

DR. JOHN GEARY AND DR. WM. JOHN GEARY: 1779 – 1853

by *M.E. Gleeson*

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



Old Thomond Bridge



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 different
 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.

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 An Indian Philosopher being asked—From what sources he de-  
 rived 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."*  
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LIMERICK:
Printed by Wm. McKERN, at the 'SUN-OFFICE,'
 16, Rutland-street.
 1820.

Dr. John Geary's 'Historical and Medical Report', 1820.

the year. A company, which had been established two years before, bought two fishing boats at great expense. The boats were successful for a few weeks in taking fish from the coast of Kerry, but the inhabitants assembled, attacked the boats, and so terrified the boatmen that they would not return there again. Fish was then brought to the city markets on the backs of horses from Galway, Kinsale and Youghal. Herrings, used as an article of diet by the poor, not infrequently caused complaints.

In the midst of these conditions, and during several epidemics between the years 1779 and 1853, two Limerick doctors laboured. They were Dr. John Geary and Dr. William John Geary, his son. John Geary, the father, entered on

his medical studies at Leyden University in Holland in 1793, at the age of 24 years, according to Dr. M. Smith's *Students at Leyden*, but he did not take his M.D. there. He was senior physician to St. John's Fever and Lock Hospital, physician to the Lunatic Asylum, president of the Limerick Medical and Surgical Association, and a member of the Midland Medical Association. John Geary, M.D., wrote in 1819 a *Historical Report of the Limerick Fever and Lock Hospitals*, covering a period of nearly forty years, and *The Nature and Progress of Fever in this District*. This book was dedicated to Rt. Rev. Charles, Lord Bishop of Limerick, with the following quotation: 'An Indian Philosopher being asked: 'From what

source he derived his knowledge, replied: "From the blind, who never place their feet till they have tried the firmness of the soil". The doctor added: 'I observed before I reasoned and I reasoned before I wrote'.

This little book was printed by Wm. McKern at the 'Sun Office', 16, Rutland Street, Limerick, in 1820, and he mentions then that his opinions were founded on a studious practice of thirty years.

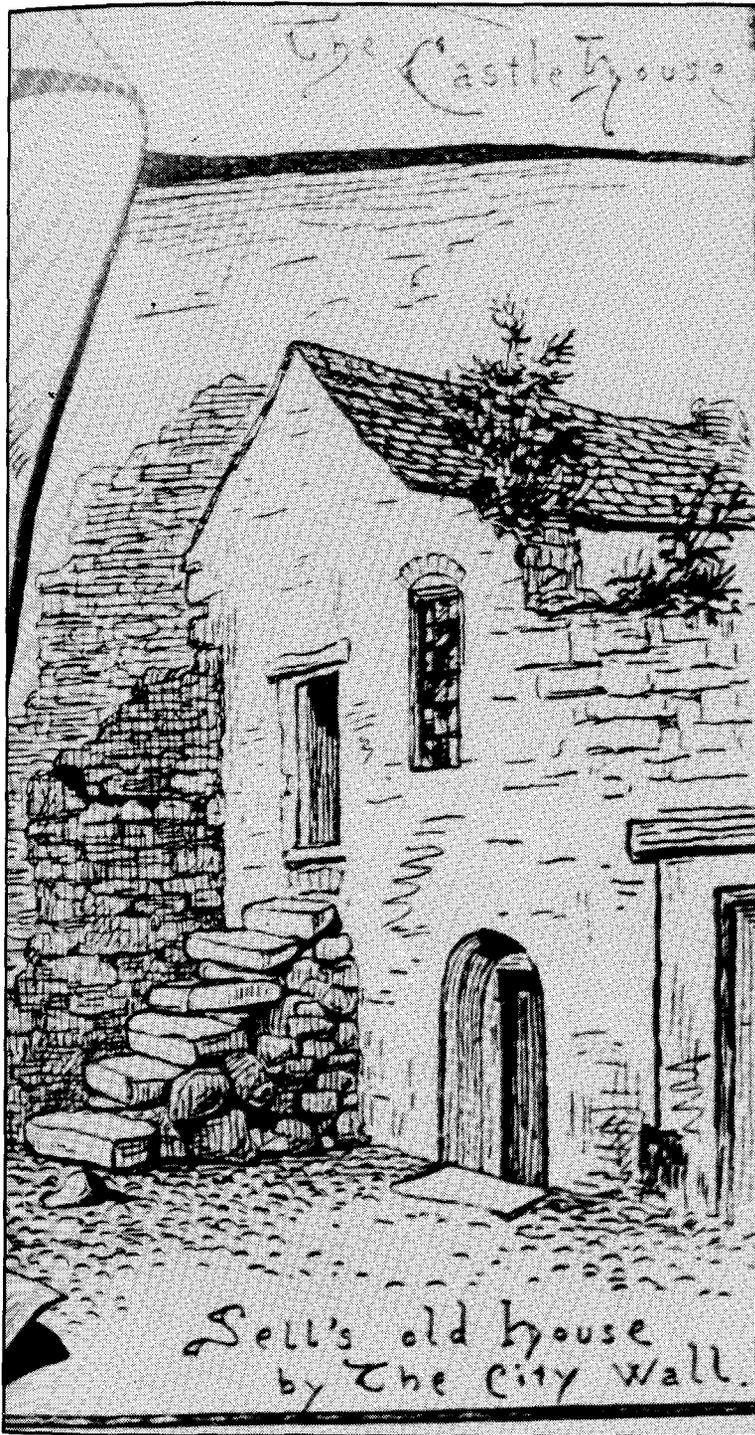
In a letter signed 29 December, 1819, his address is given as William Street, but with no number. Looking over a copy of the Charter Party, or Articles of Agreement, of the Commercial Buildings Company (now the City Hall), printed by Watson and Mahony, King's Arms, Limerick, we find Daniel Gabbett, Law Agent to the Company. In 1806 Dr. John Geary appeared in it as a subscriber to the company.

