

Sir Thomas Molyneux

Birth: 1661

President: 1702-1703, 1709-1710, 1713-1714, 1720-1721

Death: 1733

On 14 April 1661, Thomas Molyneux, physician, natural historian and antiquarian, was born in Cook Street, Dublin. Thomas was the son of Captain Samuel Molyneux (1616-1693), lawyer, mathematician, author and chief engineer of Ireland and his wife, Margaret Anne Dowdall (*d.*1700), daughter of the merchant, William Dowdall of Mount Town, County Meath.

Thomas was educated at St Patrick's Cathedral Grammar School by Henry Ryder, and entered Trinity on 5 December 1676, aged 15. He graduated, according to Hoppen, BA in 1680, MA and MB in 1683 and then MD in 1687. Eager to develop his knowledge of medicine, Thomas departed Ireland for the University of Leiden in May 1683. He travelled via England and arrived in London on 12 May. During his travels Thomas corresponded regularly with his brother, William (1656-1698), an experimental philosopher and political writer. While in England Thomas visited Oxford, Cambridge and the Royal Society and met many important natural philosophers, such as Boyle, Newton, Flamsteed, Petty and Grew. In 1686 both Thomas and William became Fellows of the Royal Society.

In July 1683 Thomas sailed for Holland. En route he visited several Dutch towns before enrolling at Leyden on 9 August. In 1684 Thomas became friends with John Locke who had taken refuge there from the hostility of King James II. In 1685, he commenced a three-month tour of Europe with his brother and the pair travelled through the Netherlands, Germany and France, visiting libraries, hospitals and making the acquaintance of notable men of science.

On his return to Dublin, Thomas established a highly lucrative medical practice at his father's house in New Row, making him one of the wealthiest practitioners in Dublin. Although Thomas and his brother again left Ireland for Chester in January 1689 due to the troubled political situation, they had returned to Dublin by July 1690. In 1711, Thomas built a handsome house at 34 Peter Street near St Stephen's Green and, in the same year, founded the Blind Asylum. He was elected Fellow of the College of Physicians and served as its President four times, becoming an Honorary Fellow in 1728. Thomas was appointed State Physician in Ireland (1715-30) and Physician General to the army in Ireland (1718-25). He was Regius Professor of Physic at Trinity College Dublin (1711-33) and sat in the Irish parliament as MP for Ratoath (1695-9). He was created a baronet in 1730, becoming the first Irish doctor to receive such an honour.

Thomas made many diverse contributions to knowledge during his lifetime. In 1684 his first scientific article entitled 'the dissolution and swimming of heavy bodies in Menstruums far lighter



than themselves' was published in *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres* and he sent an account of a 'prodigious os frontis' to the *Philosophical Transactions*. In total, Thomas would contribute eleven papers to the *Transactions* between 1685 and 1702. When, in 1683, his brother William informed him of the existence of a new society, known as the Dublin Philosophical Society and which aimed to place experimental science on a proper footing in Ireland, Thomas sent letters to his brother which were read at the meetings. He became an official member of the Society in 1693 and made numerous contributions to its proceedings including an account of an operation performed by the surgeon Thomas Proby to remove an ivory bodkin from the bladder of a young woman, a paper discussing 'the late general coughs and colds in Ireland' and an in-depth account of the Giant's Causeway.

He was the first person to argue that the Causeway was a natural phenomenon and not man-made, the first to give a scientific account of the Irish elk and the first to give an account of the structure of the sea mouse. In addition, he published *A discourse concerning the Dutch mounts, forts, and towers in Ireland* in 1725 and contributed a twenty two page appendix to Caleb Threlkeld's *Synopsis Stirpium Hibernicarum*, the first Irish flora, in 1727. At the age of 70 he became a founding member of the Dublin Society, later to become the Royal Dublin Society. Besides his brother, Thomas' correspondents included Pierre Bayle, John Locke, Martin Lister, Hans Sloane, St. George Ashe, Edward Lhuyd and Francis Aston.

Thomas married Catherine, daughter of Ralph Howard (qv) of Shelton, County Wicklow in 1693 and the couple are believed to have had between eight and sixteen children, some of whom died in infancy. Thomas died at his home on Peter Street on 19 October 1733. According to P. M. Byrne, he was buried in the family vault at St. Audeon's church. Thomas' portrait, painted by Sir Godfrey Keller, hangs in Trinity College Dublin and a statue of him, by Louis François Roubilliac, stands in Armagh cathedral.

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