

William Robert Mac Dermott

Dispensary Doctor, Poyntzpass District 1867-1918

By FRANK WATTERS

WILLIAM ROBERT MacDERMOTT was 'dispensary doctor' in Poyntzpass from 1867 till his death in 1918. According to the records of Trinity College, Dublin (*Alumni Dublinensis*), he was born in Dublin in 1839. He came from a very definite medical background, his father Ralph Nash MacDemott being described as "a physician and surgeon" while several members of the family were medical practitioners. Ralph Mac Dermott was clearly a man of means, for he had property at Athboy and Kells in Co. Meath as well as in Dublin.



Dr. W. R. MacDermott 1839—1918

In "*Alumni Dublinensis*", it states that William R. MacDermott entered Trinity on November 2nd, 1859, aged 20. He had not attended school, having been privately educated. He graduated with a B.A. degree in the spring of 1864 and two years later he emerged from the College of Surgeons with a Bachelor of Medicine degree. In September, 1867, he registered as a medical practitioner and in November of that year was appointed Medical Officer for Poyntzpass Dis-

pensary District. That he had spent 5 years studying for his B.A. degree (normally only 3 years study), may be explained by the fact that at some time between 1861-1865, he had been a "surgeon practitioner" during the American Civil War. Nothing more about his American experience is known and U.S. records have not been able to throw any light on this potentially interesting episode in his life.

However, he came to Poyntzpass in November 1867, a young man of 28. Poyntzpass Dispensary district was the smallest in the Newry Union. It consisted of one electoral division—7,532 acres in area (the largest was Rathfriland with an area of 27,855 acres). At the time the dispensary districts were first formed in 1851, the Poor Law Commissioners were opposed to the Poyntzpass electoral division being constituted a dispensary district and suggested that it should be linked with some other divisions in the Co. Armagh portion of the Union but this suggestion was defeated. Until the year 1859, however, Poyntzpass and Donaghmore district (13,520 acres) were served by one doctor, Dr. Wiliam Saunderson. At the time of Dr. MacDermott's death in 1918, the Poyntzpass dispensary district had a population of 1,624 persons, also the smallest of any district in the Newry Union.

Dr. MacDermott soon established himself in the local community and gained a lasting reputation for his medical knowledge, his dedication to the poor of the area and his strong views on the issues of the day. He was not afraid to put his views on paper and was a regular correspondent with the local papers on issues such as the state of the roads, the high level of rates, the inadequacy of the sewers and the "land" question.

That he had become part of the local scene is well illustrated by the late Mr. Gordon Glasgow of Loughgilly who wrote in the "*Portadown Times*" in 1970 about his memories of Poyntzpass

in the last decade of the century and described Dr. MacDermott as "a great Poyntzpass man".

By the 1890's, Dr. MacDermott had become a regular contributor to a publication "The New Ireland Review". His subjects ranged from medical matters—"The Tuberculosis Bill" (1908) "Science and Evolution" (1910), to social concerns—"The Basis for Old Age Pensions" (1899), "Abolition of the Poor Rate" (1898), and political opinions—"The Administrative Unity of Ireland" (1897), "Government Anarchy" (1897).

In 1892, using the pseudonym "A.P.A. O'Gara" he published his first 'novel'. Entitled "The Green Republic" with sub-title "A Visit to South Tyrone", it sets forth MacDermott's views on the "land" question and land ownerships in particular.

The "plot" is as follows: The narrator, a young doctor, newly qualified, goes on a visit to his elderly uncle (also a doctor) in the village of "Jigglostreet", Co. Tyrone. The young doctor accompanies his uncle on his rounds, meets the local personalities and listens to his uncle's views on land ownership, organisation and farming methods.

There is no doubt that "Jigglostreet" is Poyntzpass and that the elderly uncle is W. R. MacDermott. Many of the "personalities" who appear in "Jigglostreet" were apparently recognisable locals at that time, and when published in 1892 the 'novel' caused something of a sensation locally for MacDermott was not a tactful man.

