

Charles Nicholas Delacherois Purdon (1818–82)

President of the Ulster Medical Society

1874–75

Presidential Opening Address

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THE PAST AND PRESENT MEDICAL CHARITIES OF BELFAST

Gentlemen, I thank you for the office to which you have elected me, as in so doing you have shown your desire to renew your acquaintance with old practitioners; and as one of that class, occupying the position I now hold, and standing in the place in which we are assembled, I cannot help taking a retrospective view of what has passed during my years of school, study, and practice here. The contemplation of these circumstances has so impressed me with the great changes that have taken place in this town amongst the medical practitioners and charities during the last fifty years, that I hope you will not consider the time misspent if I bring before you this evening the medical charities that have existed here, and some of the eminent men who gave their time and services to benefit the inmates, and contrast them with the modern ones and the eminent practitioners of the present day.

When Belfast was a mere village in comparison with its present size – its inhabitants numbering some 17,000 – there existed but very few charitable institutions, and also very few medical men; but they, though small in number, were remarkable for talent and philanthropy, as it was mainly owing to their exertions that this hospital owes its existence. Need I mention the name of one of its founders, who, though, departed nearly fifty years, still lives in the memory of many of the seniors among you as a bright ornament of the profession – a man who, though commencing practice late in life, through the power of his intellect and energy of his character, soon rose to the highest eminence? This was Dr. Stephenson, sen., who at the beginning of his career was a Presbyterian clergyman, officiating in the Ards, but on account of theological disputes with the Synod, resigned his charge; and, notwithstanding that he was in middle life, commenced the study of medicine in Scotland, where he took his degree, then settled here, and was soon extensively engaged in practice, succeeding Dr. Halliday, sen., who was then retiring



from active business. Dr. Stephenson, being very benevolent, attended the poor in conjunction with the late Dr. M'Donnell, and in 1792 a dispensary was established, which relieved the Belfast Charitable Society and Infirmary from any further expenditure in the external department. In the year 1797, seeing that fever was being imported from Portpatrick, he was foremost in advocating a fever hospital, which was at once established according to his plan in conjunction with the dispensary, premises being taken in Berry-street, where, in the first six months, he attended seventy-three patients, and was so skilful in his treatment of fever that of the first sixty patients admitted not one died, and out of the seventy-three only three died.

These prompt measures having caused the fever to abate, the hospital was closed, and no institution of the kind existed until 1799, when a fever hospital and dispensary were established in West-street, where the poor received gratuitous advice. Dr. Stephenson was also one of the first physicians attached to the General Hospital when it was removed to this place. He continued to practise until advanced age compelled him to relinquish his profession, and died at a ripe age – over ninety years.

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He was always well known by his appearance and dress, as he was rather high in the shoulders, and always wore knee breeches and black stockings, white tie, &c., which was the usual dress of medical men at that time. He was brusque in manner, but uniformly kind to all who excited his sympathy. He died as he had lived, an honour to the profession, and was succeeded in his practice by his son, the late Dr. R. Stephenson, of whom we may say that his entire public life was devoted to upholding the dignity of the profession; and in him we found not only a kind friend as well as a skilful adviser, but also a fine advocate, and all of us who knew him had often reason to be glad that there was a Robert Stephenson.

The next eminent person attached to this institution was Dr. M'Donnell, who was also active in the foundation of this charity, and enjoyed an extensive practice amongst the higher classes. He was a learned and deeply-read practitioner, with a philosophical and inquiring turn of mind, often risking his life in the search for information. He, too, has passed away, after attaining an advanced age. In his appearance he was somewhat remarkable, clothed in drab-coloured knee-breeches and white stockings, white tie, &c., driving in an old gig hung on "C" springs, reading a book by the aid of a magnifying-glass which he held in his hand, with his well-known servant, Mick, beside him. He used to boast that he never carried an umbrella, and exposed himself to all weather.

The next I have to mention belonging to this staff is Dr. S. S. Thompson, justly celebrated as a skilful and accomplished physician, who added to his medical pursuits the pleasing study of music, and so skilled was he in it that he was elected permanent president of the Anacreontic Society, a friend, and almost father, to many among us who are now the seniors of the profession. He was also found ready to assist in difficulty, professional or otherwise, and his conduct through life, both to his brethren and the public, was ever in accord with the motto on his coat of arms – "Honesty is the best policy." He, too, has passed away, leaving affectionate recollections of his worth.

