

IRISH SURGEONS AND AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

by

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IRISH blood, flowing in the veins of the Australian nation, makes it different from other races of the old Empire. Much of the Irish heritage of courage, warmth, good humour, love of song and poetry, and argument, and Irish hospitality, permeates our national character. It has seemed to me that we do not appreciate each other as close relatives and members of a family as we should, and that we miss much by not doing so. Our peoples share the same blood, the same language and much of the same history. We should seek and nurture intimate ties of friendship. The world is no longer separated by an insuperable barrier of distance. We should build human bridges across the seas between our countries so that we may know each other as friends and neighbours.

Australia was founded as a convict colony during a period of political turmoil in France and in Ireland. Its early existence was threatened by a war between England and France which began in 1793 and lasted until the allied victory of Waterloo in 1815. Many Irish men and women, some patriots rebelling against a conqueror's tyranny, some wicked and brutal outlaws beyond redemption, some poor people, victims of desperate poverty, and others needing a new beginning, were transported together holus-bolus indiscriminately to Botany Bay. At first they went by the writ of the Irish Government and then, following the Act of Union in 1801, they came on that of the British Parliament. Transportation of convicts to Australia continued until this evil thing was abolished in 1840. About one-third of all prisoners in the colony were Irish and bitterly hostile to the country and governing classes this represented.

The penal period of Australian history was marked by constant strife, and in some cases by bitter hatreds between rival interests. These were the convicts and the emancipated prisoners striving for their rights and their freedoms, the free settlers and the self-conceived moneyed aristocracy wanting land and freedom also, and the Governor and his military autocracy, the all-powerful representative of the British Government. He controlled the land and its people until the evil of transportation was abolished and government by an elected assembly, and trial by jury, were attained. Autocratic power resisted the idea of a free colony. Local government and trial by jury were granted by Irish-born Governor Richard Bourke of Limerick, a sincere reformer with a broad understanding of the new nation's needs similar to that of its earlier enlightened governors, Macquarie and Phillip.

Until 1840, when a government provision of assisted passages to aid in immigration of new settlers was made, Australia had been too far away from the Irish homeland, the cost of emigration there too much, and life in the new land too grim and too lonely to attract many Irish settlers. In addition, it was under British rule and so tainted to many Irishmen by associations which repelled them. Departure across the world to the Antipodes constituted perpetual exile from the

Ireland and the land and the life they loved so passionately. The great mass of people with a taste for a new freedom migrating from economic and social bondage in Ireland found this in the newly independent American colonies, so close at hand across the Atlantic. This flow became a mass migration in the years of famine and many of the people carried with them across the sea a racial memory of oppression and unkindness.

Just as the Irish regiments, fighting courageously on the battlefields of Europe and India, helped to found the British Empire, so Irishmen, including naval surgeons, played an honourable part in promoting the health and welfare of Britain's newest colony in Botany Bay. Peacefully established as a penal colony, resisted only by its aboriginal inhabitants and growing in misery and pain, this would one day become the Australian nation. The migration of free settlers who arrived to occupy the newly discovered fertile lands in Australia and its new settlements became massive in the 1850s, following the discovery of a mint of gold in Victoria and in New South Wales. This included a wave of free Irish settlers. They came in search of land and fortune in the fast clipper ships. Many became leaders in government, business and the professions. Their descendants intermarried with the Scots and English and became Australians, a friendly, assertive, emotional and independent race who add their own Anglo-Celtic flavour to a European civilisation in the Pacific. I will select some colourful Irish surgeons from several periods and show the parts they played in the contemporary scene.

THE FOUNDATION AND EARLY SETTLEMENT OF THE COLONY

In 1786 John White (1759-1832) was, at the young age of 27, appointed Surgeon-General for the convict transportation fleet about to sail for Botany Bay and found a nation. He was born in Drumaran, County Fermanagh, joined the Royal Navy as a surgeon's mate, received his diploma from the Company of Surgeons in 1781, and served conscientiously as a naval surgeon in India and the West Indies. Largely as a result of his foresight, organisation and good medical care, and his insistence on clean clothing, hygiene and fresh food, the voyage across the world to Botany Bay, transporting 1,500 people and taking eight months, was accomplished with only four deaths, and the colony kept without serious illness for the first critical two and a half years afterwards.

