

Redfern, Peter

by Helen Andrews

Redfern, Peter (1821–1912), doctor and professor of anatomy and physiology, was born 17 December 1821 in Chesterfield, Derbyshire, England, second son of Peter Redfern; his mother's name is not known. He was educated at a local school and by private tutors in classics. Apprenticed to Richard Collis Botham, medical officer to the Chesterfield Union and Workhouse Infirmary, he carried out an operation for squint without Botham's knowledge, and incurred his anger. Redfern continued his studies in Edinburgh and subsequently at University College, London, graduating MB (1844), MD (1847) with gold medals, and LSA (1849), and becoming member (1843) and fellow by examination (1851) of the RCS.

Appointed lecturer in anatomy at King's College, Aberdeen (1845–60), and surgeon to the Royal Infirmary, he was one of the earliest teachers of histology in Great Britain and made his reputation as the 'founder of our knowledge concerning the microscopic structure of cartilage and discoverer of the process by which its wounds are repaired' (Keith, 590); his publications include *Abnormal nutrition in human articular cartilages* (London, 1850) and 'On the healing of wounds in articular cartilage' (*Monthly Jn. Med. Sc.*, xiii (1851), 201).

After the abolition of the lectureship resulting from the merger of King's with Marischal College (1858), he was appointed to the chair of anatomy and physiology at QCB (1860–93) and brought prestige to the college and distinction to the medical school. As the original plan for the college had made no provision for the housing of the faculty of medicine, under Redfern's direction, fine new dissecting and lecture rooms and a medical museum were built in the college grounds. A prominent member of the college administration, he provided continuity during a period of great change; a member of the council (1863–75), he was admired for 'his mental energy and power' by the president, P. S. I. Henry (qv), who described Redfern as his 'sheet anchor' (Moody & Beckett, 218). He also served on convocation and as senator successively of the QUI (1873), the RUI (1883–93), and QUB (1908).

Redfern supported the proposal (1870) by the college council to admit women to lectures, if the college charter permitted it; but he opposed the provisions that denied them equal status and privileges with men (which included scholarships and prizes) and the requirement that they pay a special registration fee and sign a declaration agreeing not to undermine class discipline. He argued that after their success in recent examinations 'no one would dare . . . to suggest that they will not be able to hold their own in intellectual struggles on any subject if they have equal advantages with men' (Roddie, 97). The question was deferred, but when it was reopened (1873, 1876) Redfern changed his stance and opposed admission in convocation and subsequently in the senate. Women were granted admission to arts lectures (1881)

and to the medical school (1889), and full equality with men – having been proposed (1891) by Thomas Hamilton (qv), president of the college, who quoted Redfern's advocacy of 1870 – was finally granted (1896) after the amendment of the college statutes.

An obituarist described Redfern as 'one of the greatest British teachers of the Victorian era' (*Lancet*, 205). A skilled anatomist, he believed that a thorough knowledge of anatomy was the only basis of surgery and medicine. Valued in the dissecting and the lecture hall, lucid in exposition, he was also a fine draughtsman and skilfully illustrated his lectures, imbued his students with enthusiasm, and was famous for his aphorisms and repartees. Attracted largely by his teaching and the growing reputation of the anatomy department, class numbers rose from 79 in 1860 to 364 in 1881, the medical school becoming the third largest in Britain and Ireland. However, the transition to RUI saw student numbers fall, and Redfern's income from class fees, which had always been the highest in the college, was reduced from £1,262 (1879) to £714 (1883). Calculating that he would receive a reduced pension if he continued in college, he resigned (September 1883), but returned when promised a special pension by arrangement with the treasury. During his last ten years, he worked six days a week and often until midnight during term, regretting only that teaching was so onerous that little time was left for research.

Examiner for Aberdeen and London universities, QUI and RUI, he was medical fellow (1883–93) of RUI, secretary of the physiological section (1859) and president of the biology section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science when it visited Belfast (1874), and gave the address in physiology when the British Medical Association visited Belfast (1884). Honorary distinctions included MA (1849) from King's College, Aberdeen, and D.Sc. from QUI; he was corresponding member of the Société de Biologie of Paris, hon. member of the Académie Royale de Belgique, and hon. fellow of the Ulster Medical Society.

On his retirement (1893), he was presented with his portrait painted by Ernest E. Taylor (1863–1907), which was later hung in the examination hall (QUB); a terracotta head of Redfern, one of four that adorned the Whitla Medical Institute (built 1902), is now preserved in the Ulster Medical Society's museum. He became a member of the governing board of the RBAI and of Campbell College, Belfast.

He died 22 December 1912 at his seaside home, Templepatrick House, Donaghadee, Co. Down, where he had designed beautiful gardens; he was buried in the churchyard of Donaghadee. He married (1860) Agnes M. Youngson from Aberdeen; they had three sons and five daughters. The eldest son, John Joseph Redfern, MD (1885), practised in Croydon, Surrey; his eldest daughter married W. H. Thompson (qv), professor of physiology, TCD.

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*Med. Directory*; William Whitla, 'President's address . . . The Belfast medical school', *British Medical Journal*, 31 July 1909, pp 252–3; *ibid.*, i (4 Jan. 1913), 51–2 (portr.); *Belfast News Letter*, 27 Dec. 1912; *Lancet*, 18 Jan. 1913, pp 204–6; *Dubl. Jn. Med. Sc.*, cxxxv, no. 495 (1 Mar. 1913), [161, 236–40] (portr.); Arthur Keith, *Menders of the maimed* (1919) (portr.); Arthur Deane (ed.), *The Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society. Centenary volume 1821–1921* (1924); T. W. Moody and J. C. Beckett, *Queen's, Belfast, 1845–1949: the history of a university* (1959); I. C. Roddie, 'The pre-clinical departments', *Ulster Med. Jn.*, lvi (Aug. 1987), supp. S96–S97