

The Ulster Medical Society's Bust of James McDonnell

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On the 26 January 1920, Dr James Colville announced to the Council of the Ulster Medical Society that Miss Penelope McDonnell Stevenson had offered to donate to the Society a bust of her great-uncle, Dr James McDonnell. McDonnell had been one of the leading physicians in Belfast in the early 19th century and had been intimately involved in the founding of Belfast institutions encompassing literature, medicine, music, and natural history. Miss Stevenson's offer was gratefully accepted by Council and for the next 45 years the bust of McDonnell resided in the hall of the Medical Institute (later named the Whitla Medical Institute) together with two companion busts, one of William MacCormac and the other of William Whitla. The Society still owns the bust of Whitla and we know it is of marble. Unfortunately, we do not know what the other two looked like, let alone of what material they were made. We have no images of the hall or of the busts and enquiries among the older members of the Society in 1991 showed that no one could recall anything about them save that they had existed.

In the 1950s and early 1960s the Society had difficulty keeping the Whitla Medical Institute going. It was in a part of Belfast which was increasingly inconvenient to visit because of distance and parking, there were concerns over the stability of the building in consequence of previous work next door, and there was the cost of maintaining the structure and employing a caretaker. The last straw for the members came when an appeal against the Society's liability to pay rates was turned down because the Society did not qualify as a charity. It was decided that the Institute should be given up and in 1965 the building was sold by its Trustees and the contents were dispersed. Some of the *lares et penates* went to the homes of members to be looked after until the Society might again have a place of its own, while a letter dated 3 August 1965 records that "the contents of the [Whitla Medical Institute] were removed today by Osborne King and Megran and taken to their auction rooms."

In a letter of 8 July 1965, the Society offered the Medical Staff Committee of the Royal Victoria Hospital "a bust of the late Dr McDonald [sic], who was one of the founders of the Society", with the suggestion that if the Staff Committee did want the bust they should arrange to collect it "some time this month." The Honorary Secretary of the Staff Committee replied on 5 August 1965 thanking the Society for "the bust of the late Dr McDonald, which they very kindly presented to the hospital." The minutes of the Staff Committee for September 1965 record the offer and the acceptance and also a suggestion that Mr Spence and Dr Allison should decide where the bust should be placed. However, despite this correspondence and planning, the bust vanished—how, when and where is unknown—and it has not been seen since. An effort was made in 1991 to trace it. Enquiries were made from the trustees of

the Institute, the purchaser of the building, the auctioneers, the Society's solicitors, the hospital administration, and other interested persons, and all drew a blank. Could it be in a storeroom somewhere? or in somebody's attic?

The bust of William MacCormac was similarly offered to the Department of Surgery, Queen's University of Belfast, and it too has vanished. There is a bronze bust of MacCormac in the Office of Archives, Royal Victoria Hospital, but it has not been possible to establish whether it was the one which once belonged to the Society.

In 1937, Dr Robert Marshall gave to the Royal Victoria Hospital a bronze copy of a bust of McDonnell (fig 1). The marble original, signed C Moore and dated 1844, had belonged to the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society although it is now on permanent loan to the Ulster Museum. It had been displayed in the Belfast Free Public Library in Royal Avenue, Belfast, for some years before the opening of the new Museum buildings in the Botanic Gardens in 1929. The earlier history of the bust is obscure. Christopher Moore was born in Dublin in 1790 and died there in 1863 but he spent most of his working life in London where he exhibited portrait busts at the Royal Academy almost every year from 1821 to 1860. It is known that he exhibited a marble bust of "James McDonnell Esq., M.D., Belfast" in 1842, but obviously this was not the 1844 bust in the Ulster Museum.

