

DOCTORS DIFFER



An early nineteenth century view of George (now O'Connell) Street.

After the construction work on Barrington's had been completed, the practical problems of running the hospital presented themselves. On 28 July, 1831, the hospital's first management committee was appointed and, a few days later, this committee selected the medical staff of four physicians and three surgeons. Further appointments followed: a 'runner' who was to be given his board but no wages; a baker, James Riordan, of George's Quay, was employed at £3 per annum, and Ann Meagher was given the task of supplying freestone.⁽¹⁾

On 1 October, 1831, the hospital's first dietary was established, and a gallon of strong spirits was ordered for the apothecary's shop.⁽²⁾

The perennial problem of the lack of hygiene in the lanes and back streets of the city soon came to the attention of the hospital authorities. A sub-committee, made up of Joseph Massey Harney, Rev. Thomas Enraght and Dr. John Carroll, was appointed on 18 November to examine the Act governing the cleansing of the slum areas of the city. When their report was completed, a meeting of clergy of all denominations, physicians, surgeons and church-wardens, was held to consider the report and to make provisions for the appointment of health

by Jim Kemmy

officers for the city.⁽³⁾

Four months after the building work had been completed, and on the appointment of John Fahy as doorkeeper, 'with fuel and candlelight during the pleasure of the committee', the hospital opened its doors for the 'reception of the poor and victims of accidents'. Matthew Barrington having earlier travelled to London to buy medical appliances and surgical instruments from a list supplied by surgeon Thwaites.⁽⁴⁾

But before Barrington's opened, it faced serious difficulties on two fronts: its committee had to work strenuously to raise enough money to equip the hospital in preparation for the opening, but this work was abruptly interrupted by an unscheduled outbreak of hostilities between two members of the recently recruited medical staff.

The dispute began on the very day of the appointment of this staff by the hospital board of governors, and, more particularly, with the selection of Patrick Barry as one of the surgeons. Barry was also the owner of an apothecary's shop, or medical hall, in William Street. Dr. William Geary, the son of Dr. John Geary, had taken exception to Barry's selection, and had made no secret of his opposition

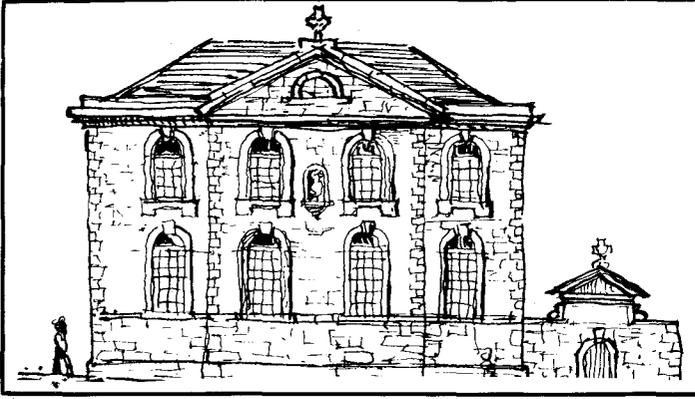
to the appointment.

On 1 August, the two men met in George (now O'Connell) Street. Patrick Barry had a stick, which he twice used to strike Geary on the shoulders.

The row went a stage further when William Geary sought legal redress against Barry, and, on 6 October, the surgeon found himself charged before the Limerick Quarter Sessions. The case attracted considerable attention in Limerick at the time: every seat in the courthouse was filled, and the overflow crowd outside strained to squeeze inside, or to hear snatches of the proceedings.

Mr. Howly, Barry's attorney, rose to the occasion, and put on a high-powered performance. The courthouse rang with his full-blown oratory, as he made his defence of the surgeon's conduct. During his address, he gave a statement sworn by his client, which outlined the background leading up to the case:⁽⁵⁾

'That he is a member of the Royal College of Surgeons of London, and a Licentiate of the Apothecaries' Hall of Dublin, also the proprietor of a respectable and lucrative Medical establishment in William Street, Limerick. With a laudable anxiety to forward his prospects in life, and to improve himself in the knowledge of Surgery and Midwifery, his client repaired to Dublin and London, in



Bridge Street Courthouse, from a drawing
by P. O Ceallachain.

