

A study of Tuberculosis in Thomondgate in the early twentieth century

by Clem Cusack

In his poem 'Drunken Thady', Michael Hogan, the Bard of Thomond, gives a vivid description of the area of Limerick city known as Thomondgate.¹ Hogan was born in New Road, Thomondgate in 1826. His father Arthur was a gifted carpenter and made fine musical instruments for which he was justifiably famous. Michael, by his own admission, did not spend much time at school and his life was difficult, with blindness setting in at a relatively early age. In 1899 Michael Hogan died in Rutland Street, Limerick next door to the old Town Hall, in poor circumstances. In the poem 'Drunken Thady' Thady describes how, following a night of drunken debauchery on Christmas Eve, he is making his way across Thomond Bridge at the witching hour when he is confronted by the ghost of the bishop's lady who hurls him over the battlement into the torrent and the poem continues; 'Yet, no- against the river's might he made a long and gallant fight; that stream in which he learned to swim, shall be no watery grave for him'. Happily the story ends with Thady, having survived his ordeal, takes the pledge and becomes a model citizen; 'mid gazing crowds, he left the shore well sober'd and got drunk no more! And in the whole wide parish round, a better Christian was not found'. Thomondgate was famous for its whiskey distilling in an area that is still known as the distillery and it did not escape the poet's attention, 'If Satan stood with his artillery, full at the gate of Stein's distillery; with Satan's self you'd stand a tussle to enter there and wet your whistle.'²

Thomondgate was a relatively compact area and was the main route for travellers into the city from County Clare crossing the Shannon River at Thomond Bridge. St. Munchin's Roman Catholic church, a well known city landmark, stands on the Clare side of the river.³ The Catholic parish is known as St. Munchin's, but in

Children in Thomondgate enjoying winter. (Courtesy of the Ludlow family).



the 1901 and 1911 census it is referred to as the Parish of St. Nicholas, which is the name of the civil parish. The Catholic parish records date back to 1770 and the wonderful old notebooks, in beautiful copper plate handwriting, are still available for inspection in the church.⁴ Thomond Bridge, linking the city to the countryside and providing a gateway to County Clare, was completed in 1840 replacing the original bridge which had stood for hundreds of years and witnessed much fateful history of the ancient city. It was designed by the architect James Pain who utilised the old foundations but doubled the span using fewer but flatter arches. Constructed of rough hewn limestone on the projecting face it gives the feeling of permanency and at one with its medieval past.⁵ Residents were initially called 'Munchins' but in the middle of the last century they were more popularly called 'soda-cakes'. Some say the origin of this name is from the practise of the housewives displaying their bread baking prowess in the windows of their houses. Midway into the twentieth century the Clune's Lane fishermen dried their salmon nets on the strand wall with their up-turned gandaloe's resting on stands during the off season. Alas, this no longer

happens, as the salmon have been fished to near extinction.

The area of Thomondgate chosen for this study is known as the High Road Castle Ward in the Parish of St. Nicholas and consists of 144 households of which one in three were sampled from the 1901 and 1911 census returns, revealing a bustling community of 577 people in 1901 which had grown to 647 by 1911 with a very wide degree of skills and occupations, literate and predominantly Roman Catholic. The largest protestant church representation was Church of Ireland with eight percent of the population and very small numbers of Presbyterians, Methodists and Baptists.⁶ Housing was built of stone with roofs of slate, corrugated iron or tiles with on average three to five rooms per family and graded as second class in accordance with the census regulations. At the turn of the twentieth century the housing would have been regarded as good quality terraced artisan dwelling with long back gardens generally cultivated but not always. Whilst a very small number were thatched dwellings in the 1901 census they had further reduced in the 1911 census and records indicate that new houses were being built in the area.⁷ Some examples



