

MICHAEL ROBERTS

In Limerick, the intermixture of past and present slightly distresses an English nose and an English morality. Not far from the station, clean, trim, with blue-uniformed maids disappearing through well-painted, brass-plated doors under the fanlights, an Irish Harley Street runs towards the Shannon. In the consulting rooms of surgeons, physicians, eye specialists, gleamingly equipped, one may see from the framed diplomas on the wall, that a degree was taken, first at Trinity, then, not in London, but in the medical schools of Vienna. Not so far away, if one continues down hill to the Shannon, walks along its open waters by the wide quay, one's enjoyment of the windy air of an open-and-shut day is interrupted suddenly by a smell, the smell of decay and dirt and being poor. Dirty-legged children appear, dirty Rowlandson-like woman slipper-slopper by under black shawls.

You ask how I came to write about Limerick. Looking for dolmens, caves, sheila-na-gigs and limestone flora, we had been staying in Co. Clare with friends of the Irish poet Geoffrey Taylor. My wife was agonized by getting something in her eye which felt large as the capstone of a dolmen. The something wouldn't be dislodged, and on our way home we stopped in Limerick and in a smart doctors' street, found a very handsome young Irishman, who whisked out a speck of dust and said to my wife as he did so that she couldn't be English, from her accent. She said, no, she came from Vienna. "How much do I owe you?" asked my wife. "Nothing", said the eye-doctor, "a present from one Viennese to another". A good omen, so we stayed on for a while in Limerick'.

When I first read these words, written by the English poet Geoffrey Grigson about Limerick in the 1940s, I had little difficulty in identifying the 'very handsome young Irishman' with the degree and the framed diploma taken 'in



'...under the tutelage of the legendary Bruce Murray, in the late 1920s, the Limerick Boat Club ... swept the honours' board ... with Michael Roberts as cox'.

by Jim Kemmy

the medical schools of Vienna'. Even though he was, strictly speaking, an E.N.T. (ear, nose and throat) specialist, who else could it have possibly have been but Michael Roberts?

The give-away word for me was not contained in the description of the dashing, debonair doctor: it was the word 'whisked'. For Michael Roberts was never one to balk at whisking a piece of stone or any other kind of obstruction from an ear, nose, or throat – or, occasionally, even from an eye. I have good reason to know something about his agility: in 1962, when I was a hefty 25 year old, he not only removed my tonsils but also an obtrusive bone from my nostril – all during the same operation in Barrington's Hospital.

One of his medical colleagues at Barrington's, Robert Holmes, put it well, when he accurately captured the surgeon's talents:

'Michael was skilful and energetic, quick to adopt new techniques and advances, and soon became a leading figure in his chosen profession'.

When Michael Roberts retired from the staff of Barrington's in April, 1984, after 49 years service, another one of his colleagues, Dr. Gerald Tyman, paid him this tribute:

'Dr. Roberts' skill and dexterity would always be remembered ... the number of calls he made to the hospital in the small hours must have been numerous'.

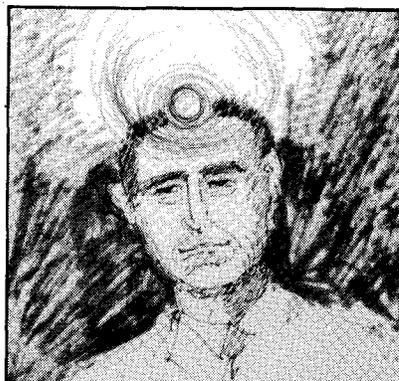
Michael Roberts joined the staff of Barrington's Hospital in 1936, just three years after he had qualified as an ENT specialist. He had earlier completed his training in London and Vienna, hence the certificates on the walls of his consulting rooms.

He became medical secretary of Barrington's in June, 1954 on the death of Dr. William G. O'Sullivan, who had spent 40 years on the staff of the hospital. Michael Roberts served for more than twenty years as secretary before handing over to Dr. Colm Toland, about a decade ago.

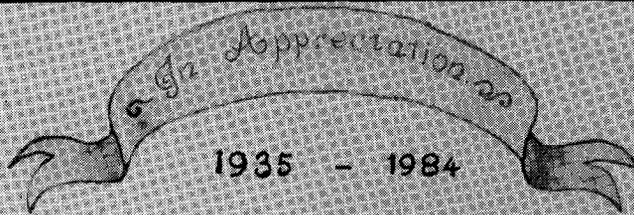
As a surgeon, he was always a busy performer, not only in Barrington's but in a number of other hospitals throughout the region. He carried out an average of 1,500 operations yearly, and sometimes reached as many as 2,000. On the day he retired from Barrington's, he carried out 13 operations.

