

# LOCAL MEDICAL PROVISION

## *Before the National Health Service*

BY DEIDRE GRAHAM

In earlier times, occasionally benevolent landed gentry made a beginning of providing some sort of basic medical care for their tenants and sometimes religious institutions also helped. However country people, especially, largely relied on home-made cures and treatments, which may have involved herbs or some local person with a reputation for *'having a cure'*, but hardly ever involved a qualified medical man. Barbers of course were sometimes called in for *'blood-letting'* and their red-striped pole is a relic of their former practice.

Many communities had what Minnie Savage referred to as *'a handy woman'*, who was sent for at childbirth. Although she often had neither formal training nor education, the *'handy woman'* - who always seemed to be elderly - was generally an intelligent and resourceful person who had learned from long experience and was often said *'to be better than any doctor.'*

However, the origins of our modern medical system can be traced back to the start of the nineteenth century. In 1805 Grand Juries were empowered to set up dispensaries, which were to be managed by those prepared to contribute one guinea towards their running costs. The amount contributed by subscribers could be matched - but not exceeded - by a contribution from the Grand Jury. Nearly everything about these dispensaries seems to have been rather vague, for there was no uniformity as to the area they served, or what services were provided, or who was entitled to the services. Some were organised on parish or barony boundaries while others were based on townlands or specific distances from a church or other central landmark. Some would only treat patients recommended by a subscriber or the tenants of a subscriber, while others left it to the discretion of the medical officer as to whom he should or should not treat. From time to time when epidemics occurred contingency plans were drawn up.

There is an oral tradition locally that, during outbreaks of fever in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the large building in Acton known as *'Kinney's Mill'* was used as a fever hospital, but no written record of this has so far come to light. However, in his article on *'Pre-Famine Poverty in Aghaderg'*

published in *'Before I forget..'* (Number 3), John J. Sands states that in 1833, when a lighterman died of cholera at Poyntzpass on a canal barge carrying turf, *'quarantine was imposed in the area and no one was allowed to enter the village of Loughbrickland from that (Poyntzpass) direction until the 'scare' was over'*. This may well have been one occasion when the mill was used.



***Kinney's Mill, Acton***

The earliest mention of a local *'doctor'* is of a *'Nesbitt, a surgeon'* who lived in Federnagh in 1830. Much of Church Street Poyntzpass is in Federnagh townland, so he may well have lived in the village. He may be the same *'Mr Nesbitt of Poyntzpass'* referred to in a letter sent in October 1817 by W.L. Kidd to the Chairman of the Apothecaries Hall in Dublin, deploring the lack of regulation and highlighting the practice of individuals, like Mr Nesbitt, who, with little or no training, set themselves up as *'apothecaries'*.

Whether **Doctor Nesbitt** was the local dispensary doctor when Poyntzpass Dispensary was established in 1831 is not known for sure, but it seems possible that he was. *The Ordnance Survey Memoirs* of 1835 note the existence of the Dispensary at Poyntzpass. The Dispensary Doctor had, at that time, a salary of £50 per annum plus £10 *'conditional for visits'* and the doctor in Poyntzpass had an assistant.

Situated, as it is, on the borders of Counties Armagh and Down, Poyntzpass was in a particularly complicated position. Most of the village is in the Parish of Ballymore in Co Armagh but one street, William Street, is in the Parish of Aghaderg in Co

Down. This Co Down section of the village was part of Loughbrickland Dispensary District. Also the Parish of Donaghmore in Co Down includes townlands on the immediate outskirts of Poyntzpass.

When the Poor Law Unions were established in Ireland in 1838, Poyntzpass, with the surrounding districts in Counties Armagh and the Parish of Donaghmore in Co Down, were placed in Newry Poor Law Union, while Aghaderg Parish, which includes William Street, was part of Banbridge Union. There were 163 Poor Law Unions in Ireland, each with a Union Workhouse.

Conditions in these workhouses were austere and were deliberately made so unattractive as to deter all but the most desperate, from seeking admission. Fear of ending one's days in the workhouse hung over elderly people, who saw it as a last resort. Daisy Hill Hospital developed on the site of Newry Union Workhouse, and used initially the former Workhouse buildings as hospital wards so, for years after the closure of the Workhouse, the hospital retained, for an older generation, something of the aura of that dreaded institution.

When Poor Law Unions were sub-divided into more formal 'Dispensary Districts' the Newry Union was sub-divided into seven dispensary districts, one of which was Poyntzpass. Like poor Law Unions, Dispensary Districts did not follow parish or county boundaries nor did Registration Districts when compulsory registration of births, marriages and deaths was established in 1864.