White was interested in natural science and he accompanied Governor Phillip on two journeys of exploration. He recorded his experiences and observations in a book, published in 1790: "Journal of a Voyage to New South Wales"—with 65 plates of animals, birds, lizards and curious cones of trees and other natural phenomena which he had drawn himself. He sent the first live kangaroo back to England. Two years later he wrote about the settlement in a state of disenchantment as a country so forbidding and hateful as to merit curses and execration, a place of misfortune for them all. He concluded this letter with a remark that subsequent time and discovery have made complacent and shallow, which I quote: "There is no single article in the whole country that is of the slightest use to the mother country or to the commercial world."

White fought Australia's first duel with his fellow surgeon, William Balmain. No hurt was done, but an enduring enmity remained. He returned to England in 1794, never to return. His natural son, Andrew, born of a convict mistress, fought as an officer at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815.

Irish born, Dennis Consideren (1815), an earnest and humane naval surgeon, anxious to do well in his profession, sailed as a surgeon's mate in the first fleet aboard *H.M.S. Scarborough*, and during his time in the settlement he studied Australian natural history. He employed indigenous plant extracts medicinally to alleviate scurvy, dysentery and other diseases which later scourged the settlement. He tried out sarsaparilla, native celery, preparations of yellow gum from the grass tree, the red gum, and peppermint and eucalyptus oil from various eucalyptus trees. He wrote to Sir Joseph Banks in 1798, and I quote: "If there is merit in applying these and other simples to the poor wretches, I certainly claim to have been the first to recommend them." His claim to priority is disputed and he makes no mention of aboriginal medicinal lore. He returned to Cork in 1794 and later went to Edinburgh, where he qualified as a doctor of medicine in 1804, referring in his thesis to his discovery of eucalyptus oil.

The third naval surgeon of the beginning period was D'arcy Wentworth, the impecunious son of a Portadown innkeeper and descended from English Whig aristocrats, the Earls of Strafford. He began his career apprenticed to Dr. Patton of Tandragee but, lured by the promise of an appointment to the East India Company, he set off for London and qualified as a surgeon's mate in 1785. His career almost ended in disaster in 1789 when he fell into debt. Seeking to retrieve his fortunes by highway robbery, he was arrested and charged at the Old Bailey. He escaped justice (it is held) by voluntarily taking passage to Botany Bay as an assistant Royal Naval surgeon and serving in the convict establishment on his arrival. He justified the pardoning of his youthful indiscretions, for during the thirty-seven years of his life in New South Wales he contributed much to the life of the colony as a surgeon and later principal medical officer and as the chief police magistrate. He became a wealthy landowner and was free of the belligerency of his associates, but unswerving in his support of emancipation and trial by jury in the colony. His partners and he built the first Sydney hospital in exchange for a concession allowing them to import spirits duty-free into the colony, and this institution, The Sydney Hospital, was known as the "Rum Hospital" for this reason. Although he showed no particular distinction as a surgeon, his contemporaries considered him a lover of freedom, a consistent friend of the people and an honest man. His son, William Wentworth, qualified as a barrister at the Inns of Court, took silk and subsequently led the Australians in their struggle for emancipation from autocratic rule and for trial by jury.

THE SECOND WAVE

These arrived as free settlers to the newly discovered fertile lands and later in the wake of the gold rush. William Crooke arrived in Tasmania in 1841 and was appointed Resident Surgeon of the Hobart Hospital. He was the descendant of Sir Thomas Crooke, the founder of Baltimore in Ireland, from which the American

city took its name, and MacCarthy More, Prince of Munster. He took up private practice and, becoming a member of the Tasmanian Legislature, advocated protective tariffs to foster local industry. He emigrated to Melbourne in 1857 and was the first to report smallpox in Victoria.