Michael Roberts was also known throughout Munster as a sportsman. He worked hard in his consulting rooms and operating theatres, and played hard on golf courses in Limerick, Adare and Lahinch; earlier he had been an outstanding cox with the Limerick Boat Club.

His first sporting love was rowing and he started out on the Shannon River at the age of twelve, under the tutelage of the legendary Bruce Murray. In the late 1920s the Limerick Boat Club had some outstanding crews, and swept the honours' board at successive regattas in Limerick and Cork, with Michael Roberts as cox. The Barrington family, I am sure, fully approved of his prowess on the river.



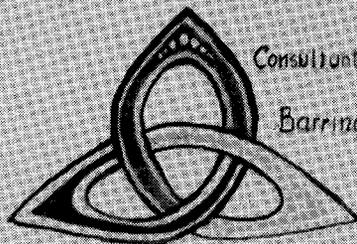
Drawing presented to Michael Roberts by the staff on his retirement from Barrington's in April, 1984, after 49 years' service.



With this presentation on the occasion of your retirement, Dr. Roberts, the staff of Barringtons Hospital desire to record their deep appreciation of your dedicated service to the patients and to your un-failing spirit of courteous co-operation with all the members of the staff throughout the years.

We wish you many years of happy retirement to enjoy the memory of your long-extended healing ministry.

To Doctor Michael Roberts, B.A., M.A., M.Ch., B.A.O.,



Consultant ENT Surgeon
Barringtons Hospital,
Limerick

Address presented to Dr. Roberts on his retirement in memory of his 'long-extended, healing ministry'.

He was to become even more famous as a golfer. He played off a handicap of two, and met all the leading amateur golfers of his day, including Joe Carr, John Burke, Jimmy Bruen, Cecil Ewing and many more. Fifty-one years ago, he became the first captain of Castletroy Golf Club and held this position for three years in 1937, '38 and '39. He later went on to become president of the club.

He did not confine all his golfing activities to Castletroy. He also played at the Limerick, Adare and Lahinch clubs. He served as captain and president of Limerick and Lahinch, and as captain of Adare. Although he was never to win a national golf title, he did capture hundreds of prizes in competitions throughout Munster.

When he retired from Barrington's after nearly a half-century of work at the hospital, there was a large gathering of his colleagues and friends for the farewell ceremony. In his parting address he stated that the people of Limerick

should respect the work and dedication of the nursing staff and house-surgeons. He pointed out that this attitude should be particularly applicable to the patients department. The staff of Barrington's showed their appreciation for his life-time's work at the hospital by presenting him with a variety of gifts, including a replica of Martin Cregan's 1830 portrait of the seven members of the Barrington family who established the hospital.

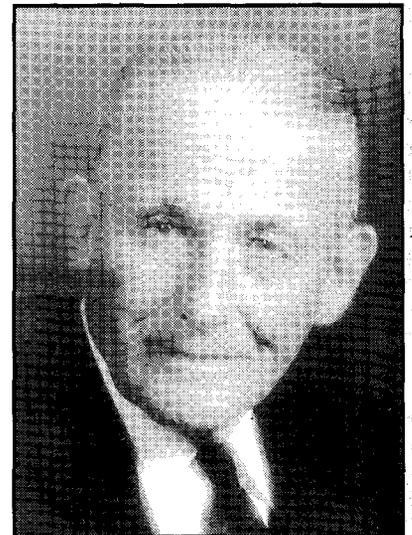
Despite all his medical and sporting honours, Michael Roberts is quietly

modest about his achievements. Noted for his direct manner of speech, he never lost the idiom and cadences of his native city. Even in his retirement he has retained all the discipline that stood him in such good stead throughout his long working life.

Life has been good to him, and his labours have brought their own tangible rewards. It must, of course, be said also that he, in turn, used his talents, training and experience wisely and well. And there can be no doubt that his life's work has brought relief and solace to very many people.

Still as sprightly as ever, he lives today in comfortable, restful retirement with his wife, Aileen, and with his family in close proximity. Freed, at last, from professional pressures and the grind of his daily duties, he relaxes in his elegant house, surrounded by a delightful garden, laid out below in an old, disused quarry. It is a retreat to enjoy and savour, and he is making the most of his new-found leisure.

Few people will begrudge the Peter Pan of the Limerick medical profession his well-earned and contented rest.



The Peter Pan of the Limerick medical profession '... in his well-earned and contented retirement'.



His colleague, Dr. Gerald Tynan, presented Michael Roberts with this replica of the Barrington family portrait, April, 1984.