Another talented physician attached to this hospital was A. G. Malcolm, whose whole mind was given to the study of his profession; but just as he was beginning to attain an eminence, which foreshadowed a distinguished future, such as he well deserved both by his contributions to the literature of his Profession and his skill in healing disease, he was cut off; but, though dead, he speaketh to the pupils of this institution in the exhibition which has been founded,

and which bears his name. I forbear to mention the names of other medical men who have acted as physicians to Belfast charities, as we still enjoy the pleasure of their society, and the advantage of their skill, and I hope that we as practitioners, and the public as patients, may long continue in possession of that society and skill.

I will now draw your attention to another class of practitioners attached to local charities, the first of whom I will mention is one long since passed away, and the record of his talents and experience has been but dimly preserved and handed down – I mean Dr. Halliday, sen., formerly an eminent medical man here, whose advice was sought in all quarters by rich and poor, high and low. He first came to Belfast as surgeon to the Cameronian Regiment, and his skill was so soon acknowledged that he left the army and settled here, becoming the consultant of the entire county, and was in such demand that he was able to fix his own remuneration of one guinea per mile. Of him it is said that he always attended a consultation in court dress, by way of sustaining the dignity of the profession, I suppose; but being too often called in only when the case had become hopeless, he used frequently to express his opinion of this neglect in his quaint way by saying, "I am like a huntsman, always in at the death." He was succeeded in practice by Dr. Stephenson, sen., and his son, who, however, did not continue many years in the profession, being early confined to the house by disease.

The next in order is Surgeon Comins, who practised in this town, besides holding the post of Deputy-Inspector General of the Forces, and, if my memory serves me rightly, he was also surgeon to the infirmary of the Belfast Charitable Society. He was the first in Belfast who performed an amputation of both legs at the same time, which was thought so extraordinary an operation as to be published far and wide in the newspapers. The sequel to the operation, consisting of the death of the patient, was, however, not noticed. It is said of him that, being of a money-making turn of mind, he kept a flock of ducks at the military hospital, which were fed on the poultices after the patients had quite done with them. These ducks he used to send to the market, but the public having discovered that something was rotten in the state of Denmark (or rather in the state of the ducks), the secret of their diet leaked out, and thenceforward as long as the doctor remained here, ducks were as a drug in the market.

Dr. Drennan also was one of the first attendants of the Belfast Charitable Society. He practised here for some time, and rose to eminence. A great

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deal of his time was devoted to this society, and I may mention that it was he who introduced inoculation in the north of Ireland. He was of retiring habits, an elegant scholar and poet, and the record of his professional attainments and work may be found in the transactions of this noble institution.

I will now turn to one who, being everything to me, it will, I trust, prove an apology for bringing him under your notice this evening. Of him I will only say that his abilities and character were recognised and appreciated by all who knew him. I need hardly mention the name of Henry Purdon, sen., formerly one of the first surgeons of this place. He came here as staff-surgeon, having charge of the military hospital. As he had great experience in foreign service, he soon became distinguished as a skilful operator, and was for a long time one of the surgeons at this hospital, as also to the Belfast Charitable Society. During his professional career he was invariably the friend and adviser of his brethren, and, though he has long passed away, his place is supplied by his son, Dr. Purdon, once the surgeon of this institution, as well as the colleague of some who are still engaged within its walls; and now the father of the profession in the town.

Another celebrated man was Staff-Surgeon Forcade, who for a long time gave his services to the poor in this town. His skill in operating and in treating those under his care was well known and acknowledged by all. He, too, has passed away, and left but kindly recollections to those who knew and esteemed him. Another pillar of the profession was the late Surgeon D. Moore, who, after being employed in the Royal Navy during the war with Napoleon, settled in Belfast when peace was proclaimed, and gave the benefit of his great experience to the patients of this hospital as surgeon, to which he continued until advancing years caused him to resign his place to his son, Dr. James Moore, who combines in his person the skill of the surgeon with the talent of the painter; all he lacks is the taste of the poet. There is but one more of the many eminent men who were associated with this charity whom I will mention (for to speak of all as they deserve would occupy more time than we have at command), and that is the late Dr. J. M. Saunders, who was cut off in the prime of life, just as he was rising to great eminence in his profession, leaving a void in this place which it took a long time to fill; and still our remembrance of his thoughtful care of the sick, and his tenderness in treating and skill in prescribing and operating throw a halo around the memory of James Saunders. But having had enough of those gentlemen who gave their

skill for the use of these institutions and the advancement of science, I will now speak of the institutions themselves.

