SHEEN, ALFRED WILLIAM (1869-1945), surgeon and first Provost of the Welsh National School of Medicine

Name: Alfred William Sheen
Date of birth: 1869
Date of death: 1945
Gender: Male
Occupation: surgeon and first Provost of the Welsh National School of Medicine
Area of activity: Education; Medicine
Author: Alun Roberts

William Sheen was born 30 April 1869 at 61 Crockherbtown (later to be known as Queen Street), Cardiff, the eldest of eleven children of Alfred Sheen, Cardiff surgeon and the man who, in 1885, introduced dancing into the social programme of the annual conference of the British Medical Association. Initially educated at the Cardiff Proprietary School, William Sheen spent his premedical year at the University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire (UCC) in 1885/6 before proceeding to Guy's Hospital Medical School for his preclinical and clinical training and qualifying with the London MB in 1892.

After a series of junior hospital appointments during which he obtained the London MD and MS and the FRCS (Eng) he was appointed assistant surgeon at the Cardiff Infirmary in 1895. In 1900 he was promoted to honorary surgeon, a position he held until 1919. During his time as honorary surgeon he became well-known in surgical circles, being active in the Moynihan Surgical Club and establishing a particular reputation in the fields of prostate surgery and splenectomy. Always a keen supporter of the military he secured his release from domestic practice to serve as a surgeon to the Imperial Yeomanry Field Hospital during the South African War, while during the First World War he commanded the 34th (Welsh) General Hospital, mainly in India, with great distinction. He was awarded the CBE at the end of the war. Required to resign from the Infirmary (by then known as the King Edward VII Hospital) in 1919 because of arcane retirement rules then in force Sheen worked for a short time in London before returning to Cardiff in 1921 to take up the post of foundation Professor of Surgery at the Welsh National School of Medicine.

From the outset the new School's progress during the 1920s was plagued with controversy. It was caught up in a debilitating argument between UCC and the University of Wales regarding its constitutional status, and became embroiled in an increasingly acrimonious conflict with the Cardiff Royal Infirmary (as the hospital was known from 1923) over the latter's responsibilities as a teaching hospital. As Sheen, disappointed by the uncooperative attitude of many of his hospital colleagues, admitted at the time, 'the methods and vested interests of a hospital staff totally unaccustomed to the work and aspirations of a teaching hospital naturally produce difficulties'.

In 1926, rather to his surprise, Sheen was elected as dean of the school. In reality, succeeding a number of indifferent predecessors, he remained the only credible candidate in the field and it fell to him to guide the institution through some decidedly choppy waters. The fact that Sheen had been a respected member of the clinical staff of the Infirmary for many years prior to his appointment to the chair of surgery, did not prevent his former colleagues from choosing to withdraw their cooperation as teachers, feeling that the school authorities - and indeed Sheen himself, who sometimes displayed a rather brusque and insensitive manner - did not sufficiently appreciate their worth. This action led to the temporary abandonment of clinical teaching for the 1928/9 session, a step without precedent in the history of medical education in Britain, forcing a whole generation of Cardiff students to complete their medical studies elsewhere. Fortunately all parties stepped back from the brink of disaster and within a matter of months a compromise settlement was reached between the authorities of Welsh National School of Medicine and the Royal Infirmary which inter alia gave the hospital clinicians greater involvement in the running of the medical course. Notwithstanding the shrewd observation once made by a member of the University Grants Committee to a senior officer of the Privy Council, that 'agreement is a very rare quality in South Wales', the constitutional status of the school was also settled in a spirit of compromise, the preclinical departments remaining part of UCC, while the clinical departments became an independent Welsh National School of Medicine within the federal University of Wales in 1931.

Having served as dean of the medical school since 1926 it was natural that William Sheen should be elected the first administrative head of the Welsh National School of Medicine, with the title of Provost. His undoubted qualities of leadership - demonstrated as County Director of Voluntary Aid in Glamorgan during the rescue operations at Senghenydd, the scene of Britain's worst ever coalmine disaster in 1913, as well as during the First World War and latterly as dean - remained a substantial asset to a new institution striving to establish its identity at a time of considerable financial difficulty. 'The Colonel', as Sheen was affectionately called by his friends, attracted the general respect of his academic colleagues and, indeed of the student body which (according to the student magazine, *The Leech*) regarded him as 'father-confessor and friend, a guide and helper'. He and his wife were great supporters of the medical students' club, regularly attending its social functions and, under Sheen's stewardship and despite the financial constraints, the students' catering, residential and recreational facilities were substantially enhanced during the 1930s.

Although, as Provost, he played an active part in the work of the University of Wales, he escaped the periodic obligation to take his turn as University Vice-Chancellor. The head of the School of Medicine was excluded from the rotation arrangements because of the School's inferior constitutional status among the institutions making up the federal University at that time.

Notwithstanding the heavy responsibilities he did shoulder as Provost, Sheen continued to serve as professor of surgery and director of the surgical unit until his retirement from that position in 1935. Under his leadership the department attracted surgeons of great promise, who went on to secure senior appointments themselves in due course, men like Lambert Rogers who succeeded Sheen to the chair at Cardiff, A. L. d'Abreu, who became professor of surgery at Birmingham and R. V. Cooke who became senior surgeon to the United Bristol Hospitals. The distinguished surgeon Sir Clement Price Thomas, who became president of the Welsh National School of Medicine during the 1960s, later related how these men all told him 'what a wise and generous chief he was, always at hand to give advice, and for ever encouraging the young men to stand on their own feet'.

In spite of his onerous duties Sheen found time to take part in other medical activities, serving, at one time or another as president of the Hunterian Society, The Guy's Physical Society and the Cardiff Medical Society. He also served as president of the Cardiff Naturalists Society and as a deputy-lieutenant of the County of Glamorgan.

Although Sheen stood down as professor of surgery in 1935, a year after the School's normal retirement age for academic staff, he continued as Provost and, at the outbreak of the war, he resumed as professor of surgery while Lambert Rogers, d'Abreu and others went on active service. He grasped the challenge of leading a depleted medical school through testing times with great determination and his death on 28 March 1945, at the age of 75, was particularly untimely as he was actively engaged in planning the post-war development of the school in line with the recommendations of the ground-breaking Goodenough Committee (1944). The manner of his demise was characteristic of his indomitable spirit. He had struggled from his home to the medical school, an exhausting journey of some four miles, through the heaviest snow on record, in order to keep an appointment. The effort proved too much for his heart, he collapsed in his office and, despite the best efforts of his Infirmary colleagues, he died a month later. After a funeral service in the Lady Chapel of Llandaff Cathedral, he was buried in the cathedral cemetery. His wife Christine, second daughter of J. P. Ingledew JP of Cardiff, whom he had married in 1898, had predeceased him in 1939. They had no children.

Author

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