Houses on Quarry Road, Thomondgate taken in 1932. (Courtesy of Sharon Slater)

of the terraces exist to this day, but much of the old housing has been replaced by new local authority and private dwellings. At this time Thomondgate was regarded as a suburb of Limerick city surrounded by farming lands and a healthy place to live. Both census returns indicate that very few were sick on census night 1901 and 1911. In fact only one person was recorded as sick in the census on 31 March 1901.⁸ However, the census may not reflect the full story, particularly in regard to tuberculosis which was the most serious health issue in Ireland at that time. Tuberculosis carried a social stigma because of its highly contagious nature and while tuberculosis was a far more serious disease in the crowded tenements of Francis Street and Arthur's Quay, it may not have had the same impact on the Thomondgate community. A German

traveller to Limerick in the 1850's, Julius Rodenburg, observed that the houses in the Irish Town close to the Bishop's cathedral were filthy dens and emitted the most appalling stench. In 1909 Thomas Johnson, future leader of the Irish Labour Parliamentary Party made similar comments in which he referred to the houses as 'kennels'.⁹

In her opening address, at the Tuberculosis Exhibition held in Dublin on the 12 October, 1907, the Countess of Aberdeen said that of the 74,000 recorded deaths in Ireland in the previous year some 12,000 were from tuberculosis. Death figures from this disease were higher than from old age or heart disease. Tuberculosis struck down the flower of the population young men and young women when they should have been at the most productive

period of their lives. Tuberculosis records, showing the death rate in Ireland between the years 1864 and 1906, compared with England and Scotland, show that at the end of that period England and Scotland's death rate was declining and at the same time increasing in Ireland.¹⁰ The death rate from Tuberculosis in Ireland was at 4.5 people per 1,000 of population compared to 3.2 in England. Reasons advanced were numerous, Professor William Osler of Oxford University suggested that there are three 'bads' – bad food leading to ill nutrition, bad air in wretched cabins aiding the spread of the disease and bad drink, alcohol, in the context of depriving the family of the necessities of life.¹¹ It is of interest to compare how these factors relate to a tiny community like High Road, Thomondgate. The death certificate of a twelve year-old gives some insight into this world of the early twentieth century with the illness being certified as probably tuberculosis, no medical attendant present and nursed by her mother, at their residence in Thomondgate.¹² Infant mortality was closely related to tubercular deaths. Additional questions were included in the 1911 census requesting information on the number of children born alive and the number still living. In one case fourteen children were born alive with only seven surviving to adulthood of which one was subsequently killed in the First World War. An examination of the census does not appear to answer this question fully as in another case the answer is given as four and four, but parish records reveal other children born under that marriage.¹³ It is interesting to compare infant mortality in Thomondgate to the rest of Limerick city and the country as a whole.

As one would expect the vast majority of the people enumerated were local or from neighbouring counties in Ireland. A small number were born in Scotland or England or had returned from America and one person lists Corfu in Greece as the place of birth. It is very possible that these people were associated with the Crown Forces or were part of the British administration. A number of residents are listed as members of the Royal Irish Constabulary or retired members of that force. Census enumerators were also members of the RIC, which gave them a better knowledge of the people and their activities. This was a powerful tool in the hands of the British



