

NOWADAYS there are many who look back on the effort of our early physicians and surgeons with disdain, and sometimes with disbelief.

They use, most unfairly, the yard stick of modern standards of medical and surgical achievement to measure the skill of the modern practitioner against that of his seventeenth century counterpart.

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 the pages of history 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 many cases, and how to do it. Others, non-professionals, or 'quacks,' were generally uneducated, and prescribed remedies in all cases whether they diagnosed the ailment or not.

Some of the unofficial doctors were good in the treatment of minor ailments, but, on the whole their ministrations may have 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 medicalman in Limerick's history was Dr. Thomas Arthur or Dr. 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 County 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, not to mention the long list of sheriffs, and other civic officials stretching through the pages of our history.

Thomas was born in 1593 in the Irishtown, probably in Mungret Street, 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 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 £74-1s.-8p. 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."

Among 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 pur-



Arthurs Quay, circa 1880. Originally called Mead's Quay, it was the old port of Limerick. Note the Castle Barracks in the background.

Arthurs: a famous Limerick family

suance 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 such outstanding eminence, or, indeed, a doctor of any standing at all, particularly since, only a short time before, the practice of moneylending 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 today when so many of our citizens are caught in the thrall of the ruthless modern money lenders, not to mention the banks, finance companies and building societies — institutions that operate with the blessing and protection of the law. 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 into 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 curse which he steered during the period leading up to the 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 wonderfully clear picture of Limerick life in the seventeenth century. This almost perfectly preserved diary was at one time in the ownership of Maurice Linehan, who left us the benefit of much of its contents in his "History of Limerick." In the last years of his life the poverty stricken historian was forced by necessity to sell this, Limerick's most valuable treasure, to the British Museum.

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 radiated. 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 attending to 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 Archbishop, historian, poet and antiquary. Together with these remarkable attainments he was also a lifelong 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 to 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 haughty Duke was successfully 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. Butler was inclined to forget 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. There is more than one instance of his relentlessness in pursuing a debtor beyond the grave and 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 unpalatable for the weary Cromwellians, for they had to share 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, but the dreadful conditions evoked an uncharacteristic 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 rounds attending to his privileged patients, jotting down their names and sometimes details of their complaints, but always the fees he received from them, while the heads of some of his best 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 fever hospitals. It is of interest to note that it



Arthurs Quay circa 1920. Construction of these houses began in 1771. The bricks used were made in Coonagh Brickfields. Barrington's pier was also built at that time for unloading materials from Coonagh.

was in the Pest House at Mungret Street that the Bishop of Emly 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.

Among those successfully treated by Dr Arthur after the capitulation were Dr. Credanus, who was severely injured by a shell during the siege, and Dominic Fitz-David 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.

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 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, a section of the back wall of the house still survives. Also returned to his family after the Restoration was his vast property in County Clare which stretched from Crag Mountain to the Shannon between Athlunkard and Shravee. The Abbey Fishermen bought the fishing rights attached to the estate in 1930.

Today Thomas Arthur is all but forgotten, and the street where he lived has been left to rot for more than a century, and is now an eyesore and a sad and unrealistic relic of a once splendid thoroughfare. The insensitive construction of ill-planned high rise flats was the last straw in the rape of what was once the principal residential street in Limerick. 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.

Well known Limerick historian Kevin Hannan, takes a trip down memory lane and traces the history of the Corbally area and its environs.

LIKE other districts around the city, Corbally has, for the past sixty years, been undergoing a gradual transformation. There are houses everywhere. Up to the 'thirties it was a sparsely populated rural district, today it is a considerable town in itself.

Before the building of Athlunkard and Park bridges the whole area was, more or less, isolated. The land around the canal, and the area now known as "Healy's Field" was an impassable morass, while the tides and floodwaters of the Shannon swept up to the gardens of the residences along the Mill Road. The only land approach to Corbally was by a narrow road which was a continuation of the present St. Patrick's Road. This can be traced through Singland Cross, Rhebogoe Cross and the canal bank (on both sides), and through lower Park. A smaller road linked Pennywell Lane with the ferry that operated near the present O'Dwyer Bridge.