The following is a description of 'Jigglostreet' (Poyntzpass) taken from "The Green Republic" :

'It was getting dark as we entered Jigglostreet after our depressing day's work

.....Passing an ugly barn-like building half-hidden with sombre firs and copper beeches, he spoke again, an unusual bitter note in his voice.

"That is the Presbyterian meeting-house. There are five entrances into the street; this guards one, the Episcopalian Church another, the Roman Catholic Chapel number three, the Methodist place number four while the Baptists and Plyms make doubly sure of the last with two spiritual fortresses facing each other. Well, that for 600 persons, but somehow Satan gets

past them all,"'

'We passed a metal pump, glaring in a coat of red-lead paint in the middle of crossing streets, with a single tree beside it, the state of which may be guessed from the fact that it was stripped of its bark for between four and five feet from the ground, the work, of course, of the village urchins'

.....'An amusing idea brought the smile back to my uncle's face.

"Yes" he said, "we have got a new pump, but it is under suspicion and no wonder. For a long time the water had a peculiar flavour. It got so decided, that at last we sent a bottle of it up to Dublin to be analysed. Report satisfactory — a fairly wholesome, potable water. But our old pump came to a standstill, and would yield none of the duly certified element. Had to be opened up when there was found in it a dead rat, the skeleton of a rodent of the same species nicely macerated, small bones not identifiable, box of Holloway's ointment, ounce bottle of castor oil (empty), two pewter spoons, a pen knife, a match-box, two keys and other sundries, all alleged to have been stuffed down the spout by certain juveniles in spite of strongly-worded testimonies from their parents. We shall very likely put the playful little dears under surveillance when the bubonic plague breaks out" '.....

.....Ninety per cent. of the inhabitants use the street pump and in spite of the rats it's the safest. I wrote to the Board of Guardians that one pump was insufficient many times. Letters marked "Read" and thrown into the waste-paper basket."

There is no mistaking that Poyntzpass village is being described and apart from the fact that the village pump in 'The Square' was removed some years ago, the geography of the village remains unaltered.

Dr. MacDermott was constantly corresponding with the County Council, the Board of Guardians, and writing to the press in an attempt to have improvements made, not just as far as the village pump was concerned, but also the drains and sewers.

In "The Green Republic" we find the following description:

".....As Mc Coy walked the horse up the street I observed a street grating in front of a shop window covered with a sack, and several more carefully closed over with lids of tea-chests."

It is interesting to compare this with the following extract from an article "The Irish Village Under It's New Masters" by W. R. Mac Dermott which appeared in "The New Ireland Review" in November, 1905.

"I am writing from personal experience, an experience I find it difficult to express without bitterness. I have lived for years in an Irish village with which I am connected only as the Medical Officer. In the village in question, the street is made up of less than half-a-mile of two intersecting main roads The half-mile of main roads serves for traffic to and fro from distant points; motor cars, traction engines, carts and so on pass over it. It is used again for the general purposes of a large monthly cattle fair, serving farmers and dealers over a large area. Half-a-mile of road does not cost much to keep up, but the cost, whatever it is, should not be entirely charged against the village. There are, however, a pump, — a single pump, and sewers which may be charged against it. These sewers, however, with one exception, were made from 60 to 100 years ago, no one knows by whom, but everybody knows how, since many of the inhabitants have the gratings at their doors covered with boards or sacking to obviate the stench from them"

Poyntzpass was obviously not the sweetest-smelling of villages, nor indeed was it the healthiest, for despite W. R. Mac Dermott's efforts, the death-rate at the turn of the century was remarkably high. At a public meeting held in The Courthouse in October 1910, Dr. Mac Dermott told the packed audience that he "need not tell them about the sanitary condition of Poyntzpass. It was from the time he came to it, abominably bad. The death rate was from 30 to 40 per thousand of the population, while the present death rate in London was not more than 15, and the death-rate in Belfast was

far under London. It would be quite wrong to say that Poyntzpass was a healthy village'. The village's inadequate sewers were regarded as the prime reason for the high death rate.