Thomas Johnson



Lady Aberdeen; the wife of Ireland's longest-serving Lord Lieutenant

administration for the policing and control of the population. Whilst the turn of the twentieth century saw a growth in Gaelicisation only one census form in the 1911 census was completed in Gaelic. It was in beautiful copperplate handwriting, probably by a younger member of the family, but signed in English by the head of the household, Julia McNamara.¹⁴ Houses were lit by either candles or oil lamps and the city had a number of direct current electricity generators, which were used mainly for street lighting or in the houses of the favoured few. The range of trades and occupations of the residents of High Road, Thomondgate shown in both the 1901 and 1911 census is impressive. Every industrial activity in Limerick city is represented, from millers, cattle and pig buyers, RIC members, telegraphists, distillery workers, journalists, printers, compositors, shopkeepers, shop assistants, servants, laundresses, lace makers, carpenter, brick layers and quite a few general labourers. What may help to distinguish Thomondgate as a working class area is the absence of family servants. Domestic servants were very apparent in the census returns of the more prosperous areas of the city. Certainly they worked long hours with little safety nets in the event of falling ill, as one apprentice printer said it was "more akin to slavery than work".¹⁵ The introduction of the old age pension was described as "the greatest blessing of all". Old age was defined as seventy years of age and the pension at five shillings a week was a considerable sum at that time. Pension payments began on 1 January 1909 and it was an occasion for much rejoicing as reported in local and national newspapers.¹⁶ Controversy arose regarding the very high number of old age applicants from Ireland and questions were raised in the British Parliament. A comparison of the ages of adults in Thomondgate between the 1901 and 1911 census clearly shows increases in age, in the ten years between censuses. The returns appear to have been altered, with early qualification for the old age pension in mind.

Tuberculosis and infant mortality

In 1906, death from tuberculosis in Ireland was recorded at 12,000, the highest of all infectious diseases out of a total of 72,000 deaths. There was a tacit acceptance by the people of the very

high death rate from the disease despite considerable advances in its treatment since the discovery by Professor Koch of the tubercle bacillus in 1882.¹⁷ It was further estimated that as many 120,000 people suffered in varying degrees from the disease in Ireland. Development of an effective drug treatment was to take a further forty years, with the discovery of the antibiotic streptomycin by a soil microbiologist, Selman Waksman, at Rutgers University in the United States. Further discoveries of PAS by Jorgen Lehman of Gothenburg University in Sweden; and in 1952 the discovery of isoniazid by Bayer Laboratories, Germany was to signal the virtual end of this dreaded disease.¹⁸ However, sanatoria for the specialised treatment of tuberculosis and presence of the mobile mass radiography on city streets were a common feature of life in Ireland well into the 1960s.

From the commencement of civil records in 1864 death from tuberculosis in Ireland started from a low level 2.4 per 1,000 of population compared to Scotland at 3.6 and England at 3.3. However, whilst England and Scotland began a gradual decline up to 1906, Ireland's death rate showed a gradual increase over the same period.

An examination of the Limerick County Borough No.2 District deaths register for the period October 1899 to July 1902, which includes the High Road, Thomondgate area, revealed a high incident of phthisis in the age range 10 to 40 years in both the male and female population. A total of 52 people are recorded as having died from phthisis or related tubercular disease giving an annual percentage of 7.8 per cent of deaths for the period.¹⁹ Transposing this figure to a national figure using the population for Limerick No.2 District 1901 census at 5,430 people returns a death rate of 0.72 deaths per 1,000 of the living population, considerably lower than the national figure of 2.7 deaths; nonetheless it is a significant rate for people in the prime of life.²⁰ Over half the deaths in the register

are thirteen adults explained by ailments of old age such as heart disease, apoplexy, bronchitis and general infirmity. The vast majority of these deaths took place at home with limited attendance by a doctor or a member of the nursing profession. Most were attended by members of the family with the deaths being reported to the Registrar by the householder.

A number of deaths occurred in the two city hospitals St. John's and Barrington's which were attended by residents of this area, because of proximity and tradition. Some of the entries in the death register make interesting reading such as;

- Female, 48 years, Ovarian Tumour, St., Johns, private means,
- Male, Farmer, 65 years, Fracture of the Spine, Barrington's Hospital,
- Male, 32, Alcoholism certified, car owner.

