

Book Review by P. Kenna

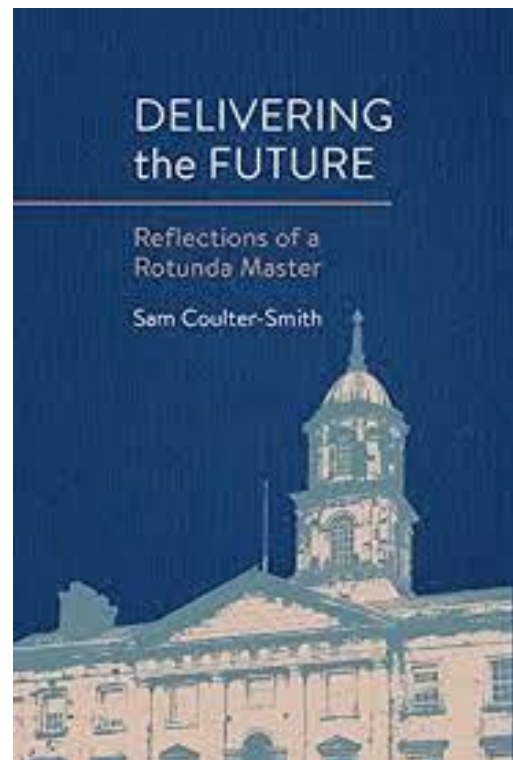
## **Delivering the Future: Reflections of a Rotunda Master By Sam Coulter-Smith**

Statements about conflicts of interest usually appear at the end of a document, and frequently declare no conflict, or the smallest of overlapping interests. In contrast, to this norm I have many conflicts in reviewing this book. Firstly, I have a long association with Voluntary Hospitals in general and the Rotunda in particular, having worked there from 1981 to 2017. Additionally, Dr Coulter-Smith says that I was one of his mentors. If I was his mother, or even his partner, in life or business, the conflict of interest could not be greater.

Memoirs by ex-Masters do not appear frequently. The ones that come to mind are those by Bethel Solomons (*One Doctor in His Time*, 1956) and Peter Boylan (*In the Shadow of the Eighth*, 2019). These memoirs tell us as much about the hospitals in which the Masters worked, a lot about the issues of the times, and even more about the individual authors.

“Delivering the Future” has the three pillars also, telling us something about the author, a lot about the hospital and woven throughout the role that Voluntary Hospitals play in Irish Health Care.

What does this book tell us about the author? Firstly it lets us know that the author can write an interesting and entertaining book, although the appeal is unlikely to be universal. We learn of Sam’s long association through personal and family recounting about the Rotunda. The book conveys the impression that the author can write about himself with reasonably complete candour, little dissembling and considerable insight. The best example of this is when he explains why he stayed on for an extra year in school – to compete in the Leinster Senior Cup Rugby Competition. Having stayed an extra year to do this, his team was then knocked out in first round. Recounting this anecdote suggests that the author does, or wants you to think he does, place a higher interest on loyalty and optimism than on pragmatic outcomes.



The history of the Rotunda is covered in several early chapters of the book. Much of this would be known to staff who work in the hospital, and for people wishing to see how a hospital reflects societal change it is illuminating. When writing about the more recent past, the observations of the author become more personal, more detailed and more insightful.

The most significant theme running through the book is the role that the Voluntary Hospitals play in the Irish Hospital System. The impressions given are that the Voluntary Hospitals are the driving force behind most of what is good in Irish Hospital Healthcare. So much so that the reader cannot help but wonder if excessive pondering on a proud past might produce an arrogant present. From the author's viewpoint, it is difficult to understand why the enormous debt of gratitude that Ireland has to the Voluntary sector is not acknowledged. Many parts of Irish society, he says, either fail to understand or misunderstand what the Voluntary Hospitals do for the country, and those that he refers to include: Sláintecare, the HSE, the Department of Health, Professor John Higgins, the State, and even the interminably ungrateful general public. As the soldier's proud mother said, as his regiment marched past, "They are all out of step except my Johnny!" At a time when the Voluntary sector is experiencing unprecedented funding from the State, and some staff (predominantly consultants, of whom I was one) enjoy enviable working conditions, perhaps now is not the time to cavil about their burden.

Written from inside a self-contained stockade *Delivering the Future* is interesting, informative, well written, and is a useful window on aspects of Irish Obstetrics that will be a here-after resource for future generations to read.

### *Afterthought*

The previous memoirs alluded to earlier, Bethel Solomons and Peter Boylan, were written twenty years after they concluded their roles as Master. Sam Smith, in contrast, wrote this book five years after concluding the role. It may be unlikely that his views on the Voluntary Hospitals, as expressed in this book, will be the same in fifteen years.

### **Review By:**

Dr Peter McKenna

National Women and Infants Health Programme