This road was transformed by mother nature to a green velvet pathway lined with beautiful hawthorns. It was known to many generations of local folk as "Paddy's Hedge", and was probably the most frequented 'lover's lane' around the city for two hundred years. In my own time it was also the happy hunting ground for some of the clergy from St. John's, who often put the courting couples to flight.

A public house — probably a shebeen — stood in this boren at a point where it turned a sharp angle, and about 250 yards from the canal bank. Perhaps the proprietor of this ale house gave his name to the place.

Ha'penny Well was situated on the canal bank at the entrance to the boren.

Sweeping down from the high ground of the Bun Ard are the water meadows of Lanahrone, part of which are now taken up with the splendid houses which were built at the end of the nineteenth forties by Irish Estates Ltd.

The Clare ferry operated near the site of Athlunkard Bridge.

A radical change in the social order of Corbally and park took place in 1757 when the Shannon Navigation canal cut through the two roads which served as the only avenues to the city. The whole area became an island, bounded by the Shannon, the Abbey river and the canal, and having only a small hump backed bridge over the latter waterway at Madden's Lock to connect up to the old road with Pennywell Lane.

Second avenue

The construction of Park Bridge during the terror of 1798 proved a great boon and opened up the delights of Corbally to many people for the first time. The building of the beautiful Athlunkard Bridge by the Paine brothers in 1830 provided the second avenue from the city to Co. Clare. Even before the building of the bridges, efforts were made to contain the tides and flood waters of the Shannon by raising strong embankments between the Lax Weir and the site of Park Bridge.

After the building of Athlunkard Bridge the citizens started their picnic excursions to the church fields — the area downstream of the bridge on the right bank — a wholesome

amenity that can never more be enjoyed as a result of an ill-planned scheme of houses which spoiled the tranquility of the place and ruined a heartening panorama of green and silver stretching to the foot of the Clare Hills, with the tapering spire of St. Patrick's, at Patreen-a-lax lending a pastoral touch to the splendid scene.

The Mills

The special features that gave so much character to Corbally were the mills and the Lax Weir. The former were demolished during the war years and no trace remains. There were two mills close to each other. The old mill was built by the Bindon family who had a fine mansion close by. It had an undershot wheel that was worked by a stream which owed nothing of its force to a mill dam, the natural fall of the river having been sufficient to provide constant power. The tail race, which curved to the river almost directly opposite the Liberty Stone (this large stone can be seen in the river at low tide opposite the little car park at the end of the Mill Road) has been long filled in.

Great improvements were made by the Gabbets, who next came into possession of the mill and part of the lands. The mill race was cleaned and made wider and the long narrow strip of land which was an island formed by the mill stream and the river, was planted with trees. This, in the course of years, became lovingly known to generations of trippers to Corbally as Gabbets' Grove.