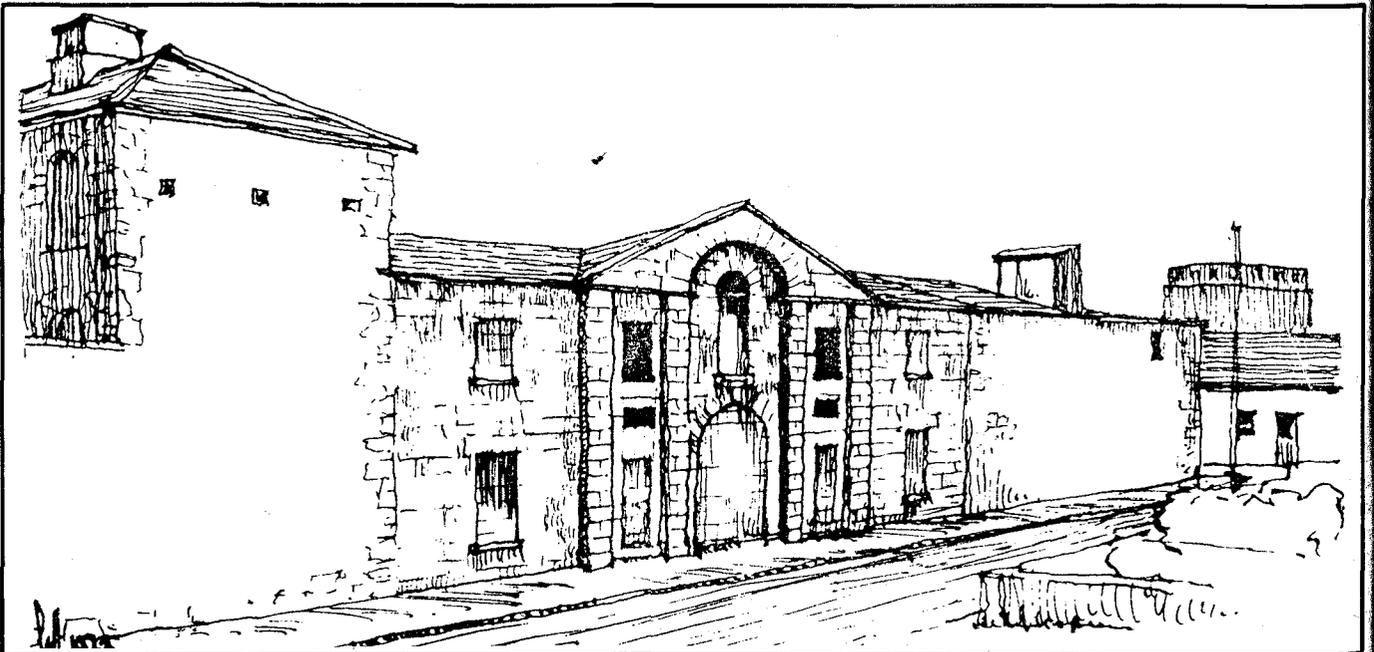
which latter capital he obtained his diploma, after the usual examinations. Mr. Barry returned to Limerick, and in July a canvas commenced for medical attendants to Barrington's Hospital. A meeting of the committee took place on the 30th of that month, for proceeding with the election, and the result was, that Mr. Barry was called in and told by Mr. Barrington that he was appointed with Surgeons Thwaites, Wilkinson, Franklin and Keane, the Physicians being Drs. Carroll, McCarthy, Brodie, and Geary, jun, the prosecutor in this case. The appointment of Dr. Barry was subsequently confirmed by the chairman of the committee. Immediately after this, however, Dr. Barry was informed by report that some of the newly elected medical gentlemen would not act with him in consequence of his keeping an Apothecary's shop. Naturally alarmed at this intelligence, he, of course, applied instanter to ascertain the truth of this statement, and he was told by every one of them, with the exception of Dr. Geary, jun. that it

