

BOOK REVIEW

Irish Medical Education and Student Culture, c. 1850-1950

by Laura Kelly

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This thorough academic study explores the impact of medical education and influences such as politics and religion on medical students in Ireland over a 100 year period. The topic is relevant to a wide audience because of the large numbers of Irish medical graduates that have emigrated over many years to work in the medical profession in Britain and the USA.

The author is a lecturer in the history of health and medicine and has chosen a wide range of sources including doctors' memoirs, student magazines and diaries, newspapers and oral histories with the focus on the student experience rather than officialdom. The book comprises chapters on the 19th century medical school marketplace, student image and representation, social mobility, educational experiences, masculinity, women in medical schools, and education north and south of the border after 1920.

The quality of education in Irish medical schools varied considerably. Bedside teaching established in Dublin during the 19th century by Robert James Graves and others was a major strength. Excellent midwifery training in the large Dublin obstetric hospitals was another notable feature. However, lack of regulation, poor lectures, and overcrowding hampered student learning.

The medical schools admitted large numbers of students for financial reasons. As a result, large numbers of Irish medical graduates emigrated due to lack of opportunities and deprivation in their home country. Students' backgrounds, their social influences and experiences in medical schools are presented with an attempt to determine the factors that shaped their subsequent professionalism. What emerges, particularly in the 19th century is a male-dominated environment with the emphasis on heroism, self-sacrifice and hard work. Surprisingly, political and religious influences were not considered to have had a significant impact. Women were admitted to medical schools earlier in Ireland earlier than in Britain but, socially and educationally, they were largely separated from male students. Prejudices against women in medical schools remained for many years.

The book achieves its stated aim of addressing a gap in the knowledge of the history of medical education in Ireland from the students' perspective. It should become a valuable resource on a topic that has not been researched in depth previously, although the impact of large-scale emigration of Irish doctors on medical education in Ireland might have merited a separate chapter. It will appeal to those with an interest in the history of medical education, educationalists and women in medicine, to social historians and to the Irish medical diaspora.

Mike Collins
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