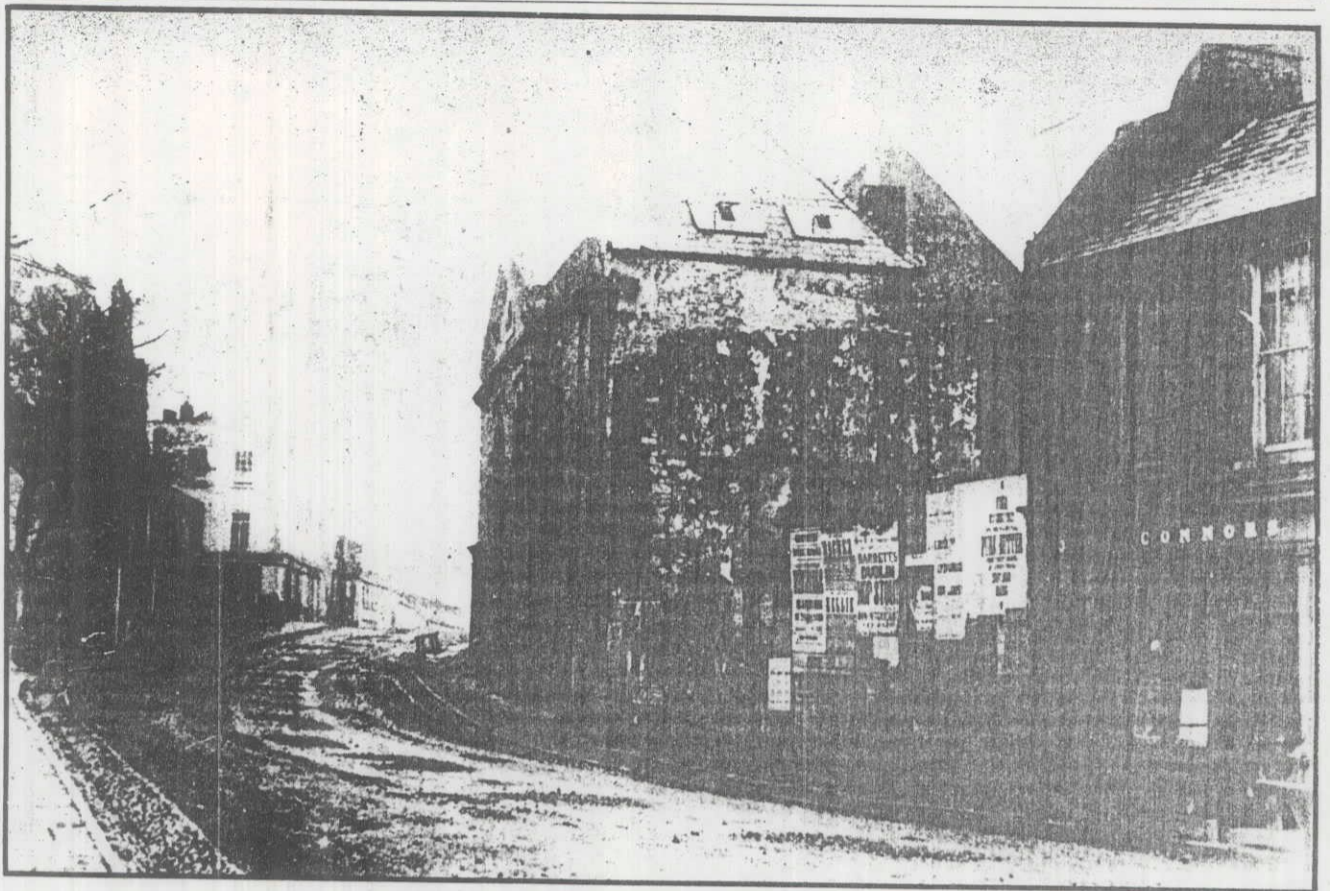
The great mill dam was by far the finest and longest structure of its kind to be seen anywhere, and was constructed in conjunction with the new mill, which came into the possession of John Norris Russell, described by Lenihan as "the most enterprising merchant that Limerick ever saw".

Though the American style steel rollers, introduced by James Bannatyne in the 1880's, revolutionised flour milling, Corbally mills worked into the 1920's.

The oldest and longest lasting feature of Corbally is the Lax Weir, though nothing now remains but the tottering and overgrown piers stretching across the river at the tail of St. Thomas's Island. In compliance with an act of Parliament, under Victoria, the Weir had an open gap, forty feet wide and in the main flow of the river. This was known as the "Queen's Gap".

Down through the years the various owners and leasees were jealous of the numbers of salmon availing of the free passage through the Weir, so much so that many stratagems were employed from time to time to discourage the fish from availing of the gap. On one occasion a number of stuffed otters were placed in menacing situations to scare the fish. Spur walls were raised from the gap to deflect fish into the traps, or cribs. These practices were the subjects of litigation in the courts that held the public interest for much of the latter half of the nineteenth century.

