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 yardstick 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 Pallask 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 Irish town 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. Money-lending, 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.

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...
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-of-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.
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. Od, 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 after 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 remains 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.