One of several breaks in the sewers of long standing, was in Railway Street, adjacent to Poyntzpass No. 2 National School. A "cesspool" had formed "for the young people to breathe in the fumes while they were at school" according to another speaker at the meeting.

In 1899 and again in 1904, plans for a new sewerage scheme had been drawn up but then abandoned. In 1908 an inquiry was held to investigate complaints by residents and as a result the Council was ordered to carry out improvements. However, when it was realised that the carrying out of this new sewerage scheme would cost from £2,000 to £3,000 which would have to be borne by the local ratepayers there was an outcry from those ratepayers living in the country areas around the village.

Surprisingly, Dr. Mac Dermott sided with the objectors, basing his stance on the conviction that the scheme as planned would not solve the problem. Householders would not be compelled to connect into the new sewers and many would continue to use the road drains as sewers. He blamed the County Council for years of neglect and neglect of road drainage for much of the problem but his stance infuriated some in the audience and there were 'boos' and cries of 'Judas!' However many agreed with his argument that the ratepayers had for years been paying, and receiving no service whatsoever and that the cost of the proposed scheme should not have to be borne by the local community alone.

In a chapter in "The Green Republic" entitled "Tyrkane Fort", Mac Dermott sets forth his views on some aspects of the 'land' question which was of course very much an issue at the time. Taking the young visitor to a vantage point, "Tyrkane Fort", from which a wide area of land can be viewed, he identifies and comments upon individual farms and landowners. His argument could be summarised as follows: Agriculture, the production of food, is the basis of everything. It is crucial to the well-being of all. However, the

land and it's cultivation are entrusted in many instances to people incapable of making the best use of this vital resource. Land is handed on from one generation to the next without any thought as to whether those inheriting are interested in, or competent or capable of managing it.

In the area he surveys, the old doctor points out the neglected farms overgrown with whins, or rushes. There are farms in the possession of the old,—he claimed that 60% of landowners were more than 60 years of age — the very young, widows, absentees, those too poor to stock the land and those mentally incapable of managing anything. He felt that the most vital of all our resources was being handled in such a haphazard way and advocated some form of 'nationalisation' as the answer.

Today "The Green Republic" apart from the incidental information it gives about life in this area it has lost a lot of it's relevance. Today there is no means of recognising the 'personalities' who may have felt they were being depicted at the time and only the local townland names and place names are identifiable. e.g. "Arranhantarrahan Old Road", "Shaneglish", "Twelve Lane Ends", "The Fourteen Towns" and "Megillo's Corner". The name "Jigglestreet" is also the name of a road in the Ballyargan area, between Poyntzpass and Tandragee.

His second book could hardly have been more different. Entitled "Foughilotra: A Forbye Story" it is a humorous novel, supposedly written in the dialect of the Montaighs area of North Armagh on the shores of Lough Neagh. However, there is no evidence of Dr. Mac Dermott spending any time in the Montaighs district, the oldest residents of neither Poyntzpass nor the Montaighs having any recollection of him studying the Montaighs dialect. It seems likely that just as "The Green Republic" was not set in Co. Tyrone, but in the Poyntzpass area, so the dialect used in "Foughilotra" may well be the language commonly spoken round Poyntzpass at the turn of the century. As such it would have considerable value to anyone making a study of the local dialect, but as a 'read', it is heavy going. The following is the opening of the novel:

Chapter 1:

WEE MON OINS' JINNYANN IN COURT

"Puttin' a wee book in me han', jes' as if they were sayin' their prayers, they ses to me to tell the truth, the whole truth, an' nothin' barrin' the truth, so help me, God, an', wi' that I be to kiss the wee book for them.

