

# DR. THOMAS ARTHUR

**N**owadays there are many who look back on the efforts of our early physicians and surgeons with disdain, and sometimes with disbelief. They use, most unfairly, the yard stick of present-day standards of medical and surgical achievement, and seldom give a thought to antiseptic surgery, X-rays, hospitals, trained nurses and, above all, the general know-how of the profession today.

The history of medicine and surgery in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is of great interest, not only to the medical profession, but also to those who like to turn back history's pages to compare the treatment of human ailments in the past with present-day methods.

In times gone by repair men were at hand when the human body broke down. Some were professionals and, within the limits of available knowledge, were good at knowing what to do in most cases, and how to do it. Others, non-professionals, or 'quacks', were generally uneducated, and prescribed 'remedies' in all cases whether they diagnosed the complaint or not. Some of the unofficial doctors were good in the treatment of minor ailments, but on the whole their ministrations killed more than they cured: yet the professionals could also be regarded as dangerous because they were more adventurous, since they enjoyed a kind of respectable immunity from the consequences of some of their more experimental and less successful treatments.

The first outstanding medical man in Limerick's history was Dr. Thomas Arthur, or Thomas Arthur Fitzwilliam, as he sometimes liked to be called. This preference, no doubt, resulted from the deep respect and devotion which he held for his father, William Arthur, a wealthy merchant, and his mother, Anastasia Rice, a member of a prominent local family.

The Arthurs came from Somerset with the Normans and settled in Co. Limerick in the district around Pallas and Emly, where they farmed successfully for many years before settling in the city. Here they were to make their name for all time as administrators, merchants and professionals. They gave Limerick twenty-one mayors and two bishops,

By Kevin Hannan

not to mention the long list of sheriffs, bailiffs and other civic officials, stretching through the pages of our history.

Thomas was born in 1593 in the Irishtown of old Limerick, probably in Mungret St. As one would expect from wealthy and influential parents, he was given the best possible education. He took his degree at the famous university of Rheims, after undergoing his medical training in Paris. On his return to his native city, he began building up a practice among those who could afford to pay him.

From the very beginning his outstanding talents were in evidence and his assistance was sought far outside Limerick. In his remarkable chronicle, which came to be known as the 'Arthur Manuscript', he records at the outset the success of his first year's practice, with special emphasis on the fees deriving from it - a handsome £74.1.8. He was so well pleased with this return that his emotions were stirred: ... "for this and other gifts conferred on me, unworthy, I return boundless thanks to the almighty who has thus deigned to bless the beginning of my medical practice".

Amongst the 'other gifts', no doubt, were the proceeds of his land and property deals, details of which appear all through his diary. This lucrative 'side-line' was uppermost in his activities. He became a wealthy and extensive landlord, and by way of further supplementing his considerable income from the practice of his profession and the pursuance of his interests in the property market he was also a money-lender. For this latter activity he seems to have escaped much of the stigma that usually attaches to this once questionable activity, though some commentators have criticised him for it, pointing out that such conduct was unbecoming a doctor of outstanding eminence, or, indeed, a doctor of any standing at all, particularly since, only a short time before, the practice had been held up to world odium by no less a genius than William Shakespeare himself.

Arthur's forays in this sordid activity can perhaps be viewed in a more

tolerant light to-day when so many of our citizens are caught in the thrall of the ruthless modern money-lenders - the banks, finance companies and building societies - institutions that operate with the blessing and protection of successive governments. Moneylending, far from being a disreputable occupation, has now become an acceptable, even respectable, way of life. Thus many of our young couples, when they move to their new homes, are burdened for the rest of their lives with crippling interest rates that would have appalled Thomas Arthur and astounded Shylock himself, who, after all, only wanted a pound of flesh, and not the sweat of a lifetime's endeavour.

Thomas Arthur seems to have escaped the adverse verdict of history for his condemnation of the Confederates and his unflinching loyalty to the establishment, and also for the neutral course which he steered during the period leading up to capitulation of the city to the Cromwellians and the dreadful atrocities of the occupation forces afterwards. He was imprisoned and excommunicated by his fellow citizens, but he emerged in his lifetime as one of the greatest and most respected medical men in the British Isles.

In his absorbing chronicle he has left us one of our greatest literary treasures - a wonderful picture of Limerick life in the seventeenth century. This almost perfectly preserved document was at one time in the possession of Maurice Lenihan, the historian of Limerick, who left us the benefit of much of its contents in his monumental **History of Limerick**. In the last years of his life the poverty-stricken man was forced by necessity to sell this, one of Limerick's most valuable documents, to the British Museum. This transaction was a blessing in disguise, for thus the manuscript escaped the holocaust of the Custom House.

