

# DR. SARAH O'MALLEY



*Sarah O'Malley and her husband, Charles, on their honeymoon on the Riviera, 1931.*

**I**n its 160 years' history Barrington's Hospital has produced more than its share of dedicated and hard-working men and women who served their fellow-citizens with concern and care. It is not easy to compress even a summary of this record of public service into one article: it is only possible to mediate a small part of it through one's own personal experience of the hospital and its staff.

Because of a nutrition-conscious grandmother, I was fortunate enough to enjoy strapping good health as a child, in spite of the war-time shortages, and so was fortunate enough to have visited the out-patients' department of Barrington's Hospital on only one occasion to have a tooth pulled. On a freezing winter morning, with the frost thick on the road, I made my reluctant way to the hospital. Having waited for some time in the cold, stone-flagged waiting-room, I was given an injection, and had the offending tooth pulled. The path outside felt as icy as my numbed mouth, as I emerged freezing and bleeding from the hospital and, with my neck-scarf wound around my mouth, made my return journey home, feeling intense physical pain for the first time in my short life.

Although I was fortunate enough never to have to re-visit Barrington's

## *by Patsy Harrold*

again, my daily journey to school led me along the length of Broad Street, across Baal's Bridge, past the hospital, Mary Street, and Nicholas Street, and down the hill to St. Mary's convent, in the centre of the 'Parish'. In short, I lived some hundreds of yards from Barrington's, and in walking from the heart of the Irishtown to the heart of the Englishtown, I passed the hospital every weekday.

The Irishtown of the late 1940s was a busy, bustling place. Almost a village in itself, it had two bakeries, a large hardware store, a dozen pubs, several groceries and a variety of sweet and other shops. Every morning, Broad Street was lined with donkeys and carts from which the Parkmen sold the produce of their vegetable gardens. The Irishtown was the main shopping centre for the people of Garryowen and the surrounding areas, many of them the wives of labourers, pork butchers and the more modestly prosperous tradesmen. Among the busiest shops in the street were the six meat shops; not butcher's stalls as such but shops where pigs' offal from the three bacon factories in the city was sold at relatively cheap prices.

For the poor people who lived in the

squalid network of lanes that faced and surrounded the hospital, a visit to Barrington's was often a monthly or even a weekly occurrence. Even when good food (within war-time's restricted range) was available, the poor could not afford to buy it. The resultant lack of vitamins, and the general lack of hygiene, resulted in frequent outbreaks of scabies and other slum diseases. Every spring brought an epidemic of measles among children, a disease which was often neglected, leaving many of the children with impaired eyesight. Poverty was rampant, and even the hardiest were afflicted with minor ailments resulting from poor nutrition and bad housing.

For all these victims of an indifferent state which had failed to provide little more than the most rudimentary form of health care, the outpatients' department was a haven. The sorry and sick queue of people who daily crowded the hard benches were abjectly grateful for the ministrations of the hospital staff.

The clinic, with its stone floor and bare, wooden benches, was a cold and inhospitable building. And if the patient queue of misery suffered the cold and boredom, conditions were hardly ideal for the doctors and nurses either.

Of the many doctors who worked in the outpatients' department, Dr. Sarah O'Malley was probably the most



**Charles O'Malley.**

colourful. A petite and elegant figure, her outward gentle femininity could be deceiving, because she had an inner determination which enabled her to hold her own with all her male colleagues. She spent almost a lifetime in Barrington's, starting as a young woman in 1934, when a woman doctor was

something of a novelty, and finally retiring a year or so before her death in 1981, at the age of eighty.

Sarah (or 'Judy', as she was better known to her friends), grew up in Thurles, where her father worked as a county engineer at the time of the foundation of the state. She entered college at the early age of sixteen, and spent her first year in the arts' faculty, intending to pursue a career in teaching. After a year, she switched to medicine, the profession she was to practice for the next sixty years. When she finished her medical studies, she went to York to work as an intern, and it was there that she specialised in ophthalmology.

While holidaying in Switzerland with a friend in the late 1920s, she met the young Limerick dentist, Charles O'Malley, who was ill with tuberculosis. They fell in love, and decided to get married, although Charles warned her that she might have to be a working wife for the rest of her life because of his bad health. In 1931, they borrowed £100, and went off on their honeymoon to the Riviera.

Back in Limerick, they immersed themselves in the cultural life of the city and, through Charlie's friend, Stan Stewart, the noted local antiquarian, became friendly with the writers Frank O'Connor and Sean O Faoláin. After O'Connor's translation of Brian Merriman's poem, 'The Midnight Court,'



**Sarah O'Malley, president of the Thomond Archaeological Society, 1975, wearing the Gleninsheen collar.**

had been banned in the late 1940s, he was blacklisted for a period and found it hard to secure regular employment. When the Cork-born writer was in financial difficulties he was always sure of hospitality in the O'Malley home in Pery Square.

Their good friend, John Hunt, the art historian, was also a frequent visitor to Pery Square. The playwright, poet and district justice, Donogh McDonogh, was another friend of the O'Malleys, and regularly visited their house on trips to Limerick.

In 1965, Charles became president of the Thomond Archaeological Society. After her husband's death, Sarah renewed her interest in the affairs of the Society. She emulated her late husband by becoming president of the Society in 1975, and was the first officer to wear the 800 B.C. Gleninsheen collar, the insignia of the Society. She was a lively president, being most hospitable to visiting societies, and making full use of her office to encourage more regular social events. She did much to dispel the fuddy-duddy image of the Society. Sadly, in 1980, her health began to deteriorate, forcing her to give up her many activities and to restrict her social outings. In the last months of her life she was only able to see a few of her old friends.

She was a loyal member of the staff of Barrington's for about 45 years, and any account of the hospital in this period would not be complete without an appreciation of her contribution. Fortunately, her death did not sever the O'Malley connection with the health services in Limerick: not only did her dental surgeon son, Charles, preserve his parents' association with Pery Square, but her daughter, Grace, married the surgeon, George Cantillon, who also served in Barrington's for more than thirty years.



**Drawing of Sarah ('Judy') O'Malley by A. Griffin, April, 1962.**