Dr. Wm. John Geary was his son. A medical directory for Ireland of 1853 gives the following: 'Wm. John Geary, 59, George Street, took his M.D. in Edinburgh in 1824. L.M. Edinburgh. Physician to St. John's Fever and Lock Hospital. Physician to the Barrington Hospital, City Dispensary, Magdalen Asylum, Medical Inspector under the Medical Charities Act for Limerick, Cork, Clare, and Kerry, and contributor to the *Dublin Journal of Medical Science*, 1837'.

William John Geary was also mayor of Limerick in 1844. The tablet on Matthew Bridge states that this bridge was contracted for during the mayoralty of William J. Geary. Both father and son were evidently very scholarly men, and both were writers. In the old medical library at Barrington's Hospital I found many beautiful old books donated by them. Inside the cover of one was this quaint remark: 'From Robert Stevenson to his friend W. Steele, who sold it to a standholder, from whom 7/6 got it for William J. Geary'.

William John Geary, in describing Limerick in the period 1821-1834 (population, 63,310), stated that the city of Limerick at this time might be divided into the old and the new towns, divided by a branch of the Shannon which sets off over 1 mile to the north and passing round the Abbey flows into the main river at the Custom House. It is built on a limestone stratum and occupies about 640 acres. The surrounding country to the north, east and south is flat, and covered to a considerable extent during the winter season by water in consequence of the overflowing of some considerable inland rivers, which empty themselves into the Shannon at these points, as well as the latter river forcing the banks at the King's Island.

The old town, which included the parishes of St. Mary, St. Nicholas and St. Munchin, had been for some time in a state of progressive and rapid decay. The wealthier inhabitants had forsaken these



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 pitiable 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.

