The nom de plume of 'Philanthropus' hid the identity of one who had a small book printed in Limerick in 1819 and entitled 'A Letter to Rt. Hon. Charles Grant, M.P., Secretary for Ireland', representing the causes of the alarming increase of contagious fever in Ireland. It was an appeal that something should be done to alleviate the sufferings of the poor people at that time, many of whom 'Philanthropus' described as 'Housed in Houselessness'. No food but potatoes, and no drink but water.

Strange to say (according to an old health report) the first permanent interruption of the progress of epidemic fever was attributed to the use of turf – the cheap rate at which the poor were able to purchase it. Being the chief fuel in Limerick since 1818, it was used in all kitchens and working places. There was also a large supply of coal in the city, some culm pits being worked in Clare and Limerick. To the evil consequences of permitting the importation of old drapery, which took place to a considerable extent, great injury was caused to the home manufactures of frieze and flannel as it deprived the tailors and thread makers of employment. The soil of County Limerick was said to be particularly adapted to the cultivation of flax, and no place more suited than Limerick to the establishment of 'manufactories' where provisions were abundant, labour cheap, and where there were numerous sites for mills.

It was also suggested that a quick and certain intercourse between Limerick and Dublin was much wanted and would prove beneficial – the advantages arising from this measure being that the merchants would be thus enabled to ship to London through Dublin, early in the season, and the newly salted provisions would then come to market, instead of being locked up in the Shannon by westerly winds.

Ardent spirits were also plentiful, and cheap and malt liquors were not used during this period in Limerick, as they were said to be of bad quality, being generally adulterated by treacle, quassia and other matters.

Food was not too plentiful, and labourers were often thirty weeks unemployed in a year. Fish was scarce and high priced, a small quantity being brought from Galway and Youghal once in a week when the weather was mild, but during many weeks none came to market except fish caught in the Shannon, such as salmon, trout, eels, small soles and plaice at certain times of
A HISTORICAL
AND
MEDICAL REPORT
OF
The Limerick
Fever and Lock Hospitals:
Comprising a Period of Nearly Forty Years:
And Illustrative of
The Nature and Progress of Fever in this District;
With
A Comparative View of its variations, at uniform
intervals, from the Foundation of the Hospital
to the present Time.

TO THIS PUBLICATION ARE ANNEXED
Some Observations on the Treatment of Fever.

BY JOHN GEARY, M. D.
Physician to the Lunatic Asylum, and Senior
Physician to the Hospitals.

DEDICATED TO THE
Rt. Rev. CHARLES, LORD BISHOP OF LIMERICK.

An Indian Philosopher being asked—From what sources he de-
dived his knowledge? replied—"From the blind, who never
place their feet 'till they have tried the firmness of the soil;—
I observed, before I reasoned; and I reasoned, before I wrote."

LIMERICK:
Printed by Wm. McKern, at the 'Sun-Office',
16, Rutland-street.
1820.

Dr. John Geary's 'Historical and Medical Report', 1820.
An 18th century hovel by the city walls.

Districts for the new town, and the houses, which were lofty and closely piled together, were allowed to run into a condition of rapidly approaching ruin. This quarter of the town and the parish of St. John were principally occupied by the numerous poor of the city, and, to quote Dr. Geary: 'It was there as in the decayed Liberties of Dublin that the indigent roomkeeper and ruined artisan, the unemployed labourers and the rejected country cottiers, with their famishing families, retreated and died in pitable conditions'. It was amid such scenes and in the discharge of his professional duties that William John Geary laboured. He said that he often wished that he could have influenced what he termed the over-cautious legislators of the time, to whose prejudices against a legal provision for the poor he attributed the sad conditions which then prevailed.

The new town or parish of St. Michael, he stated, was built with a due regard to the health and comfort of its inhabitants and to it was added the populous district of St. John's in the dispensary arrangement. While acting as visiting physician to the dispensary, he was constantly struck with the immense amount of poverty which existed in the city. He then classified the people to their respective districts, and the following figures might be of interest: Population of St. Mary's and St. Nicholas (1827-32) was 14,629; St. John's and St. Laurence's, 15,667; St. Munchin's, 4,071; St. Michael, 16,226. The corresponding poor of these parishes were listed as follows: 7,000, 6,400, 940, 2,500; and the figures for fever patients returned St. Nicholas and St. Mary's, St. John's and St. Laurence's district as the highest and St. Munchin's as the lowest.