A headstone in St Joseph's Churchyard commemorates two members of a local family who were doctors. **Surgeon James McGill M.D.** died in February 1843 aged 38 years and his son Surgeon **Edward McGill M.D.** died in September 1863 also aged 38 years. A press report at the time of James McGill's death in 1843, states that he died of consumption and that, "... his coffin was placed beside his father's Edward MacGill who died on the 18<sup>th</sup> ult. at the advanced age of 103." James Magill may have practised locally at some stage but Edward was a surgeon attached to the Dragoon Guards and Light infantry. There is no record of either of them having been community doctors here.

In February 1846, at the time of the Great famine, **Doctor William Moorehead M.D.**, writing from Poyntzpass stated in Parliamentary Papers relating to 'Famine Relief in Ireland' that "Fever and influenza have increased in the proportion of four to one within the last two months". He adds, however that this was, "...not entirely attributable to insufficiency or unsoundness of food." The same document also records that, that in the area around Markethill, "fever, diarrhoea and dyspepsia have increased considerably." This would certainly have had repercussions locally. John J. Sands's, in the article *The Great famine* ('Before I forget ...' Number 1) records that

typhus fever was raging in the area in October 1846, resulting in many deaths and that in the summer of 1847, Fr Bernard Mooney, Curate in Aghaderg Parish, died from typhus fever.

At that time the Doctor in charge of Loughbrickland Dispensary was **Dr Joseph Davidson**. He was succeeded in 1855 by **Dr John McKain**, a graduate of Glasgow University, who was to remain in the post in Loughbrickland for 37 years till his death in 1892, when he was 82 years old.

Following Dr Moorhead as Dispensary Doctor in Poyntzpass was a **Doctor William Saunderson**, a native of Mullahead, Tandragee. He was very highly qualified having obtained several degrees - A.B. (Dublin 1838), M.B. (1840) L.R.C.S.I. (1841). He would have been the dispensary doctor here in the aftermath of the Great Famine and appears to have acquitted himself well.

In 1851 the dispensary districts were re-organised again under the terms of the *Medical Charities Act*. Ireland was divided into over 700 districts with the stipulation that there should be at least one salaried medical practitioner in each district. As a result of this latest re-organisation, and no doubt to save money, Poyntzpass and Donaghmore Dispensary Districts were forced to amalgamate and be served by one doctor. So at this point Dr Saunderson, while continuing to serve as Dispensary Doctor in Poyntzpass, took on the Dispensary District of Donaghmore as well.

At the time of this amalgamation the Poyntzpass representatives on the dispensary committee recorded their appreciation of Dr Saunderson's efforts while in charge of Poyntzpass only: "*It is but justice to Dr Saunderson that they record their sense of the great professional skill and also of the unremitting attention with which he has discharged the duties of medical officer since the period of his appointment to the institution*".

*J. L. Darby Clk Rector of Acton Poyntzpass*"

This union of Poyntzpass and Donaghmore did not please the people of either district but a committee to oversee the running of the joint dispensary had to be appointed. Its first chairman was Isaac Corry. He was followed in the position by Colonel Close of Drumbanagher. Cowan's *History of Donaghmore* records that at the very first meeting of this committee James Harshaw's proposal that, "*the committee should protest against the amalgamation of the two dispensaries*" was passed unanimously.

This sentiment was again very strongly expressed at a General Meeting in Poyntzpass Courthouse on September 6<sup>th</sup> 1854 and as a result of continued protest by the year's end, the Poor Law Guardians had reversed their decision and Donaghmore and Poyntzpass became separate Dispensary Districts again, each with its own

medical officer. However, Dr Saunderson, who had been given a house in Donaghmore in the meantime, decided to remain as Medical Officer for Donaghmore and Poyntzpass was left to find a replacement. Dr Saunderson continued in Donaghmore for many years. Later he lived at Union Lodge, which he rented from the Fivey family, and died there in 1884. He is buried in Tandragee.

Dr Saunderson was succeeded in Donaghmore by Dr Samuel Mills who served as Dispensary Doctor in Donaghmore for 31 years. When Dr Mills retired in 1911 he was briefly followed by Dr John P. McGivern. On the latter's resignation in 1912 Dr Francis P McDermott was appointed Dispensary Doctor for Donaghmore.

**Dr Thomas Edward Shannon** was appointed in Poyntzpass. Not much is known about Dr Shannon other than that he retained the position until 1867. A note in the *Portadown Weekly News* of June 11, 1859 records that *'Thomas E. Shannon M.D. has been appointed Medical Officer to the police force of Poyntzpass'*. In 1864, when the registration of all births, marriages and deaths became compulsory, Dispensary Districts were made *'Registration Districts'* as well, and in the case of Poyntzpass, the Dispensary Doctor supplemented his income by acting as the Registrar for the district.