James McDonnell's grandson, Robert, was a surgeon who served in the Crimean war and later became President of the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland. He settled in Kilsharvan House, County Meath, where his descendants continued to live until recently. At one time Sir Peter Froggatt had been asked to deal with family papers relating to James McDonnell and his son, John. John McDonnell, also a surgeon, was Robert's father and the first person in Ireland to use inhalation anaesthesia. Before the house was sold, Sir Peter was asked if he would accept a number of items, one of them being a bust of James McDonnell which had stood in the hall at Kilsharvan for many years. This bust (fig 2), made of marble and signed C Moore but dated 1841, is identical in appearance to the one in the possession of the Ulster Museum. Ownership has now been transferred to the Royal Victoria Hospital.

It is unlikely that McDonnell would have asked more than one artist for a portrait bust, and it is unlikely that he would have sat more than once for Moore. It is likely, therefore, that the missing Ulster Medical Society bust was identical

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Fig 1. *The Royal Victoria Hospital bronze copy of the marble bust of James McDonnell dated 1844 in the possession of the Ulster Museum.*

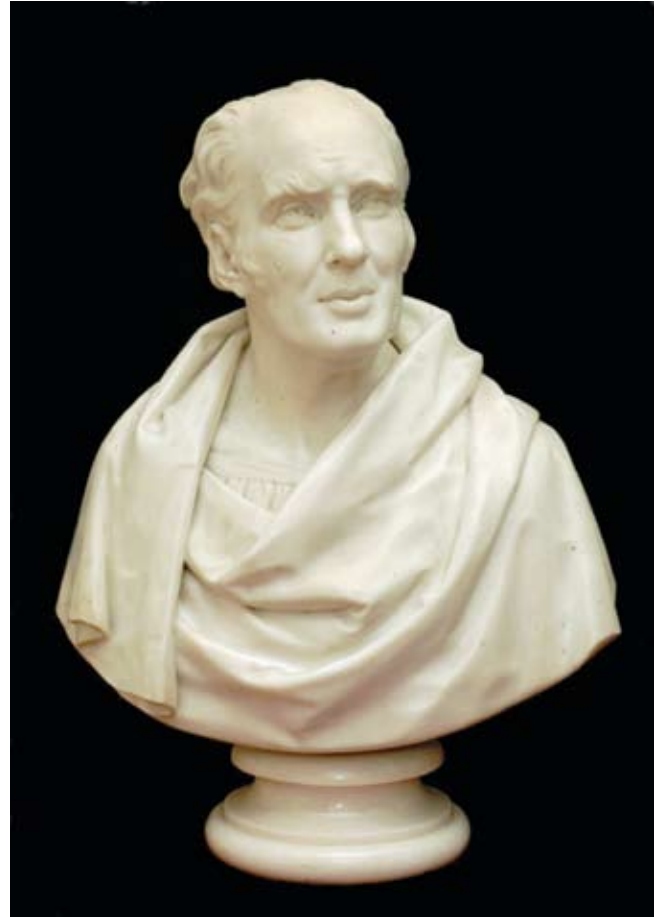


Fig 2. *The Royal Victoria Hospital marble bust of James McDonnell dated 1841 which came from Kilsharvan House.*

in appearance to the Ulster Museum and Kilsharvan busts. It was not technically difficult to make identical copies. The sitter would initially have been modelled in clay. This original would then have been used to make a plaster copy and the clay would have been beaten up and reused. The sculptor could then carve one or more marble copies as required, using the plaster model as a guide and checking the accuracy with a pointing device. It is possible that the Kilsharvan bust was the original bust, and that after its exhibition at the RA in 1842, copies were made for other branches of the family. Certainly the Kilsharvan and Ulster Medical Society busts once belonged to McDonnell family members and perhaps the Ulster Museum bust did too.

There is no question of blame but it is extremely unfortunate that the Society's busts of James McDonnell and William MacCormac should have been lost. It may not be possible now to retrieve them but the Society would welcome any information as to their whereabouts. The Society would also welcome information on any other item of historical interest including minutes books, transactions etc, etc.

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