Sir Thomas Naghten Fitzgerald, early Melbourne's most distinguished, popular and respected surgeon, qualified in Dublin in 1850 at the age of 20 and immediately took passage to Melbourne, where he was appointed to the staff of Melbourne Hospital at the age of 21. He remained on the staff for 40 years. He was especially interested in orthopaedics and in deformities. He successfully practised subcutaneous tenotomy for talipes and for a variety of other deformities. He adopted Lister's antiseptic method in 1868. The discovery was brought to Melbourne by Dr. H. M. Night March, Lister's house surgeon, then taking passage in a clipper ship. He was a great teacher, an excellent operator and a popular and much-loved figure in Melbourne. He was always received with an ovation at the Melbourne races as he drove on to the course in his open coach, drawn by splendid horses. He went to the South African War, appointed as surgical consultant to the Australian Expeditionary Forces, and he reported favourably on the morale, the medical services and the treatment of wounds. When he died he was mourned as Melbourne's greatest surgeon.

Dr. Robert Charles Alexander Lindsay was born in County Tyrone of a pioneer family of linen and yarn merchants. He qualified at Queen's College, Belfast, and emigrated to Australia, taking passage on the *Red Rose* for Melbourne in 1864, and on arrival immediately went to the goldfields in Victoria. He founded (according to Sir Robert Menzies) Australia's most illustrious family, for of his ten children five became famous artists.

Charles MacCarthy, a lovable, slightly fey, adventurous and generous Irish character, emigrated to Sydney from Dublin because he thought the warm sunshine might be good for his chest. He joined the surgical staff of St Vincent's Hospital in 1876. As a student he had served in a French ambulance during the Franco-Prussian War and had been awarded the Croix Militaire after the Battle of Sedan. He was a tiny, dapper, bearded Irishman who spoke with a melodious Tipperary voice. Apart from his surgery, he was a sculptor, an artist and a musician. He did busts of John Dillon and Sarah Bernhardt which were exhibited at the Chicago Fair in 1893 together with a portrait of Sarah. A beautiful bronze of Mary Aikenhead, the founder of the Irish Sisters of Charity, adorns the grand staircase of St Vincent's Hospital in Sydney.

Lister's antiseptic method had not entered his imagination. In the operating theatre he would habitually turn up his sleeves and operate with his bare hands and with his rings on his fingers. Sometimes, during an operation, he would pause, call for a pen, take it and write for a moment or two on to his cuff. As he resumed operating he would say: "A beautiful melody has just passed through my head." During the First World War he wrote patriotic songs, including "The toast is Anzac".

Refrigeration with ice as a means of local anaesthesia had just been reported in the medical journals. MacCarthy used this method on a patient with haemor-

rhoids. When he removed the ice and applied a clamp to the protruding piles, his patient leaped from the table with an anguished howl and stumbled painfully to the door, with MacCarthy hanging on to the instrument and pleading with him in an anguished brogue: "Stay, friend, stay." He was a lovable character.