In the seventeenth century, as now, Dublin was the place to be if one desired to rub shoulders with those that mattered. It was the hub from which the social, professional and cultural life of the country was directed. Arthur found it impossible to resist the pulling power of this magnet and set up practice in the capital in 1624. He tells us that this important move was made as a result of pressure from



**Arthur's Quay.**

'persons of influence'. He also took up residence in Dublin but found great difficulty in looking after his business affairs in Limerick.

From a close study of his casebook one must conclude that he was strictly partial in the selection and treatment of his patients, for there is no evidence that he ever treated anyone out of charity.

His greatest success in the medical field was his treatment of James Usher, the sham Archbishop of Armagh. This outstanding and powerful figure was at once an archbishop, historian, poet and antiquary. Together with these remarkable attainments, he was a life-long hater of Catholics.

Perhaps the humiliation of being cured by a staunchly Catholic doctor was offset by the prospect of living a normal life again; after all, his ailment had baffled the best Protestant doctors in England, who had given him up as a hopeless case, with only a short time to live. Usher's gratitude may be gauged by the fee of £51 which he paid his deliverer. This was almost as much as the doctor received for his first year's practice.

The success of his ministrations on so prominent a figure secured for him the patronage of other V.I.P.'s, including the Lord Deputy, Viscount

Falkland, and James Butler, Duke of Ormond and Viceroy to Charles II. The Duke was treated for a serious and stubborn complaint, but he was so full of his own importance that he considered it an honour for any doctor to be called in to treat him. However, he reckoned without Thomas Arthur, the astute businessman who loved money better than patronage. He was slow to settle the doctor's account, but Arthur stuck to him like a leech and pressed home his claim for payment with his customary vigour. The reluctant Duke finally instructed the Treasury to pay the bill of £10. Though a supporter of Ormond's all through the civil war, the doctor, with characteristic detachment, treated him as just another patient. And there is more than one instance of his relentlessness in pursuing a debtor beyond the grave by continuing the action against the next-o-kin.

Arthur was in Limerick during the fateful siege of 1651. This was an appalling period for the besieged and besiegers alike. The coldness, gloom and despair, which were the prevailing features of every street and lane of the festering city, made the fruits of victory sour and unsavoury for the weary Cromwellians, for they had to share much of the hardships which had for so long afflicted the despairing citizens.

Right through the catastrophe Thomas Arthur maintained his independence and high standing in the disease-ridden city. The dreadful conditions excited his compassion to the extent that he organised whatever assistance was possible for the afflicted. He was not deflected, however, from attending to his accounts and his treatment of the better-off citizens - that is, if they were not suffering from the plague. Like all other doctors of the period he had a healthier respect for his own preservation than that of his patients. Amid the turmoil and misery he went about his daily rounds of attending to his privileged patients and jotting down their names, and sometimes their complaints, but always the fees he received from them, while the heads of some of his old friends were rotting on spikes over the gates of the Irishtown.

In times of pestilence sufferers were usually surveyed from a distance and if the remote diagnosis indicated signs of contagion they were usually left alone by all but their nearest and dearest. If their condition worsened hopelessly they were brought to the 'pest houses' to die. These places were used to isolate persons suffering from contagious diseases, and were the forerunners of the fever hospitals. It is of in-

terest to note that it was in the pest house in Mungret Street that Bishop Edward O'Dwyer was arrested.

Many victims were comforted by a few heroic and charitable people, especially the Vincentian Fathers, who daily risked their lives among the afflicted. Bishop Terence O'Brien's brother, who spent all his time among the dying poor, contracted the disease himself and died.

The plague visited victor and vanquished alike. Even the proud Commander-in-Chief of the invading army, Major General Henry Ireton, did not escape its ravages, despite the attentions of Arthur. He suffered the same melancholy fate as the lowly citizens he came so far to subjugate. After his fateful malady had been diagnosed, it is said that his close friendships were sorely tried and he was left alone to bemoan his fate, remorseful of his harsh treatment of the Bishop of Emly a short time before.

Among those successfully treated by Arthur after the capitulation were Dr. Credanus, who was severely injured by a shell during the siege, and Dominic FitzDavid Rice, one of the outstanding defenders of the city, who had a leg amputated. These were two special cases that illustrate the doctor's surgical skill.

We find the high-ranking Puritan officer, Colonel Ingoldsby paying 16/- for unspecified treatment. Major May paid £1.2s.0d. and several ensigns paid 10/- each. Also treated at this time was Lady Honoria O'Brien, daughter of the Earl of Thomond, who paid £2. It would appear that the above sums reflect the social position not unknown among our present day physicians.

Thomas Arthur lived through one of the most difficult periods in our history. From the rebellion of 1641 to the Restoration his political opinions differed from those of the vast majority of the people amongst whom he lived and worked. He was courageous enough to stick to his ideals at all times, even when his life was at stake, although there were those who charged that he tried to court the favour of the Cromwellians so as to safeguard his vast properties. We have, however, ample proof that this was not a man to 'beg up' to anyone. He had consistently supported the establishment long before 1641. It would, therefore, be unfair to criticise him for his politics; rather must he be remembered for his great skill as a doctor and surgeon, and for his gift of a delightful account of his life in Limerick during the turbulent period in which he lived.

