and then in 1881 to the Royal College of Physicians on Kildare Street.)³ Macalister was largely responsible for placing the society on a firm foundation, and in his inaugural address as President he stressed the potential for undergraduates to conduct worthwhile original scientific research, and exhibited some specimens of abnormally sutured skulls. He went on to read papers and show specimens at nearly every meeting.³

Interestingly, in 1877 Macalister was made head of anatomy in Trinity, the same role that James Macartney had occupied six decades previously. Macalister had a great knowledge and interest in all areas of science, contributing several articles to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and writing a classic textbook of anatomy. In 1883, he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society and made Chair of Anatomy at the University of Cambridge.³ His obituary in the *Journal of Anatomy* goes some way to illustrate his talents:

“Consequent on special recommendation he was allowed to commence his medical studies at the Royal College of Surgeons of Ireland at the incredibly early age of 14. From this point his progress was meteoric. He was appointed Demonstrator of Anatomy at the College at 16 and at 17 obtained the double qualifica-

tion. Entering Trinity College Dublin, he was elected Professor of Zoology at the University of Dublin while still an undergraduate, and was precluded from proceeding to an honours degree in Science, the would-be examinee being an examiner. Could anyone imagine a more Gilbertian situation?”⁴

The earliest hand-written records of the Association were lost in 1895,¹ but were rediscovered in the 1920s and given to Henry Horatio Dixon, the eminent Professor of Botany and co-formulator (with John Joly) of the cohesion-tension theory, who took a keen interest in the Association from his student days onwards.³ Extracts follow:

“At a meeting of students of the University of Dublin held on Tuesday, January the 27th, 1874, in No. 5, T.C.D., Professor Macalister in the Chair, it was proposed and resolved that a Society be formed for the encouragement of original investigations in every branch of Biology. The term ‘original’ to mean what has been observed and studied by the speaker himself, and

that the Society be called the Dublin University Biological Association.”³

“The Council consisted of a President, Vice-President, Hon. Sec., Treasurer and a Committee of three. The annual subscription was five shillings [32 cents in modern currency]. Meetings were to be held on the first Tuesday evening in each month from November to June inclusive, tea to be had at seven-thirty, and the chair to be taken at eight. The Annual Meeting was to be held on the first Tuesday of November, and Doctor Macalister, Professor of Zoology and Comparative Anatomy, and Doctor E. Percival Wright, were to be asked to act as President and Vice-President respectively.”³

The Association became popularly known as “the Bi”, mirroring the clipped nicknames of some of Trinity’s other societies, the Histori-



cal (Hist), Philosophical (Phil) and Theological (Theo). It duly met for the first time on 3. March 1874 at No. 5 in Parliament Square, with Prof. Macalister giving an inaugural address on “The Proper Objects of a Students’ Biological Association, with Notes on the Work of some Contemporary Societies.”³ Although the Association, in fact, continued to meet at the same location in subsequent months, it appears that on 14. March 1874 the Board granted it permission to meet on alternate Wednesdays in one of the lecture-rooms at the science end of the College, “provided that Dr [Edward Hallaran] Bennett becomes responsible for the proper use of the room.” 20 members were elected, among them the Rev. Dr Haughton, and Professor Sinclair, King’s Professor of Midwifery. Throughout the early sessions, papers were read on various topics relating to natural science, such as “Do Fishes Hear?” and “Is the Appendix in Man an Argument in Favour of Evolution?”³



By 1876, membership had increased to 56, and at the opening meeting on 7 November that year, held at No. 40 in New Square and once again presided over by Macalister, it was decided that medical and psychological subjects were “suitable”. Papers and exhibits dealing with topics of medical interest came to predominate over the next few sessions, the first being a paper on “Anatomical Irregularities”, followed by reports of clinical cases. Quite possibly, this shift in focus may explain and parallel the decline of the Medico-Chirurgical Society. It was also decided that a cheaper brand of tea should be sourced for meetings, on account of the Association’s ailing finances.³

Macalister was again President in 1877 and 1878. The meeting day changed to the second Wednesday of every month, to avoid scheduling conflicts with the meeting-night of the graduates’ Biological Club. The Association was

steadily growing in membership, and in 1878 it successfully lobbied the Board for use of a larger room in the “New Buildings” (the natural science and medical buildings to the east of College Park). The University Philosophical Society suggested at this time that it and the Biological Association should merge, but nothing came of this initiative.³ The following year, the rules of the society were amended to emphasise how the society had become much more focused on medical topics, with the word “Biology” taken to cover “pathology, therapeutics and all the allied sciences”. After this date, scarcely any botanical or zoological papers were delivered – but there were some

exceptions, such as an account in 1883 of a post-mortem examination of a camel which had died in Dublin Zoo, and a paper on “Hypnotism”, where it is recorded that the speaker attempted (unsuccessfully) to hypnotise a rabbit during the meeting.³ In 1880, it was decided

to begin awarding a medal for the best paper delivered to the society. The following year, in 1881, Dr Charles Ball was President, and proposed at the opening meeting that “the Dublin University Biological Association is worthy of the support of all Students of Medicine and Natural Science.”³ This same motion has been proposed every year since, most recently by the President of the 136th Session, John J. O’Leary.