The Weir owners had control of the fishery well into the estuary and long lasting disputes with the Strand fishermen were con-



Bridge Street (or Quay Lane) as it was then known. The building on the right is the Gerald Griffin Memorial School, which formed part of the old Limerick City Courthouse. Note the dirt road and cobbled drain.

stant features of public interest. The most notable action, indeed one of the most important in the legal annals of this country, the famous case of the fishermen of Limerick versus Malchomson, the leasee of the Weir. The case was fought for years by John O'Dea, representing the fishermen of the Strand, Crosby Row and Town Wall. After years of legal argument the case was decided in favour of O'Dea in the Irish Court of Error, nine judges out of the twelve deciding against Malchomson. Tragically for O'Dea — and the fishermen — the decision was reversed by the English House of Lords!

O'Dea died in the fever hospital of the Work House in 1864.

The Weir, which was undoubtedly established by the Danish settlers, had a most chequered history and passed through many owners and operators. Amongst its better known early proprietors were the Dominican Friars, who had much property in the area. In the early 1800's, it was in the possession of Limerick Corporation. Thomas Little operated it under lease for ten years prior to 1834, when it was leased to Poole Gabbet at an annual rent of £300. On the death of Gabbet in 1845 the Malchomson family of Portlaw, Co. Waterford, became the new owners. It is of interest to note that the Limerick Steamship Company was founded by this family. In 1860 they also erected a public fountain in Athlunkard St., in the north wall of the ruin of the Earl of Clanwilliam's town house.

The flour milling family of Bannatyne acquired the Corporation's interest in the Weir in 1885 and operated the fishery for many years. The last owners were the Lax Weir Fishery Company. Snap and seine nets were also used in conjunction with the fishery.

Under the Shannon Fisheries Acts of 1935/36 the fishing rights of the Shannon were vested in the Electricity Supply Board, who were bound by these Acts to make every effort to make good the damage done to the river by the Shannon Scheme. They afterwards operated Thomond Weir for forty years without the statutory free gap.

The grand sweep of water between the Weir and the mill dam has been known to generations of fishermen and anglers as the "free water". Here they could ply their craft without let or hindrance, immune from

the attentions of bailiff and landlord. The stretch suffered much, however, from the effects of the hydro-electric works.

St. Thomas's Island

St. Thomas's Island is situated between the Weir and the mill dam. From the mill pier it looks like a mound of green velvet sloping gently from the river. A few hawthorns break the smoothness here and there, and the upstream end is fringed by some white willows. There is the inevitable ivy-clad ruin. This was once a fine house built by a wealthy

gentleman names Tuthill.

There were several owners down through the years, including a gentleman who was confined to the island for six days of the week, and could cross to the mainland only on Sundays when he was immune from the attentions of a process server (the writ could only be served on a week day).

The island was the property of the Dominicans, who also had a church of ease there, prior to 1538, when they were dispossessed of everything and driven underground.

In later years the island was owned by a farmer for a short time. It was the custom of this man of the soil to bring milk to town twice a day in the summertime. An astute policeman stationed at the constabulary barrack at the junction of the Mill Road and Corbally Road noticed that the farmer carried many more tankards than the number of cows he milked would warrant. On examination the suspected vessels contained poteen! Further investigation revealed an elaborate distilling complex well hidden on the island.

LIMERICK MOTORS

(RAHEEN) LTD. TEL: (061) 27277.

FIAT / LANCIA MAIN DEALER LIMERICK CITY/COUNTY

THINKING OF CHANGING YOUR CAR?

THINK FIAT/LANCIA

UNO 45 from £8,090

TIPO 1400 from £10,390

LANCIA Delta from £10,980

UNO VAN from £5,000 + VAT

DUCATO Big Volume from £11,700 + VAT

Leasing terms (2-5 yrs.) attractive

OVER 50 USED CARS IN STOCK

WANTED:

Good clean used cars/vans,
1981/'84

Open 6 days, Monday to Saturday

Contact: NOEL, MIKE, RAY at (061) 27277