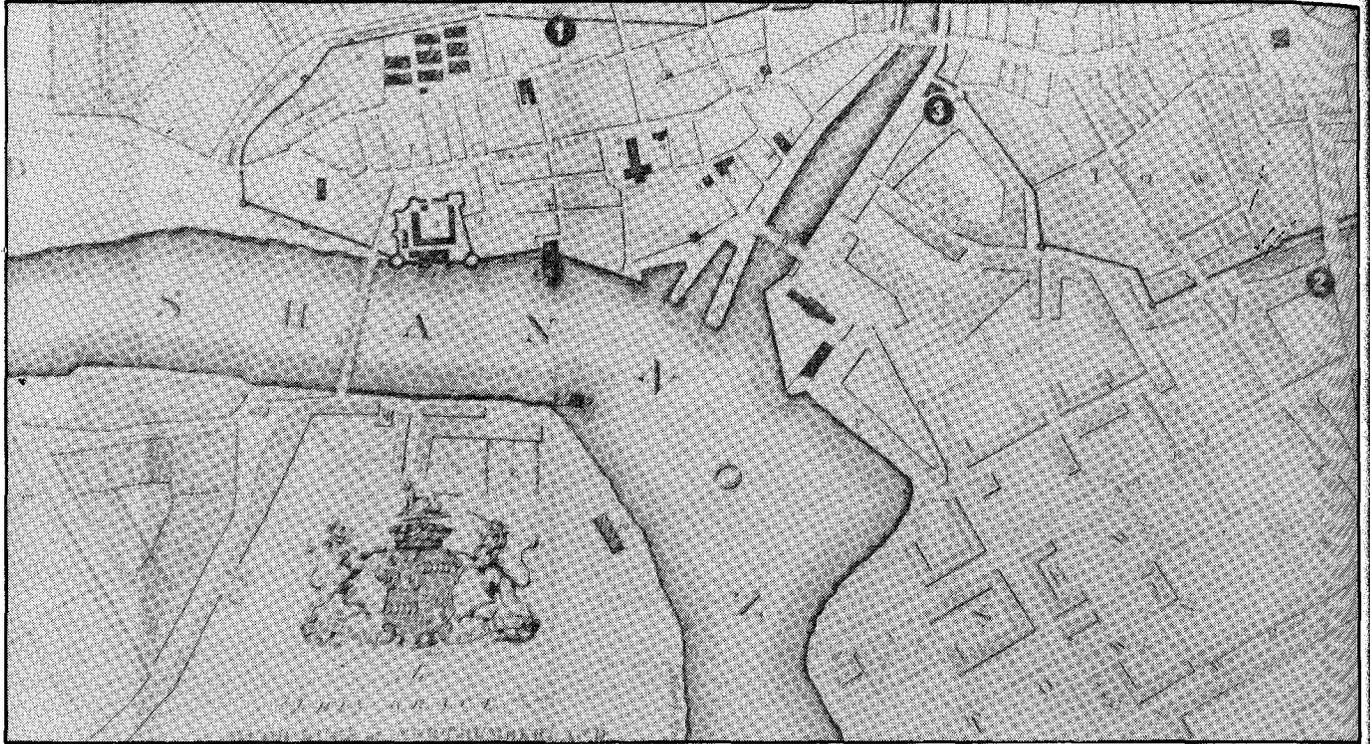
Many 'manufactories' could not be boasted of at this time, but amongst those which existed was an extensive glue mill in the Abbey, and it was considered most unfavourable to health. During the warm weather, to quote Dr. Geary, the effluvia emanating from putrid animal matter collected in this establishment poisoned the surrounding atmosphere, and dysentery 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



18th century map of Limerick.

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.

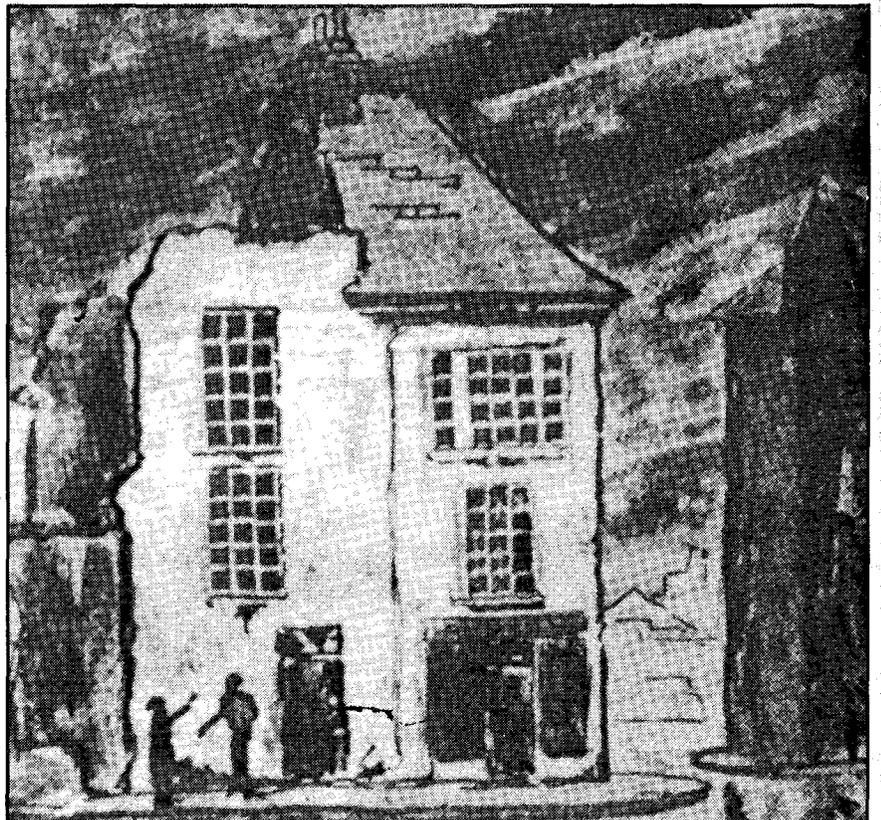
John Geary goes on to discuss the conditions of the streets from 1786 to 1792, and deploras the state of the city, the back lanes of the Irishtown, the Abbey and various other parts. During his work in one of these, he contracted fever himself, and mentions that a house situated near Mr. Kelly's tanyard, 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.