In the middle of the last century, Belfast, through the intelligence and energy of its merchants, who laid the foundation of its present prosperity, began to be of commercial importance, which naturally attracted numbers of labouring classes as well as vagrants from all parts of the North, and these became so numerous as to demand the attention of the leading inhabitants of the town and adjoining country, a meeting of which gentlemen, consequently, was held in the "George" on the 20th day of August, 1752, to consider the question of building a poorhouse, hospital, and church, the necessity for which is shown by the following resolution, passed at a subsequent meeting:— "Resolved that, whereas a poorhouse and hospital are greatly wanted in Belfast, for the support of vast numbers of real objects of charity in this parish, for the employment of idle beggars who crowd to it from all parts of the North, and for the reception of infirm and diseased poor; and whereas the church of Belfast is old and ruinous, and not large enough to accommodate the parishioners, and to re-build and enlarge the same would be an expense grievous and unsupportable by the ordinary method of public cesses. Now, in order to raise a sum of money to carry these good works into execution, the following scheme has been approved of by the principal inhabitants of said town and gentlemen of fortune in the neighbourhood who are friends to promote so laudable an undertaking."

This scheme was a lottery, by which they were to raise a certain sum of money, the tickets to be sold in the principal cities and towns of the empire; but as the scheme did not receive much encouragement in London, and the tickets were cried down, the committee sent over to London Messrs. Gregg and Getty, with the power of an attorney, "to promote the execution of the scheme and at the same time arrangements were made for obtaining subscriptions, that by their assistance the lottery might be carried out; and, in order to restore public confidence in the scheme, the following advertisement was inserted in the papers:— "Whereas it hath been maliciously reported that the Belfast charitable scheme was to be given up, the managers think proper to give this public notice that the same is without grounds, and that they have taken proper measures to carry the said scheme into effect." Notwithstanding this advertisement, the scheme was still decried in London, and legal proceedings had to be taken against purchasers to make them pay for their tickets.

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At last a sum of money having been obtained, a committee was appointed for the purpose of drawing up a memorial for presentation to Lord Donegall, asking him to grant a piece of ground to the society. He having acceded to this request, plans were invited from parties in England and Scotland as well as Ireland, stating to them the sum to be laid out on the building for poorhouse and hospital as £3,000, which sum was found sufficient, as the inhabitants of the country round about furnished stone, sand, lime, and water gratis. The plans having been received, were exhibited in the market-house for the inspection of the gentlemen in charge of the undertaking and inhabitants. After considerable discussion, three of the plans were selected, and sent to Dublin to Mr. Cooley, who was to improve on them. Finally Mr. Cooley's plans were adopted for a poorhouse to accommodate 36 inmates, and an hospital to contain 24 beds.

The foundation-stone was laid on the 7th August, 1771 ("a day memorable for many glorious events in the history of this nation"), and five guineas were enclosed in it. The buildings, when finished, had, in addition to the hospital and poorhouse, assembly-rooms for the use of the townspeople and profit of the charity. About the 17th September, 1774, the hospital was opened for the admission of the sick, who were admitted from the several districts into which the town was divided. Foreigners also were admitted into the infirmary "on the consideration that they pay for their support and medicine." The physicians and surgeons, being asked if they would be pleased to attend such foreigners gratis, made reply, "As we have already contributed by subscription to your charitable institutions, and offered gratuitously our attendance on the indigent sick of the town and parish of Belfast, we cannot at present undertake to enter into foreign engagements, the extent of which might involve us in a business very different from that which we intended when our services were offered to your society."

In addition to receiving the sick into the infirmary, an extern department was established, at which a physician and surgeon attended each Tuesday and Saturday, for the purpose of giving advice and assistance to such persons as came within the rules of the society. Wards were also allotted for the treatment of lunatics; and we find, from an entry in the committee-book, that one of the lunatics was to be handcuffed and chained by the leg. The physician and surgeon attended by rotation three months at a time. Drs. Stephenson, Ferguson, Halliday sen., Apaley, Halliday jun., Drennan, and Bankhead;

Messrs. Campbell, Bowen, Comyns, M'Clurney, Marshall, Purdon, White, M'Clelland, Anderson, Gelston, and Montgomery, were some of the first attendants of this noble institution.

I may here mention that in this establishment were made the first trials of inoculation and vaccination in the North of Ireland, as may be seen by the following resolution, passed by the committee on 4th May, 1782:— "Resolved unanimously, that the thanks of this committee be given to Dr. Drennan for his introduction of the plan of inoculation, which has been adopted by the society, and that Mr. Bristow be requested to notify to the public the adoption of the plan." The plan was considered of such value that on the 1st June, 1782, we find the committee passing this resolution:— "Resolved, that thanks be returned to Dr. Drennan in the public papers for the scheme of inoculation introduced by him into the house, and that Mr. Crombie do wait on him and acquaint him with the resolution; and that he send it to the papers, provided the doctor doth not oppose it." Vaccination was tried by Dr. Halliday jun., as the entry in the committee-book, 29th of March, 1800, attests:— "Dr. Halliday jun. attended, and proposed that the children of the house, or as many of them as had not the small-pox, may be inoculated for the cow-pox, upon the assurance that it is not infectious; that it is an easier disorder than the small-pox, as certified by a number of most respectable physicians in England. Resolved, that the experiment be tried on a few of the children in the house, provided that the parents of the children freely consent thereto."