It seems that the Association entered a period of decline at this point, and by 1892, it was nearly doomed to extinction by money difficulties.¹ Rescue came in the form of Professor Edward P Wright, the noted ophthalmic surgeon, botanist and zoologist, who was elected President and paid off the accounts from his own funds. By 1894 the Bi was once again financially secure, and in the words of



Dr (later Sir) Kendal Franks, it seemed to have risen from the ashes, as if it had “discovered the antitoxin that destroyed the microbe that destroyed societies”³ Around this time the Bi acquired a very high-quality battery-powered electric lantern, which cost £144 and was used at meetings when electricity was not available; this lantern later acquired a home for many decades in the lecture theatre where the Association held its meetings.³

Topics discussed at meetings moved with the times, and papers were delivered on the latest technologies and treatments. Specimens of X-ray images were exhibited just months after Wilhelm Roentgen had discovered X-rays, and details were given on new forms of hernia and prostate surgery. In 1897, the Bi started a public health campaign for clean milk, which continued for several decades thereafter, on account of “the danger to public health arising from the prevalence of tuberculosis in dairy cattle in Dublin”.^{3,5} The opening meeting of the 1914-1915 session noted the impact that the Great War was having on the medical profession. Professor Dixon noted that, of the 69 students who entered the medical school in 1909 and 1910, 65 had accepted commissions

with the Royal Army Medical Corps, and in total 750 present or former students of the school were on active service.⁵

Women were first admitted to the society in 1929, by a vote of 29 to 16. It was pointed out at the meeting, however, that entreaties would need to be made to the Provost and Board to facilitate the participation of female medical students at the Association’s meetings, as women were at that time required to leave College entirely by 6.00pm every day.⁷

By the 1930s, the Association was known for its social events as well as its paper-readings. The 1939 annual dance was held in the Metropole ballroom on Monday, 11. December and was eagerly anticipated not just by medical students but by many from across College, with *The Irish Times* deeming the annual event “the best attended of all College dances”⁸

The meetings of the Association grew broader in their exploration of the wider impact of medicine on society. A 1967 debate organised jointly with the Law and Theological Societies, and University College Dublin’s medical society, saw a substantial majority vote in favour of a motion supporting termination of pregnancy

under certain circumstances.⁹ The centenary of the Association was celebrated in 1974, with speakers at the opening meeting stressing the need to examine the attitudes as well as the knowledge of would-be doctors in medical school examinations.¹⁰

At present, the opening meeting of the Association is referred to as the “Inaugural Ball”, and is held at the start of Hilary term. In his presidential address to the 136th session, Prof. John J O’Leary took the opportunity to compare Ireland’s financial crisis of the late 2000s to an illness that needs treatment. The association now has only joint use of rooms in College on the top floor of No. 6 in Parliament Square, meaning space is at a premium. In addition to talks and seminars on medical matters, other regular events include: a booksale in Michaelmas term, held in the foyer of the Moyne Institute; a round-robin football tournament, Med Cup, at Trinity’s sports grounds in Santry; a Christmas pantomime, staged at the Trinity Centre for Health Sciences in St James’s Hospital; a Christmas trip; and a celebration of either Eid-al-Adha or Eid-ul-Fitr (depending on the Islamic calendar). The annual dance is now known as “Med Ball”, and in 2011 was held at the Crowne Plaza Hotel, Northwood, with a record attendance of over 500 students. It is joined by a Hallowe’en fancy-dress ball, normally held in a Dublin nightclub. Recent increases in the number of Canadian students attending Irish medical schools have prompted the establishment of the Canadian Irish Medical Students’ Association (CIMSAs), whose Trinity chapter organises social events and seminars.

References

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Since 2002, the Association has run a city-wide fundraising and public health event, entitled “Med Day”, on an annual basis. The event is held on a Friday in Michaelmas term, and is the fruit of months of planning by a sub-committee of 4th year medical students. They liaise with College authorities, the Garda and the media to send hundreds of students out across Dublin collecting money on the streets, as well as organising events like a charity auction, talent show and raffle around College on the same day. Publicity is raised for a worthy issue concerning public health, and thousands of euros are raised for under-resourced services at Trinity’s two main teaching hospitals, St James’s Hospital and the Adelaide and Meath Hospital, Dublin incorporating the National Children’s Hospital; in 2010, the total came to €56,000, beating the previous year’s figure (despite economic recession) by €6,000. Some of the proceeds also fund a medical scholarship under the aegis of the Trinity Access Programme (TAP), and the Med Day committee works with the TAP office to organise an annual open day for pupils in disadvantaged local secondary schools enabling them to experience a “crash course” in the medical student experience.

It seems fitting to finish with the words of S.B. Sachs, written on the same theme 75 years ago: “I have chosen to terminate this history at that point; to leave their minutes resting in their tomes, so that at some future date, someone else may have the pleasure of comparing our modern ideas with the ideas of the future.”³

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