**Dr. William R. McDermott**

**William Robert McDermott (1839-1918)** became Dispensary Doctor and Registrar for Poyntzpass in 1867. He was to occupy the post for half-a-century. A graduate of Trinity College Dublin, he was a man of great ability and strong opinions, which he was always ready to voice. His career and contribution to local life is fully outlined in Volume One of *'Before I forget...'* Dr MacDermott was always ready to put pen to paper. Letters and articles from him appeared regularly in local and national newspapers and learned journals.

He was the author of two books, *'The Green Republic'*, which dealt with the 'land question', and *'Foughilotra'*, one of the earliest novels to be written in a local dialect. He was renowned for his knowledge on all sorts of subjects and in his later years, having dealt with the health of three generations of local families, it was said that he knew what congenital weaknesses were liable to crop up. However, although he remained very active into his seventies, in his 80<sup>th</sup> year his health began to decline.

In January 1918 he was taken ill and he was no longer able to provide the service to the community. As a temporary measure, the Dispensary Doctor for Donaghmore, Francis Peter McDermott, (a namesake, but no relation), undertook to minister to Poyntzpass District for a fee of two guineas per month *'for the duration of the war'*.

**Dr Francis Peter McDermott** was a native of Belleeks Co Armagh. He had studied at St Patrick's College, Armagh, before going to Dublin to study medicine at the College of Surgeons. In 1911, when he was 26, he was a medical student attached to the Mater Hospital in Dublin, where he would probably have been completing his practical qualifications. Dr W.R. MacDermott's decline and death later in 1918, coincided with the great Spanish flu pandemic which led to so many deaths worldwide and several locally.

Francis P. McDermott of Donaghmore was a young man, not long out of Medical School, and his energy, enthusiasm and skill, in dealing with the epidemic, greatly impressed the locals. While Poyntzpass people were anxious that a permanent replacement doctor be appointed quickly, the authorities were reluctant to appoint a replacement for Poyntzpass, as the district was the smallest in the Newry Union both in area (7,532 acres) and population (1,624 in 1918). So in an echo of a previous arrangement, an amalgamation with Donaghmore was once again proposed. While some resisted amalgamation and wished for Poyntzpass to remain a separate Dispensary District, the majority at a meeting in the Court House Poyntzpass agreed to the union with Donaghmore, on condition that Dr Francis P McDermott undertook to reside in Poyntzpass.

Dr McDermott agreed to do this, and was apparently ready to make the move, but, not surprisingly, the people of Donaghmore were totally opposed to his move to Poyntzpass. As Donaghmore District was twice the size of Poyntzpass both in terms of area and population Dr McDermott was forced to stay in Donaghmore. So the village of Poyntzpass lost its resident Dispensary Doctor, a loss that has never been reversed.

Dr Francis P McDermott remained as Dispensary Doctor for nearly forty years and earned the respect of the local community for his dedication, commitment

and knowledge. He handed over the running of the practice to his son Dr Dermot McDermott around 1955.

Doctors often acted as dentists too, for dental services were in earlier times often non-existent for the ordinary person. A family member or the local blacksmith might be called upon to extract a troublesome tooth. Around the time of the First World War, a dentist named **Rutherford** came to the village on the fair day and set up a surgery in the room of a house in Church Street, where he was kept busy all day pulling teeth. Fillings or local anaesthetics were apparently not part of his service.



**William Rathbone, founder of District Nursing**

## DISTRICT NURSES

In some places, usually through the generosity of benevolent landlords or factory owners, nurses were employed to minister to their poor employees or tenants from the middle of the nineteenth century, but **William Rathbone** a wealthy Liverpool merchant and philanthropist is generally seen as the founding father of district Nursing, having set up a scheme to train nurses in Liverpool in the early 1860's. However it was not until 1887 when Queen Victoria, as part of the celebrations marking her Golden Jubilee, donated £40,000 towards setting up a trust fund for training District Nurses to care for *'the sick poor'*, that the provision of District Nurses began to become general. Nurses who were trained as part of Queen Victoria's initiative were known as *'Queen's Nurses'* and received a good general training which qualified them to treat and advise on many everyday aspects of medical care and hygiene. They had to spend some time working in a hospital and had to be competent midwives.

While dispensary Doctors received a salary out of public funds and while the training of nurses was covered by the Queen's fund, the upkeep of each

District Nurse was the responsibility of the community she served. Local District Nurses' Associations were set up with the responsibility of raising sufficient funds to pay the nurse and to provide her with a comfortable home and a means of transport. Funds were raised both by direct subscriptions and by organising various fund-raising activities. There are many mentions in the local press of fundraising dances, whist drives etc to support the local district nurse during the period up to the 1950's.