Before ever they giv' me the wee book the mon in anover them, sittin' he was wi' two more up be hisself, ses to another man in anunder they called the clerk, did the girl, meanin' me, know the natur' of an oath, an' he makes answer more nor over I heerd me day, of Foughilotra an, the whole of us. If I hadn't heerd the mon meself I couldn't have bleeved the half he up an' tole agen' us. Haythens was the name he set on us.

Then the mon in anover them looks, thinkin' like, a brave spell at me, an' ses:

"Me girl, tell me, did ye ever tell a lie yer day?"

"A many a one," I ses.

Wi' that he laughs, an ses to the mon anunder:

"Ye may swear her, Kelly. It's clear she can tell the truth."

Then the mon giv' me the wee book, as I tole ye, an' made me say after him, an then kiss the wee book. Then, suddent like, up jumps a big mon that was sittin' one side of me, an ses to me:

"Me girl, don't ye be afeerd, if ye answer what's put to ye right."

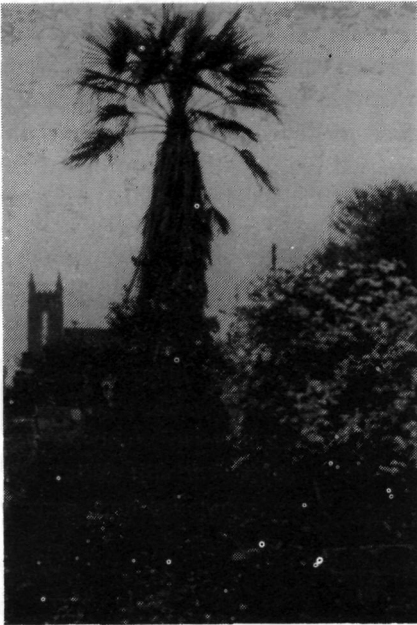
"I'm afeerd of none of ye", I ses to him. "An' as to answerin' right, that's accordin' to what's put to me."

This started them a-laughin', as if I stud on me head for them. But the big mon ses, angry like, as if the laughin, was at him:

"Yer a brave girl, Jinnyann; ye wouldn't be afeerd of the devil hisself if ye met him, an' ye out a-walkin'."

"If I met the same out a-walkin', I ses to him, "he'd tell me not to be afeerd of him, jes' as ye des. Be all accoun's he's civil and smooth to ye, layin' hisself out to catch ye in the en'"

That MacDermott had plenty of opportunity to study the local dialect is undisputable for his duties of course brought him into daily contact with a cross section of the local population and as far as their characteristics when giving evidence was concerned, he was equally well placed, serving as a magistrate for many years at the Local Petty Sessions, "Foughilotra", more than 330 pages in length, displays his sense of humour, but also his "eccentricities" and it is hard to imagine that the book was ever a commercial success.



Relics of Dr. MacDermott's beautiful garden — a flowering magnolia and an ancient palm tree

That W. R. Mac Dermott was an eccentric there is no doubt. He lived adjacent to the dispensary in Church Street, never married and so by the turn of the century was "well set in his ways." Stories abound of his odd ways.

Dr. Mac Dermott had a bicycle, and although he never learned to cycle well enough to venture onto the roads, practised regularly up and down the long hallway which runs from the front to the back of the dispensary, using the stairs and walls for support with Eliza Fleming, his long time housekeeper strategically placed in case he should fall. He wore a red 'fez' with a tassel and a visit to him as a patient could have something of an ordeal as his bedside manner left something to

be desired. On one occasion, he shouted across the busy village street to a genteel lady—a Miss Alexander—who apparently had a constipation problem) "Did your bowels move today?" Her reply is not recorded. When examining a patient he invariably declared, "You are going to die", which prognosis, while accurate no doubt in the long term, did little to calm those anxious about their more immediate prospects.