For many years this society continued the only charity in the town; but gradually other institutions became established, which relieved its expenditure and enabled the committee to restrict their admissions to the poor and diseased; and within the last few years, through the munificence of the late John Charters and Edward Benn, new wings have been built for the accommodation of children and the sick, and at present there exist four commodious wards for adults and two for children, containing upwards of forty beds for patients labouring under chronic diseases. These are under the care of Dr. Ferguson and myself. The dispensary was established in 1792, thereby enabling the Belfast Charitable Society to close its extern department, as by its means the poor were attended at their own residences. It rapidly became popular, and in the first four years and four months 2,406 patients received advice and assistance; it has been developed by the Poor Laws into two extensive dispensaries, attended by seven medical gentlemen.

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The fever hospital, as before stated, was first established in Berry-street, being attached to the dispensary, with which it continued to be associated for years, and proved most effectual in checking the epidemic at that time raging in Belfast, on the abatement of which fever it was closed; and no hospital for infectious diseases existed until 1799, when it was re-opened in West-street, in charge of two physicians (increased in June, 1819, to three), two consulting physicians, two surgeons, and an apothecary.

Finally, on the 18th August, 1817, the hospital was removed to the present building in Frederick-street, when four physicians and four surgeons were appointed to attend regularly. Of late years it has been enlarged by the liberal donations of the late John Charters and Sinclair K. Mulholland, who have built two large wings; so that now it may be said to rank foremost among the charities not only of Belfast, but of the North of Ireland.

The Lying-in Hospital was opened in 1794, and supported by subscriptions from ladies in the town and county. About forty-five years ago it was removed from its original site in Donegall-street to its present position. Its attendants are too well known and remembered to require any mention on my part. However, I may say that it is at present in charge of Drs. Smith and Burden, the latter of whom has retired from active practice to enjoy the rest so well earned by his attention to suffering humanity.

The Chapel-lane Dispensary was opened in 1827, for treating especially diseases of the eye, and, through the talent and exertions of its two medical attendants, became thronged with patients. It was at last closed, after continuing several years, soon to be succeeded by a similar institution, which continues to the present day.

These that I have mentioned were the medical charities which existed when Belfast was but small in comparison with its present importance. As population increased, charitable institutions sprang up, gaining for Belfast a reputation for benevolence which extends over the entire kingdom. The first in order of these more modern institutions is the asylum for the treatment of the insane, established in 1829, and at present under the care of a gentleman whose reputation is more than European, Dr. Henry MacCormac, consulting physician to the asylum, who is most ably assisted by the resident medical officer. Dr. Stewart, considered one of the first physicians in Ireland for ministering to a mind diseased.

Next comes the Ophthalmic Hospital, built by the benevolence of a lady whose name is enshrined in

the records of almost every local charity; and I am sure when I mention Lady Johnson you will all join in the wish that she may long live to witness the good results that spring from her philanthropy. This hospital is under the care of the Drs. Browne, who are well known to you all.

Another institution which has grown to colossal proportions is the hospital for infectious and contagious diseases, adjoining the Union Workhouse, and under the Poor Law management, the principal medical officer of which, Dr. J. S. Reid, is so well known and appreciated that he requires from me nothing further than the mention of his name.

An hospital for cutaneous diseases, established in 1864 as a dispensary, is now, through the donations of the late Edward Benn, about to be removed from its present site to a new and handsome building in Glenravel-street, beside another institution founded by the same large-hearted man, the Ulster Hospital for Diseases of the Eye, Ear, and Throat; these two are respectively attended by Dr. H. S. Purdon and Dr. M'Keown.

Still another hospital, founded by Mr. Benn, is the Samaritan, for diseases of women and children. It is under the care of Dr. M'Mordie; in addition to which we have two other hospitals for children, which are, through their attendants, contributing much to alleviate the suffering of the young; and, finally, there is just now established, through the benevolence of the late Samuel Martin, an hospital for children labouring under chronic diseases. It is built in a healthy locality near Belfast, on ground purchased by him, and given, with the building, to the committee of the Belfast General Hospital.

Having now mentioned the old and new medical charities of Belfast – all of which are, under the judicious care of their several attendants, labouring to check disease, relieve suffering, and promote health, – it only remains for me to conclude my brief sketch of their history with the hope that the gentlemen who gave their time and skill to them may attain the position and reward their merit deserves, and continue to enjoy the respect and affection of the public when he who now addresses you has in his turn passed away.