It would be normal to expect that the deaths recorded as old age would constitute the highest number of deaths due to natural causes but this figure only stands at 53 per cent. What is alarming is that infant and child mortality including phthisis represents some 41 percent of all deaths. British medical journals of the period report that the presence of Irish women in major cities such as Liverpool helped to reduce the level of child mortality there because of their practise of breastfeeding an infant up to two years of age. Thereafter the child had to rely on milk the quality of which was uncertain due to the prevalence of brucellosis in cattle, poor hygiene in dairies and lack of refrigeration.²¹

Table 1 shows the comparative death rate between males and females of the population over various age groups for Limerick Number Two District for the period 29 March 1900 to 31 July 1902 and the numbers that died of tuberculosis in brackets.²²

The key to the treatment of tuberculosis at the turn of the twentieth century was

Table 1

Infants 0-2 years		Child 2-15 years		Adult 16-35 years		Adult over 35		TB all ages	
Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
67	55	42	46	44	38	108	100		
(1)	0	(6)	(3)	(15)	(14)	(7)	(6)	(28)	(24)



Professor Robert Koch

early intervention and the application of a strict regime of treatment devised by the medical authorities for the home treatment of tubercular patients. Typhus and cholera had been largely eliminated in Ireland and as Oliver Wendell Homes put it, one great scourge remained- 'the white plague'.²³ A considerable knowledge of tuberculosis and its treatment had been accumulated by the doctors in England and throughout Europe and the specialised treatments required to cure it or at least slow its progress. In an effort to find the cause of the increase in the prevalence of the disease the Women's National Health Association of Ireland under the Presidency of Ishbel Aberdeen, wife of the Lord Lieutenant, launched an 'Exhibition against Tuberculosis' in the Home Industries Section of the International Exhibition on 12 October, 1907.²⁴ The exhibition was opened by her husband and remained open until the close of the International Exhibition on 7 November 1907. An important part

of the crusade against tuberculosis was a series of lectures delivered by the most eminent physicians and nursing staff of their day. Many of the major figures of the period were present including John Redmond leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, Augustine Birell Chief Secretary, representatives of all churches and the Gaelic League. Special mention was made of Gaelic League efforts in the west of Ireland through Dr Seamus O Beirne in lecturing in Irish to the Gaelic speakers. Support for the fight against this dreaded disease was widespread across the entire population. The exhibition was fortunate in having William Osler Regis, Professor of Medicine at Oxford who gave the opening address and an overview of the progress of tuberculosis and the very effective advances in its treatment. Two main sources of infection were mentioned, sputum of infected people and milk from cows infected with tuberculosis, this latter reason was also a major contributory factor in infant mortality. Other factors in the spread of the disease were poor housing and diet and the lack of proper sanitation and basic hygiene. Tuberculosis was easily recognized and diagnosed by the medical profession and if caught early could be successfully treated.²⁵

In the ten years to 1911 the population for Limerick No.2 Borough had decreased from 5,340 to 5,179 persons (2,485 males and 2,694 females). During the same period the population of Limerick city had marginally increased from 38,151 to 38,518.²⁶ High Road, Thomondgate had an increase in the same period from 577 to 647 persons. The percentage rise was almost twelve per cent, quite remarkable for a period of overall decline.²⁷ The total number of deaths recorded from tuberculosis was 44 out of a total of 454

over a period of 31 months representing an annual rate of 17 people or 3.74 per cent. Using the 1911 population figures of 5,179 persons for Limerick No. 2 Borough represents 0.32 deaths for 1,000 living people. This figure of 0.32 deaths was well below the national average of 2.7 per 1,000 living people.²⁸

Table 2 shows the comparative death rate between males and females over various age groups from January 1910 to September 1912 with tubercular deaths shown in brackets.

Table 3. Comparison of deaths in Limerick Borough No. 2 using registers for 1900 and 1910 under various age groups.

The incidence of tubercular deaths continued to decline in the years 1919 to 1922. Some fourteen people died annually representing a national figure of 0.27 deaths per 1,000 living people.²⁹

However, infant mortality figures remained high at 118. The declining rates of tubercular deaths indicate that the strict medical advice was being adhered to and patients treated in the recommended manner.