Another tale of his gruffness concerned a lady who had an "itch in the blood". This hypocondriac had defeated all his best efforts to the point of exasperation. In his old age he had become adept at retrieving bottles, etc., from high shelves with the handle of his walking stick and on this occasion, when the lady returned complaining yet again, without rising from his chair he turned to a shelf of bottles. Pointing to each bottle in turn with his stick, he went along the shelf. "Poison, that's no good, I've tried that." "Poison, I've tried that", "Poison, I've tried that", "Deadly poison, ah that's the one." He deftly hooked the bottle from the shelf, and catching it, filled a smaller bottle from it. He gave the latter to the lady who left and according to tradition, didn't return. A case of "killing or curing!"

However, despite this apparent gruffness, his dedication to the poor is undoubted. On the occasion of his celebrating 50 years as dispensary doctor in 1917 the following tribute was paid to him in a letter to the Board of Guardians:

"During the past half-century, Dr. Mac Dermott has discharged the duties of his office in the most exemplary manner and as a consequence he stands high in the estimation of all who have had the pleasure of his acquaintance. A gentleman of kindly, courteous and considerate disposition, he has proved not only a good physician but a true friend. Indeed it can be truly said he bore without abuse the grand old name of gentleman. To the sick poor of the district he was particularly attentive, for he ever had "a tear for pity and a hand open as day for melting charity." He possessed in a noteworthy degree the luxury of doing good and few there are who cannot recall "acts of kindness and love" on his part. In truth his life has been "gentle, and the elements so

mixed up in him that nature could stand up and say to all the world "This was a man"

At the time of his appointment in 1867 Dr. Mac Dermott received an annual salary of £80. In 1871 the salary of each dispensary doctor in the Newry Union was raised to £120 per annum and at that figure it remained until 1917. On the occasion of his Golden Jubilee in the post, the Newry Board of Guardians unanimously granted him an increase of £30 per year as a gesture of their appreciation. During the course of his 50 years service, Dr. Mac Dermott never took a holiday and obviously enjoyed excellent health, despite the unhealthy environment in which he lived as at no stage between 1867 and 1917 had the Board of Guardians to appoint a locum tenens for him.

The comparative value of a salary of £120 which seems pathetically small today, is put in some perspective by the cost of other commodities at the time. At the meeting of the Board of Guardians, which voted Dr. Mac Dermott an increase, other matters discussed included the cost of coal used in Newry Workhouse. Figures disclosed that in 1912 a ton of coal cost 16/6 (82p). This had risen dramatically to 19/1½ (96p) in 1914 while Fosters of Newry advertised top quality Irish Tweed Suits for 55/- (£2.75) and Overcoats for 50/- (£2.50). So no doubt as a bachelor, W. R. Mac Dermott was able to live comfortably enough. At the Board of Guardians meeting referred to, according to the "Newry Reporter" one of the members, Mr. R. W. Henry told the meeting that the doctor who had been made aware of moves to grant him an increase, had come "into Newry at the beginning of the week to order a new suit of clothes on the strength of getting a rise. (Laughter)".

Another member, Mr. M. Hourican very ungraciously opposed the proposal at first and asked what guarantee had the Board that Dr. Mac Dermott would remain in the service if he got an increase. He need hardly have worried because in January, 1918, the old man fell ill and his duties had to be taken over by the doctor serving Donaghmore district — by an odd coincidence another Dr. 'Mc' Dermott. Francis P. Mc Dermott was no relation.

He was never to be well enough to resume his duties and on Friday, August 9th, 1918, he died peacefully at his Church Street home. His death evoked widespread regret in the district he had served so long and the feeling of the community was well summed up by Rev. W. F. Johnston who conducted the funeral service at Acton Parish Church:

"..... We have lost one who for the past half-century cared for the bodies of the residents in this district. He during that period discharged faithfully and well all the duties of Medical Officer of Poyntzpass district. His skill and knowledge as a physican, which were very great, were always at the disposal of the sick whether poor or rich. His powers of mind which were remarkable, were ever exercised for the alleviation of suffering. The many acts of kindness which he did, cannot be recounted but will live in the memory of those whom he benefitted. He was a member of the Church of Ireland and took an active share in the affairs of the Parish to the funds of which he was a generous contributor, and in which he held various offices, being a nominator at his death. He is now at rest, and although we know that it is well with him, we yet cannot but mourn his loss, for it leaves a gap which will not easily be filled."