was wholly untrue that they had expressed any objections to work with him, or refused to meet him as a professional man. Dr. Barry, smarting under feelings of irritation at this unexpected, and, as he conceived, unjustified attempt to arrest his career in life, believing that his character, reputation and interests were at issue, he did, under the impulse of excited feelings, commit himself by a violation of the law by assaulting the prosecutor, whose objections to him as a Surgical practitioner, he was persuaded, were perfectly groundless. The court would, he hoped, perceive from the tone and temper of his affidavit that the offence alleged was the act of a man labouring under the sense of a wanton insult, the act of a man willingly guilty of an indiscretion, but of one hurried away by the warmth of his passion on finding a bar put to his professional advancement by a member of the same profession. He did not mean to say, strictly speaking, that any provocation would justify a violation of the law, but with reference to human feelings and passions, and considering the infirmities of human nature, he did hope the court would look upon it as the act of a man who thought at the instant it was his duty to resent an ungenerous effort to impede his progress in a respectable

profession, and to deprive him of his just emoluments by doing him a gratuitous injury. It was by no means the wish of his client, to offer any reflection on the gentleman, who he felt had thus thrown himself in his way'.

The statement then went on to give an account of Patrick Barry's medical career, and, in a flash of colourful courtroom rhetoric, the attorney compared his client's career with that of Sir Humphry Davy, one of the most eminent medical men of the nineteenth century:

'Mr. Barry commenced life as an operative Chemist and Apothecary, and with a praiseworthy zeal to ameliorate his future, repaired to those places where he could improve himself by practice and study. He had procured letters from the highest sources, and the most respectable members of the profession in London and Dublin, stating that the cause of objection made to Dr. Barry, did not prevail in either of those capitals. Counsel could cite of his own knowledge, Dr. Merryman, one of the most eminent practitioners in London who was partner in an Apothecary's shop. There was a striking instance of the celebrated Sir Humphry Davy, originally a poor, friendless, and unprotected boy behind an Apothecary's counter, but he afterwards shone forth a brilliant luminary, for the general good and benefit of mankind. If it had been said to that great man, you shall not pass beyond this stage, you must stay where you are, and **scruples** and **drams** are all you shall know of the science during your life - what important discoveries would not the world have lost, and could the glorious ray that encircles his name have ever passed down to posterity.



The old City Prison, from a drawing by P. O Ceallachain.

That very branch of the business, which the Apothecary follows, forms the principal and radical part of the knowledge for professional men, the compounding of medicine. Here is Dr. Barry requiring only that which is constant to the practice and usage of members of the faculty in London and Dublin, but he finds himself suddenly stopped by the vote of another professional man. Looking then to these circumstances, and the peculiar situation in which his client was placed, considering the infirmities of our weak nature, and admitting there is no legal vindication of the act, yet weighing the amount of provocation received, and the penitence now evinced by his client, he hoped the subject would be taken into the wise but merciful consideration of the court – If, then, under the influence of indignant emotion, and feeling naturally excited, his client was hurried for the instant into the commission of an act, which he now regrets'.

After this extravagant burst of oratory, the attorney, in his summing up, came down to a more sober level in seeking the court's mercy for his client, while, at the same time, maintaining the plea of guilty:

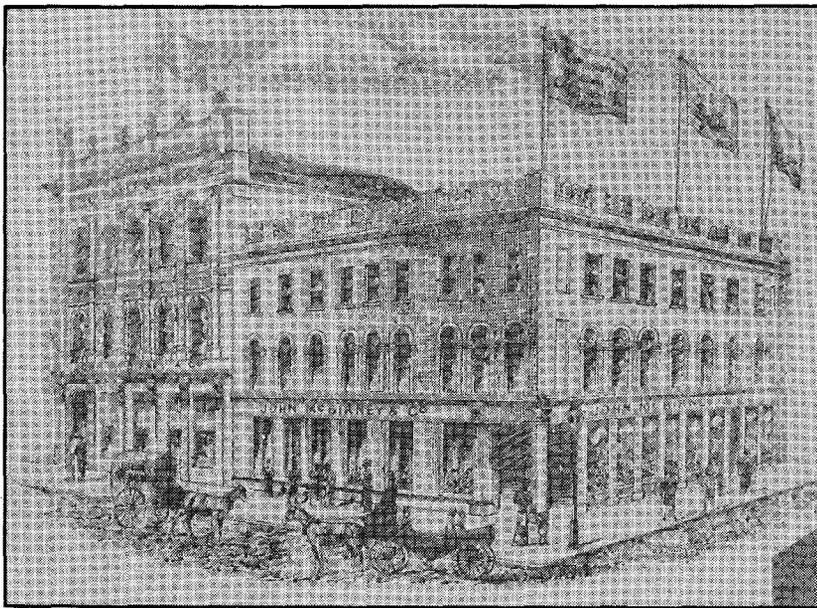
'He hoped the court would humanely deem it to be a case, not calling for an angry exercise of the penalties of the law. He trusted it would be rather counted a case, under the circumstances that occurred, worthy a mitigation of punishment. He had no instructions to say a word against the prosecutor, his client on reflection bows to the power and authority of the law, he pleads guilty; and Counsel fully trusting in the wise adjudication of the court, was satisfied to leave the facts entirely with the bench.'