The reduction and even elimination of deadly disease in the very young is easily achievable in a modern society with good housing, nutritious food, good hygiene practises, pasteurized milk and strong healthy parents. Medical support and drug treatments can eliminate infections in children before it takes hold. For example, in a Dublin Corporation Health Report for 1903 it lists a painter who earned 30 shillings a week, with a family of six, paying a rent of 3 shillings and sixpence per week. Dinner included meat and vegetables. However, at the extreme end of the social spectrum it lists a labourer who earned 15 shillings, with a family of ten and paying two shillings and three pence a week, for probably a one roomed tenement, with breakfast consisting of tea, bread and occasionally butter. Dinner was bread only, and supper, tea, bread and sometimes bacon. Wretched housing, grinding poverty, and malnutrition were the lot of the lower classes. Low pay and unemployment were the final links in the chain.³⁰ Many of these factors were missing from Thomondgate in 1901, where housing was good, outdoor water

Infants 0-2 years	Child 2-15 years	Adult 16-35 years	Adult over 35	TB all ages
Male-Female	Male- Female	Male-Female	Male-Female	Male-Female
65 51	32 30	39 16	85 126	
(0) 0	(4) (4)	(10) (14)	(4) (8)	(18) (26)

Table 2

Infants 0-2 years	122	24.4	116	26.14
Children 2-15yrs	88	17.6	62	13.96
Adults 16-35yrs	82	16.4	55	12.38
Adults over 35yrs	208	41.6	211	47.52
Total	500	100	444	100
Tuberculosis	(52)	(10.4)	(44)	(9.68)

Table 3



Thomondgate with chimneys of the distillery in the background. (Courtesy of the Ludlow family)

closets provided and gardens used to grow nutritious vegetables. The area was on the edge of the city surrounded by farms and with plenty of fresh air. Medical support was available to the people of Thomondgate in the nearby dispensaries and hospitals. Yet, with the advantages enjoyed by the residents of Thomondgate infant and child mortality statistics remained high.

A sample of one in every three of forty four returns from the 1911 census, of High Road Thomondgate, give an indication of the numbers of children born alive and the numbers still living. Ten households had elderly couples with no family or a single a person living alone and one household of brother and sister. The total number of children born alive was 142 of which 112 were still alive on census night.³¹ Some 30 children had not survived to adulthood representing a death rate of 21 percent. Figures from Table 1 (1901) and Table 2 (1911) indicate the numbers of infant and child deaths for the area were 210 and 178 respectively. The population figure for Limerick Borough No.2 in 1901 was 5,340 and in 1911, 5,179 which gives child and infant mortality of 3.9 and 3.4 respectively per 1,000 living people. The total population of the 44 houses in the sample was 200 people and with a child death rate of 30 gives a return of 15 per 1,000 people which is completely at variance with that of the borough. The only other death rate that can be used for comparison purposes is a figure of 6.18 per 1,000 living for Dublin in 1900, which reduced to 4.87 by 1920 and these are broadly in line with Limerick.³²

A considerable amount of infant and child deaths occurred at home with only the

opinion of the carer, usually the female members of the family, as to the actual cause of death. For example; Female, aged three and a half years, probably convulsions died at home or female, aged one year and a half, probably bronchitis, home death.³³

Diseases such as gastro enteritis, measles, diphtheria, scarlet fever/scarlatina or bronchitis took their toll of infants and young children each year. Social class was no barrier against these dreaded diseases but breast fed babies, even in the tenements, had a better chance of survival. The most dangerous time for infants was when they changed over to cow's milk using glass bottles and rubber teats which were very difficult to keep clean. The need to obtain fresh milk daily was paramount in keeping a baby healthy and free of infection. There were three milk dealers recorded in the 1901 census for Thomondgate, as householders, but none recorded in 1911. It is not unreasonable to expect that fresh milk of good quality was available daily to the population because of the proximity of local dairy farmers who sold door to door. Conditions in dairies, in terms of hygiene and handling of milk, was an ongoing problem, not fully resolved until the 1950's when all milk was pasteurised.

