

# Oliver St. John Gogarty: surgeon, poet and author

For its size and population, Ireland has produced more than its statistical share of brilliant doctors. One has only to consider, for example, the eponyms which have come from that island. These include Grave's disease, Colles' fracture, Stokes–Adams attacks, Corrigan's pulse and Freyer's prostatectomy. As well as great clinicians, Ireland has given us many doctors who have found fame outside medical practice – Bethel Solomons, obstetrician and a distinguished Master of the Rotunda, but also the first Jewish mayor of Dublin, and Sir William Wilde (father of Oscar), a distinguished aural surgeon, but better known as a prominent archaeologist of Ireland.

Perhaps the best example of this second group, aptly named by Lord Moynihan 'the medical truants', was Oliver St. John Gogarty, who died 50 years ago, on 19 September 1957, and who is remembered today as a poet, author and a wit.

Gogarty, a doctor's son, was born in Dublin in 1878. He was a classical scholar at Trinity and qualified in medicine in 1907. He took his Irish FRCS, specialized in ear, nose and throat (ENT) surgery, and studied as a postgraduate in Vienna. A friend of the writer James Joyce, he was the

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model for 'Buck Mulligan', the medical student who opens the pages of Joyce's *Ulysses*.

As a student, Gogarty was a noted athlete – a runner, cyclist and swimmer – and also showed his abilities as a wit with a gift for rhyme. He won the Chancellor's Prize for Verse on three occasions, and was disappointed only to be placed second for the Oxford Newdigate Prize.

As an ENT surgeon, Gogarty helped popularize antral sinus washouts and became a popular (and wealthy) consultant. He removed the poet William Butler Yeats' tonsils, and Yeats, never one to bestow praise lightly, described Gogarty, in his introduction to the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* as 'One of the great lyric poets of our age', and included a dozen of his poems. In turn, Gogarty composed this elegiac ode as a tribute to Yeats:

**'A spray, cut from that fine  
And rare plant. Gratitude,  
For anything I owe  
In the art of making songs  
Largely to you is due.'**

Gogarty's verses often delighted in the beauty of the countryside, especially of Connemara in the west. Of the bay at Kitimon he wrote:

**'Nameless wonderful hues  
That torture the eye with joy.'**

He thought that poets should respect the blessed trinity of matter, meter and music. His advice 'To his friend, the Apothecary

Poet', in his first collection of poems, published in 1916, he himself employed:

**'When you compound a verse or  
song  
Make it translucent, not too strong;  
Pour the full measure gauged right  
That it have body, yet be light.'**

Of death he was unafraid:

**'Enough! Why should man bemoan  
A Fate that leads the natural way?  
Or think himself a worthier one  
Than those who braved it in their  
day?'**

As well as poetry, Gogarty went on to publish novels in the 1930s, which received great acclaim. These included *As I Was Going Down Sackville Street*, which involved him, incidentally, in a libel action which he lost, and *Tumbling in the Hay*. He retired from practice in 1939, saying that by now he had looked down throats and up noses long enough, and spent the rest of his life in the USA, returning home to Ireland only for occasional trips. He died in New York after a short illness, but lies buried in Connemara, where his grave stone is inscribed with his own lines:

**'Our friend go with us as we go  
Down the long path where Beauty  
wends  
Where all we love foregathers/so  
Why should we fear to join our  
friends?' BJHM**

*Conflict of interest: none.*