Many 'manufactories' could not be boasted of at this time, but amongst those which existed was an extensive glue mill in the Abbey, and it was considered most unfavourable to health. During the warm weather, to quote Dr. Geary, the effluvia emanating from putrid animal matter collected in this establishment poisoned the surrounding atmosphere, and dysentry abounded in that district. It was also said that Exchange Lane was never free from disease.

In 1826, William J. Geary was appointed by the governors of the Fever Hospital and City Dispensary as one of the two visiting physicians to the latter, with the objective of attending the sick poor in their own homes, and so diminish the demands on the Fever Hospital. He filled this office until 1832, when he resigned. He was physician on the first medical staff to be appointed to Barrington's Hospital from 1 August, 1831, until 19 December, 1851, when he retired from the staff, as he had been appointed medical inspector under the Charities Act, 14 and 15 Vic., Chap. 68. The provision of this Act rendered it impossible for him to discharge his duties as physician to Barrington's.

In April, 1847, Dr. W.J. Geary, together with doctors Michael Brodie, Thomas Kane, Robert Ringrose Gelston and William Ringrose Gore, gave to the Committee of Barrington's Hospital the sum of £100 (Irish) per annum, which had been granted by the Government for their remuneration. They were made life governors by a grateful committee in 1837.

Dr. Geary wrote a report on St. John's Fever Hospital, commenting on the fever outbreaks in the city and pointing out the importance to society of institutions for contagious diseases and stressing precautions as a natural, instinctive law. Under such feelings, he stated, measures of safety were instituted as early as 1780, and mention of this year will bring us back to the work of his father, John Geary, and St. John's Hospital, as he had much to do with it in its early years.

Previous to 1780, in spite of numerous charities here and elsewhere, fever had not claimed public attention, and very little had been done to check its ravages of the poor. This observation was not meant for Limerick alone, because in that year in no part of the British Empire was there a Fever Hospital. It was left to the good and
benevolent to give Limerick a lead in founding a hospital of this description, St. John's being the first of its kind to be opened in the city.

John Geary goes on to discuss the conditions of the streets from 1786 to 1792, and deplores the state of the city, the back lanes of the Irishtown, the Abbey and various other parts. During his work in one of these, he contracted fever himself, and mentions that a house situated near Mr. Kelly's tanyard, in a lane leading to the Island, was never free from fever for four years, that another in Father Davy's Lane, Spittal, and a third dwelling near Miss Tucker's Brewery in John's Square were also in a similar state.

Dr. William John Geary, writing on 29 July, 1837, said provisions were then bad, scarce and dear, spirits abundant and cheap, weather variable and damp; there was a great want of employment amongst operatives and labourers, and seldom had such want and distress been felt in Limerick. The parliamentary session had closed and with it all expectations of relief which its opening had promised. The discussions on the various measures of charitable relief submitted for its consideration had proved acrimonious and unsatisfactory, and it was feared that a further delay to a final settlement of Poor Law questions had arisen.

William John Geary, writing in a Dublin journal in 1837, commented on the conditions of the poor at this time, and wondered if the constitution of the Irish people was prone to fever, and furnished abundant evidence to the contrary. He quoted the author of the book 12 Months Campaign with the British Legion, and in describing the fatal effects of epidemic typhus, which attacked that body at Vittoria in January, 1836, stated that the English and Scotch suffered extremely, while the Irish Brigade, composed of the 7th, 9th and 10th Regiments, enjoyed perfect immunity. He added that, had the whole company been composed of Irishmen, instead of losing 1,000 men at Vittoria, 100 might only have been lost, in spite of the severe winter, bad rations and total want of pay. The Irish Brigade then suffered less from disease, though it was not better off for provisions or quarters than the rest of the force. The author sadly commented 'such were the advantages of misery and starvation at home'.

Painting of Downey's 18th century pub by Robert Wyse-Jackson.