This virtuoso performance cut little ice, however, with Mr. O'Shaughnessy, Dr. Geary's attorney. He said that he thought the affidavit was 'more likely to aggravate the features of the case, than otherwise', and that it was a 'vindication of the outrage against his client, expressing no sorrow or contrition, offering no apology for the attack'.

The attorney said that Dr. Geary 'was a gentleman by birth, education and profession, who had been wantonly assaulted in the streets, and struck twice

with a stick by the traverser, in a manner becoming porters or chairmen than gentlemen'.

After an intervention by Barry's attorney, some heated exchanges between the two legal men followed. O'Shaughnessy stated that the matter could be taken to a 'court of honour – whose rules, he admitted, were not sanctioned by this Court'. He concluded by saying that Patrick Barry, instead of expressing regret for his conduct in assaulting Dr. Geary, and 'the outrage inflicted on that gentleman's feelings', had only specified his regret at having violated the law. He continued:



An early nineteenth century view of McBirney's store, George Street.

'He does not offer any public apology for his subsequent public advertisements, exulting in the attack. The only regret he admits is that he had subjected himself to the punishment of the law.'

The court reserved its judgement and adjourned until the following morning. The two parties and the impatient crowd withdrew to await the court's decision.

The adjourned verdict was to cause further excitement and controversy. The court sentenced Barry to one week's confinement in his majesty's prison, and to pay a fine of £2, not so much, as the recorder pointed out, for the assault, but for his refusal to apologise to Geary.

Little more was heard about Patrick Barry and his surgical and other medical activities, but his two blows on William Geary's shoulders have earned him a footnote in Limerick medical history. He was clearly a determined man who believed in direct action, in public and in private, and such men have always made uneasy bedfellows in the tightly organised medical profession – even in the less specialised 1830s. Since that time, doctors and apothecaries (chemists) have gone their separate ways. Barry and his blows for medical

integration were, perhaps inevitably, destined to be forgotten with the passage of time. There was no glorious ray to encircle his name and pass it down to posterity – to use Mr. Howly's phrase.

On the other hand, William Geary went on to win a prominent place in the life of his native city. The son of John Geary, a pioneering Limerick doctor and writer on medical subjects, he had qualified in Edinburgh in 1824. He served as physician to St. John's Fever and Lock Hospital, Barrington's Hospital, the City Dispensary, the Magdalen Asylum and medical inspector under the Medical Charities Act for Limerick, Cork and Kerry. Scholarly, like his father, he wrote on medical matters, and was a contributor to the *Dublin Journal of Medical Science*.

He entered public life, and became a town councillor. Elected mayor in 1844, he was fortunate enough to preside over the preliminary arrangements for the building of Mathew Bridge, over the Abbey River, beside Barrington's Hospital.

Unlike his medical colleague and protagonist, Patrick Barry, his name endures, mainly because of the words inscribed on the foundation stone of the bridge, which have

ensured that his memory lives on in Limerick: *'MATHEW BRIDGE, CONTRACTED IN THE YEAR 1844 DURING THE MAYORALTY OF THE RIGHT WORSHIPFUL WILLIAM J. GEARY, M.D.'*

It is worth recalling that two other medical men held the office of mayor in this period: Richard Franklin (1839-1840), and Thomas Kane (1854), whose name is inscribed on the Daniel O'Connell monument in the Crescent.

They were to be among the last of their kind. The tradition of the active participation of Limerick doctors in the public life of the city, through membership of the City Council and other public bodies, died out in the nineteenth century, but that subject is outside the scope of this article.

REFERENCES

1. 'History of Barrington's Hospital', by M.E. Gleeson, *Limerick Leader* 14 May, 1945.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Limerick Chronicle*, 12 October, 1831.