Endnotes

1. Michael Hogan, *Lays and Legends of Thomond* (Limerick, 1924 reprinted 1999).
2. *Ibid*, pp. 74 -83.
3. St. Munchin's Church was erected in 1922, close to the site of the little penal church built in 1774 and which had replaced the crumbling old Mass house in which the inhabitants of Thomondgate worshipped, at their peril, in penal times.
4. Kevin Hannan, 'The District of Thomondgate' in *The Old Limerick Journal*, 27, Autumn 1990, p. 4.

5. Judith Hill, *The Building of Limerick* (Cork, 1991) pp. 146-147.
6. Census of Ireland 1901 and 1911 available at: <http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie>
7. *Ibid*, B1 returns.
8. Census of Ireland 1901, No. 35, sheet three, B1 return, (op. cit.).
9. Thomas J. Morrissey, *Bishop Edward O'Dwyer of Limerick, 1842-1917* (Dublin, 2003) p. 316.
10. The Countess of Aberdeen (ed.) *Ireland's Crusade against Tuberculosis, Vol.1* (Dublin, 1908) p.6.
11. William Osler, 'What the Public can do in the fight against tuberculosis' in *Ireland's Crusade against Tuberculosis, Vol. 1* (Dublin, 1908) p.20.
12. Limerick County Borough, No. 2, District Deaths, Book 13 (1900-1902) entry 51 in Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, St. Camillus Hospital, Shelbourne Road, Limerick.
13. Census of Ireland 1911, (op. cit.).
14. Census of Ireland 1911 Form A, entry 132, (op. cit.).
15. W.W. Gleeson, 'Some Limerick Print Workers' in *The Old Limerick Journal*, No. 29 Winter 1992, p. 8.
16. Cormac Ó Grada, 'The Greatest Blessing of all': The Old Age Pension in Ireland in *Past and Present Society* (Oxford, 2002) No. 175 p. 124.
17. Greta Jones, *'Captain of all these men of death'* (New York, 2001) p.3.
18. *Ibid*, pp. 227-228.
19. Limerick County Borough, No. 2, District Deaths, Book 13 (1900-1902), (op. cit.).
20. Census of Ireland, 1911. Province of Munster (Dublin 1912) p.3, (op. cit.).
21. Caitriona Clear, *Social change and every day life in Ireland, 1850-1922* (Manchester, 2007) pp. 98-99
22. Limerick County Borough Limerick No.2 District, Death Register No.13 (March 1900-July 1902), (op. cit.).
23. William Osler, 'What can the public do in the fight against tuberculosis in *Ireland's Crusade against Tuberculosis* (Dublin, 1908) Vol. 1, p. 18
24. The Countess of Aberdeen (ed.) *Ireland's Crusade against tuberculosis*, (Dublin, 1908) Vol., 1 p.1.
25. *Ibid*, pp. 19-21.
26. Census of Ireland, 1911., Area, Houses and population, Province of Munster (Dublin, 1908) p. 3. (op. cit.).
27. Census of Ireland, 1911, Form-N, High Road, Castle Ward, St. Nicholas Parish, No. 61, Limerick Urban File 52. (op. cit.).
28. Limerick County Borough Limerick no.2 District, Death Register No.17. In order to establish the death numbers for the area, Register 17 covering the period January 1910 to September 1912 was analysed.
29. *Ibid*, Death Register No.21. In order to verify the declining figure of tubercular deaths this register, covering the period November, 1919 to May 1922 was analysed and indicated a continuing drop in the death rate.
30. Sean Redmond, *The Irish Municipal Employees Trade Union 1883-1983*. (Dublin, 1983) p. 20.
31. Census of Ireland 1911, Form-A, High Road, Thomondgate (44 out of 136 sampled) Limerick Urban, No.61, File 52, (op. cit.).
32. Caitriona Clear, 'Social Changes', (op. cit.). p. 99.
33. Limerick County Borough, Limerick No., 2 District, Deaths Register No., 13, Entries 18 and 25, (op. cit.).

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