In one sense the gap was never really filled, for with the death of Mac Dermott, the village lost much more than the clever dispensary doctor.



Dr. MacDermott's house and the "dispensary"
Church Street

Throughout his career he was a committed champion of local causes and the self-confidence with which he tackled problems inspired others around him and by the time of his death there were in the area a number of able and public-spirited citizens serving on Councils and Boards of Guardians, etc., and staunchly representing the interests of the local community. With his passing the hub of community seemed to depart and in a short number of years as each member of this group departed there was no-one to fill the vacancy and the interests of the village became neglected and often went by default.

Dr. Mac Dermott's illness and death coincided with the first great influenza epidemic in 1918 and gave the local residents a good opportunity to judge the worth of F. P. McDermott of Donaghmore who was temporarily in charge of Poyntzpass Dispensary. A young man, his boundless energy and skill made a lasting impact and although there were a number of deaths in the area, there were many who owed their recovery to his total dedication.

Poyntzpass Dispensary district, being so small, it had been widely assumed that when W. R. Mac Dermott retired or passed on, he would not be replaced, and that amalgamation with some other district would be inevitable. Donaghmore seemed the most likely partner for Poyntzpass, as the two districts had shared a doctor prior to Mac Dermott's time and the other districts bordering Poyntzpass were already very large. Dr. F. P. McDermott expressed himself willing to continue "for the duration of the war" to undertake the duties of dispensary doctor for Poyntzpass for an extra payment of 2 guineas a week. A board of Guardians meeting in August 27th agreed to this.

A meeting was held in the local courthouse at the beginning of September to gauge public opinion on the matter and following a lively debate it was generally agreed that provided Dr. F. P. McDermott was willing to reside in the village, he would be acceptable. However a considerable number stuck out for a doctor for Poyntzpass district alone as the new district would stretch from "near Rathfriland to the Eleven Lane Ends".

While Dr. F. P. McDermott had expressed himself willing to move to Poyntzpass to reside and was accepted on condition that he came to live here, he never made the move, continuing to reside at Donaghmore. The reason for this was that the people of the Donaghmore District, not surprisingly, viewed his proposed move to Poyntzpass with less than enthusiasm and Donaghmore being almost twice the size of the Poyntzpass district, both in area and population, vetoed any such plans. After the war the union between Poyntzpass and Donaghmore districts became permanent and so with the death of W. R. MacDermott in 1918, Poyntzpass village lost its last resident doctor.

Tales of Dr. MacDermott still abound. He was a keen gardener—an ancient palm and beautiful flowering magnolia still remain in what was once his garden, and he had an expert's eye for the unusual and the antique. While he never accepted money as payment locally, he was often given presents of pictures, furniture, or china that he admired and when he died, his house had become a veritable "Aladdin's Cave", crammed with valuable antiques. Dealers from as far afield as Belfast and Dublin arrived in Poyntzpass the day before the auction to dispose of his effects, which was the largest of its kind ever seen in the village.

Among his other idiosyncrasies he was given to prophesying. He maintained that the Devil was in Poyntzpass and couldn't get out because of the strategic siting of the village's churches. One of his prophecies was that after his death, he would return to haunt Poyntzpass in the form of a black cat. According to 'legend' a short time after his death a black cat duly appeared in 'The Back Loanin' and over a period of time killed several chickens, the property of Mrs. Margaret Carson. Eventually exasperated by the cat's behaviour, her son James took the shotgun one day and waiting his opportunity, put an end to the cat's reign. Hearing the shot Margaret ran out exclaiming "Oh My God, James has shot the doctor!"

Another of Dr. Mac Dermott's prophecies was that "McCourt's Lough would overflow and drown all in the 'Pass!" Thankfully this is (as yet) unfulfilled.

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At the 11th Locks on the Newry Canal (1940's)