Warm-hearted Irish nursing sisters mellowed and refreshed the hard life and still harsher fate of many early Australians. Our nation has received no greater gift from Ireland. In 1815 Mary Aikenhead, anxious to emulate the gentleness and kindly simplicity of the ancient hospital de la Pitié in Paris, an institution and a Christian society which was to influence Florence Nightingale and inspire her with a model from which she created the British and Australian nursing services as a skilled calling, suitable for gentlewomen, founded the religious order of the Irish Sisters of Charity. They opened St Vincent's Hospital in Dublin in 1834. Miss Alicia de Lacy of Limerick joined the Sisters in Dublin as Sister Baptist and learned the ways of Christian nursing. She was chosen in 1834 to be one of five Sisters to leave her homeland and serve in the grim penal colony of far-off New South Wales. She was destined to found Sydney's St Vincent's Hospital in 1858, where her warm and generous heart embraced and cherished all in need—Catholic, Protestant and Jew alike. In the course of time, and when many storms had passed, in 1920, the Sisters were directed by Irish-born Mother Superior Mary Daly, who was described by Herbert (Paddy) Moran, the surgeon, as his ideal of a great and remarkable woman, and I quote: "She possessed a sparkling Celtic humour, but her Celtic temperament could crystallise at will into determined action. She inspired all about her with the fire of enthusiasm. Her life was studded with the gems of charity, and those whom she befriended never forgot her. She mothered St Vincent's in Melbourne to grow into a famous hospital and she moulded the great destiny of St Vincent's in Sydney. She was a frail woman but so busy living for God that she had no time to think of dying. Her value was that of jewels brought from afar, even from the remotest lands."

SURGEON SONS OF THE PIONEERS

Henry O'Hara (died 1921) was a notable flamboyant surgeon and teacher among the eminent surgeons of Victoria. He was born in Cork, emigrated to Australia as a boy and returned to Ireland to study medicine. Here he passed his FRCS in 1878, partly supporting himself in the meanwhile as a professional singer. He returned to Melbourne afterwards. He had the reputation of being a fast and skilful operator. It is recorded that in three hours he performed two radical operations for hernia, one strangulated hernia, a cholecystectomy for gallstones, a pan-hysterectomy, removed a hydatid cyst from the wall of the colon and did two appendicectomies. He then repaired to the medical officers' room for a 'spot', where he kept his entourage in fits of laughter with a fund of stories.

Like a true Irishman, he always had a feud on his hands. He was the bane of the lawyers. It was said that Melbourne railways paid him a 'retaining fee' not to speak against them in law suits. He was a bold and resourceful surgeon and at his best with a gallery of his cronies and admirers. He was a champion sportsman, excelled at golf, and when his horse, Ben Bolt, won the Melbourne

Cup, it was agreed that there was nobody sober in Melbourne's Brighton that night. His teaching of medical students was full of riotous humour.

He became clean-shaven and proclaimed that all surgeons should be clean-shaven. One day he said: "I witnessed a painful sight the other day. A leading Melbourne gynaecologist became confused and during an operation finished the perineal toilet with his beard." It was the jolly, robust and uncomplicated society of the goldfields. He charged high fees. On one occasion, when asked by the leading barrister of the day, a man called Purves, whether 500 guineas was the largest fee he had charged, he replied that he had once charged a patient 1,000 guineas. "Indeed, sir," said the lawyer, with a sly glance at the judge, "was it for a legal or an illegal operation?" The next day, meeting Purves in Collins Street, he knocked him down, thrashed him and arrived at the outpatients with his eyes aglow. The incident made headlines in the press. There is no doubt that Henry Michael O'Hara was the dominant medical figure of his day in Melbourne.

Charles "Plevna" Ryan was the son of an Irish overlander from New South Wales who had married the daughter of a famous artist and ornithologist. He was a man with a buoyant and genial personality, a romantic hero who lived life to the full, universally loved and respected during his lifetime. He was educated in Melbourne, spent two years at Melbourne University and subsequently graduated in medicine at Edinburgh University in 1875. While doing post-graduate studies in Vienna, he saw an advertisement calling for the enlistment of military surgeons by the Turkish Government. He applied for a commission. In 1877 he was one of the few surgeons who survived the sieges of Plevna and Erzeroum, with their horrors rivalling those of the Crimea. In 1878 he returned to practise in Melbourne. At his first operating session, after appointment to the staff of the Melbourne Hospital, he was startled to find the whole staff assembled to witness his skill, for he was the hero of Plevna.