***A Queen's Nurse on her rounds!!***

As noted, the Ordnance Survey Memoirs stated that the local dispensary Doctor in the 1830's had 'an assistant'. Who this assistant was and what his or her role was is unclear. The assistant may well have been a nurse of some kind.

The census returns for Poyntzpass in 1901 includes one **Mary Lennon** who gives her occupation as "nurse" but whether she acted as community nurse here I haven't been able to confirm. She may well have provided a nursing service in an informal way but it's more likely that she was simply a children's 'nanny'. In 1911 she was aged 73.

The first confirmed district nurse recorded here was **Dora Albinia Lancaster**. She described herself in the census of 1911 as a *'Queen's Nurse'*. She was 48. Nurse Lancaster was a native of Co Kilkenny and lived in Chapel Street. One of W.J. Napier's postcard views of the village, taken sometime before World War 1, shows her house and is entitled *'The Nurse's Home'*. Nurse Dora Lancaster had worked as District Nurse in Hollywood Co Down, prior to coming to Poyntzpass. In 1906 she was involved in a particularly horrific case there, when a young child in Hollywood, died as a result of neglect and starvation. The parents of the child, William and Ann Cleland, were tried and found guilty of causing the child's death by wilful negligence.

According to an account in *'The British Journal of Nursing'* of June 1906, the child's mother stated in evidence that she had asked Nurse Lancaster for milk for the child but hadn't been given any. When asked by the coroner why she hadn't given the mother milk for

the child, Nurse Lancaster said that it was because the child was illegitimate and that under the regulations of the Queen's Jubilee Nursing Institute she was prevented from giving relief or nourishment. The coroner, while not directly criticising Nurse Lancaster, expressed his dismay that relief for a starving child should be withheld on such grounds.

However, in the same issue of the Journal, a letter from the Secretary of the Queen's Jubilee Institute, A. M. Leake, stated that no such rule regarding illegitimacy existed and that, while it was not Nurse Lancaster's role to provide relief or nourishment, it was her duty to bring the matter to the attention of the proper authority, who would then deal with it. He stressed that the services of the Queen's nurses were based solely on needs of the patient, apart from any other considerations.

Whether Nurse Lancaster's move to Poyntzpass was in some way as a result of her involvement with the Hollywood incident is not clear but interestingly, she had strong allies in this area for she was related to both the Reilly family of Scarva House and the Alexanders of Acton House. In 1901 Nurse Lancaster's sister, Sarah Sophia Lancaster, was living with their elderly uncle, John Temple Reilly at Scarva House. Mrs Gertrude Alexander, the widow of Colonel Alexander of Acton House, was a sister of John Temple Reilly and therefore Nurse Lancaster's aunt. In 1911, by which time there were no longer any members of the Reilly family living at Scarva, Dora Lancaster had become the local District Nurse here and Sarah Sophia had gone to live with her brother James and three other unmarried sisters at Creagh on the Roscommon border, not far from Ballinasloe, Co Galway. That the family were well off is illustrated, not just by their home in Creagh, which was a fine house of 21 rooms, but also that the family gained a living from their farm, from rent and from 'dividends'. As all of the members of the family were in their 40's and 50's and none was married it would appear that this branch of the family name died out, for Nurse Lancaster, like her siblings remained single.

Nurse Lancaster served the local community for around 20 years and she seems to have been a formidable, stern woman, who was not remembered with particular affection but no doubt she helped many during her years of service here. At some point in the 1920's she resigned her post as District Nurse to take on the role of Inspector of Nurses. She died in 1934 aged 71 years.

She was succeeded as District Nurse by **Sarah Best**. Sarah Best was the daughter of John Best, a farmer of Cloghinney, Jerrettspass. In the 1901 census, when she was 21, she was described simply as a "Farmer's daughter" but ten years later her occupation is given as "Hospital nurse". She became the local District Nurse when Nurse

Lancaster resigned to become a Nursing Inspector and was certainly in the role before 1930. She lived in what was formerly Acton Glebe House, in Brannock townland, and served the community for 25 years. Nurse Best was a very different personality from her predecessor and was greatly respected, and her service and dedication to her job earned her the affection of the local community. She continued in the role of district nurse until her retirement in the late 1940's, when she was succeeded by another very dedicated District Nurse, **Betty Black**, who also earned the affection and respect of the local community.



**Nurse Sarah Best**

Today, thanks to the National Health Service, there is a whole network of professional people serving a community's health needs at local level. Poyntzpass village has a purpose built Health Centre and a state-of-the-art pharmacy. There are family Doctors, District Nurses, Dentists, Practice Nurses, Pharmacists, Health visitors, Social workers, School Nurses and so on. That was certainly not the case in years gone by before the coming of the National Health Service.



**The new Pharmacy**