Despite his long standing allegiance to the establishment, his estate was broken up under the Act of Settlement; to the Cromwellians he was just another Irish 'papist'. Much of his property was restored to his family af-

1573	16. Elizab.	1574	Thomas Johannis Arthurus 2 <sup>o</sup> Praetor.	
			Thomas Stratch	
			Milo Eustachij Arthurus Duumviri.	
1574	17. Eliz.	1575	Thomas Harold Praetor	
			Georgius Cromwall	
			Nicolaus Whyte Duumviri.	
1575	18. Eliz.	1576	Rogerus Euxarard. Praetor	
			Stephanus Dominus Whyte	
			David Rochafort Duumviri.	
1576	19. Eliz.	1577	Stephanus Whyte Praetor	
			Willelmus Johannis Arthurus	
			Patritius Fanning Duumviri.	
1577	20. Eliz.	1578	Thomas Johannis Arthurus 3 <sup>o</sup> Praetor	
			Walterus Rya	
			Nicolaus Stratch Duumviri.	
1578	21. Eliz.	1579	Johannes Woult Praetor	
			Johannes Stratch Duumviri.	
			Petrus Stratch Duumviri.	
1579	22. Eliz.	1580	Nicolaus Stratch Praetor	
			Thomas Stratch Duumviri.	
			Petrus Craagh Duumviri.	
1580	23. Eliz.	1581	Jordanus Georgij Rogh. 1 <sup>o</sup> Praetor	
			Andreas Craagh Duumviri	
			Edwardus Hacthoris Arthurus. 1 <sup>o</sup>	
1581	24. Eliz.	1582	Jacobus Johannis Galway 1 <sup>o</sup> Praetor	
			Thomas Yong Duumviri. Malb.	
			Georgius Harold Duumviri.	
1582	25. Eliz.	1583	Johannes Bartholomaeus Stratch. 1 <sup>o</sup> Praetor	
			Patritius Dominus Craagh	
			Patritius Amphrui Arthurus Duumviri.	
1583	26. Eliz.	1584	Nicolaus Comyn Praetor	
			Olivarius Harold Duumviri.	
			Nicolaus Bourc Duumviri.	

12<sup>o</sup> die Novembrij ansa arripuit impura au infamandi, bra glanda vno iclu duos alios tuas illato fargho occidit quapropter impandus in sam viribus demibus carita abscissa manebat

Tunc ingens pastus Dubli  
Et Jacobus Maurijus paxi  
naue da insula Inscati  
beasacit & mda Roma  
balli suppaias vastu  
vys quibus impatrat  
duas anoz rauras  
Tunc Regum ansem ho  
Magistralibus suis pra  
stite pmarandag fida  
Civitate Lymbicanti Reg  
pax Henrico Sidnam  
Symon Sextus clavis  
Tunc xvina castri regy en  
Tunc Jacob Maurijus  
novu & Italoru hostili  
ad portu Smarwick di  
vullo se munitu & Gax  
Basonomia cognata sui  
cximan paxit; nac  
Johanna Geraldina qua  
suspecta habuit in socie  
ndm hanc voluit done  
da gram facinora sese  
radidisset, quo illa cas  
ha sibi nupex pax  
viciscandi arsq arrip  
quon festinat vbi  
va Cartax in adibus lap  
dormientos adoribus &  
interamit; quo tempore  
se a parib; Jacobi Mau  
debitu fidalitate & obse  
pala danunciant. 25  
Maurijus tormantaria gla  
Carrig; villa & ipsa mbe  
Bourc; xvona castlcompa  
Garato Comes pousilio da  
Mobi usq; & pult; palham  
in turre Londraa npi daco  
Tunc ragna vltarior  
lantia Symbolu, Civita  
pilan san galera susta  
missit; qui Praetoribus cu  
tratum infigmis praefi  
Tunc Stephanus Rocha  
Catharina Woult in vob  
cobu Cromwall internai  
da armatas conu copias  
12<sup>o</sup> die Novembrij ansa arripuit impura au infamandi, bra glanda vno iclu duos alios tuas illato fargho occidit quapropter impandus in sam viribus demibus carita abscissa manebat

A page of the Arthur Manuscript.

ter his death in 1674, including his stone house in Mungret Street. This remarkable building, the construction of which he described in such minute and interesting detail in his diary, stood close against Tomcore Castle, which dominated the junction of John Street, Broad Street and Mungret Street.

Today Thomas Arthur is all but forgotten, and the street where he lived

is nothing better than an eye-sore and a disgrace to the local authority. All its ties and links with the seventeenth century are gone, and the shabby remnants of later architecture stand over a roadway that once carried the coaches of the well-to-do from their fashionable town houses to their more salubriously situated country seats.