He was a great teacher and a courageous surgeon. He had a generous chivalry and courtesy about him, and a genius for friendship that endeared him to all. He came into a sickroom like a clear sunbeam. Nothing would induce him to drive his new De Dion-Bouton motor-car, one of Melbourne's first motor vehicles, claiming that this would affect the steadiness of his hand. His coachman reluctantly became his chauffeur. Ryan had a high sense of duty. At 61 he insisted upon going to the First World War with the Australian Expeditionary Force. He became Assistant Director of Medical Services on General Birdwood's staff at Gallipoli. During an armistice arranged between the fighting forces to bury the numerous dead, the Turkish officer in charge noticed that he was wearing his Turkish decorations and embraced him. Ryan was overcome with emotion. Later in the war he was appointed Consulting Surgeon to the Australian Forces in London. He became the most decorated member of the Melbourne Hospital staff as KBE, CB, CMG. He worked hard and lived and enjoyed life to the full.

Herbert "Paddy" Moran, who was born of Irish parents, graduated in medicine at Sydney University in 1908. He captained an international rugby team soon afterwards and stayed in Ireland to work in the Rotunda Hospital for a time. He served in the Royal Army Medical Corps in both World Wars. After demobilisa-

tion in 1918, being inspired by the concept of applying radium as an ancillary to surgery for treating cancer, he studied at the French Radium Institute. On his return to Sydney, he was the pioneer user of radium in cancer and active in Australian and New Zealand cancer research and organisation. He encouraged medical graduates to travel and study at universities abroad and to contribute to medicine and literature. His life was punctuated by warm friendships which were easily broken. In 1923 he left Australia for ever at the height of his career to live in Italy. Among his non-medical writings, the most well-known and controversial was "Viewless Winds". Seldom has any Australian combined the enthusiasm and idealism of a medical pioneer with literary achievements and knowledge of four languages and their literature. He is commemorated by a memorial lecture on medical history from the University of Sydney and the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons which I had the honour to deliver this year at the jubilee of the College of Surgeons on the subject of "The Saga of Cardio-Thoracic Surgery in Australia over 200 years".

CONTEMPORARY SURGEONS OF IRISH EXTRACTION

These are closely knit within the fabric of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons and the colourful tapestry includes many surgeons and physicians, even myself. Among these I might mention Sir John Eccles, Nobel Prize-winning physiologist who did much to unravel the mystery of the nervous system; Sir Patrick Kenny of St Vincent's Hospital, Sydney, Past President of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons and President of the Medical Board of New South Wales; and the three Windsor brothers, sons of the late Henry Morgan Windsor of County Tyrone. Windsor came to Australia in 1914 to pursue a long, useful and tranquil life in Brisbane and raise a family of distinguished surgeons. He was made an honorary fellow of both the Royal College of Surgeons of England and of Australasia. In 1976 he died at the age of 92, still in practice and driving his own motor-car at the time of his death.

Drs. Alan Dwyer, Justin Fleming and Noel Newton, beloved and distinguished Sydney surgeons, all of whom died recently within a year of each other, have been jointly commemorated by the fellows who loved them and the work they inspired.

At the recent jubilee meeting of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons there were notable contributions by men of Irish blood, especially in the adventurous fields of cardiac and microsurgery. Just across the Tasman Sea, Pat Molloy heads cardiac surgery in the Scots stronghold of Dunedin. He arrived in Britain with my blessing, a family of daughters, a heart bursting with enthusiasm and listening to the siren song of surgery. With Irish doggedness, however, he sired nine daughters before being granted an Irish son who may be a surgeon in the making.

CONCLUSION

Irishmen, by encouraging free debate and with their humour, have helped to nourish Australian surgery, free from the shackles of authority and dogma. In our multi-racial society there is peace, mutual respect and friendship between

most Celts and Saxons, and between Protestants and Catholics. We are one family. There is an acknowledgment of common interests, an exchange of friendship and a mutual understanding. Whilst there are differences of race and religion, these are accepted and serve to vitalise and flavour our personal relationships. The old faith and national character of Ireland clearly add interest and a fine Celtic flavour to young Australia. We owe much to the Anglo-Irish stock from which we sprang.