

Richard Helsham

Born: c.1682
President: 1728-1729, 1740-1741
Died: 1738

Early eighteenth century Dublin was a city looking to the future; the end of the past century had seen the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688 in England, and the Williamite Wars in Ireland. The closure of over a century of disturbances, rebellions and civil war, and the constitutional settlement reached with the deposition of King James II and his replacement by Queen Mary and King William III gave the prospect of peace and stability. These conditions encouraged the flourishing of interest in learning and in the application of the latest ideas in natural philosophy to the improvement of living standards. The opinion-formers of the day also questioned many of the accepted practices of governance, and this led to what we can, with perhaps gentle understatement, call a vigorous political scene. Richard Helsham, twice elected as President of the College, was a man of his age.

Born in, or near Kilkenny, in 1682 or 1683, he was sent to school at Kilkenny College where the future Bishop Berkeley was a fellow student. In 1698, at the age of 15, Helsham entered Trinity College, graduating BA in 1702, MA in 1705, MB in 1709, MD in 1713 and, in 1710, he became a Fellow of the College of Physicians. Helsham's connection with Trinity was to last all his life, and indeed beyond, as his *Course of Lectures on Natural Philosophy* (Dublin, 1739), published after his death, remained in use as a student textbook for over a century. This book, the first scientific work published by Dublin University Press, was republished by the Physics Department of Trinity in 1999 to mark the millennium.

Helsham's studies led him to embrace the teachings of Isaac Newton, and convinced him that the method of experiment and observation was the true way to achieve knowledge. One of his great strengths was the ability to explain Newton's teaching in a clear and understandable way, without recourse to difficult mathematical concepts. He held the appointment of Donegal Lecturer in Mathematics from 1723 to 1730.

In 1714, Helsham became physician to Jonathan Swift, and also became a member of the Dean's circle of friends. This group of leading minds regularly met, often in a house jointly owned by Helsham and Patrick Delaney, and dubbed in consequence 'Hel-Del-Ville' by Swift. The obvious play on 'Hotel de Ville', the centre of administration of Paris, may have been the Dean's way of referring to the quality of the ideas discussed there, or of implying that the City Fathers ought to follow the advice emanating from this house.



Swift gives us a short pen-picture of Helsham in which he describes him as ‘an ingenious good-humoured physician, a fine gentleman, an excellent scholar’.¹ The Dean obviously held him in high esteem, for he intended Helsham to be an executor of his will; however, in the event, Helsham predeceased Swift. The Dean is still celebrated for his eccentricities, and for his acerbic turn of phrase, but his writings also show a keen sense of justice and a hatred of hypocrisy; that Swift held him in such regard speaks volumes for Richard Helsham’s character.

In 1711, Trinity had established a Scientific Laboratory, and the fact that Helsham taught experimental philosophy there, without payment until 1724, gives us an insight into his commitment to science, and into his desire to contribute to the improvement of people’s lives. In 1724, he was appointed first Professor of Natural and Experimental Philosophy; this was Trinity’s first chair in the sciences, and he held it until his death in 1738. In 1733, he became Regius Professor of Physic. Through his enthusiasm for learning, and his ability to impart that enthusiasm to his students, he greatly contributed to the establishment of science as a pillar of Ireland’s academic life. As a physician, he combined the worlds of medicine and science, in this way helping to bring scientific principles to the practice of medicine.

He was one of the original trustees of Dr Steevens’ Hospital, and was Visiting Physician there on several occasions. In his will he left £300 to the hospital, a considerable sum in those days.

In 1735, Helsham and his colleague and friend Bryan Robinson (qv) were consulted by Dublin Corporation regarding the improvement of the city’s water supply and, in return for his services in this regard, Helsham was granted the Freedom of the city in 1737.

Richard Helsham died on 1 August 1738, after a period of undiagnosed illness; he left directions that, after his death, a post-mortem should be performed with a view to discovering the cause of the illness. This revealed a tumour, described at the time as ‘in one of his guts an excrescence of three pieces of Flesh, the smallest as large as a hen’s egg, and resembling the flesh of the liver.’ He also directed that, before his coffin be closed, his head be severed from his body, and that he be buried at dead of night, by the light of only one taper, without ‘Hearse or pomp’.²

Without doubt, he was not just a man of his age, but one of its leading ones.

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¹ Quoted in William Richard LeFanu ‘Swift’s medical friends’ in Eoin O’Brien (edits), *Essays in honour of J D H Widdess* (Dublin: Cityview Press, 1978) 52.

² Quoted in Thomas Percy Claude Kirkpatrick, *History of the medical teaching in Trinity College, Dublin and of the School of Physic in Ireland* (Dublin: Hanna and Neale, 1912) 82

