THE O'HICKEYS

HEREDITARY PHYSICIANS TO THE O'BRIENS OF THOMOND
AND SOME OF THEIR DESCENDANTS

By

LIEUT.-COLONEL J. HICKEY, M.C.

The O'Hickeys have from remote times been Hereditary Physicians to the O'Briens, Kings of Thomond.

The very name O'Hickey is derived from the Gaelic word O'Caigh or O'Icedhe, which means ‘descendant of the healer’. This name was assumed as a proper name about A.D. 1006 when Brian Boiro-mhce, King of Thomond and Monarch of Ireland, directed families to assume proper names. Historical Irish records set out that the O'Hickeys are descended from Cormac Colchin, second son of Cathan Fionn, 14th King of Munster, who, in A.D. 420, is said to have been converted to Christianity and baptized by St. Patrick. His great-grandson, Aodh Caomh, 17th King of Cashel and Munster, is recorded as having built the first Christian church in Ireland at Killaloe. The name and the profession of the O'Hickeys has therefore been in existence for nearly sixteen centuries. Even down to the present century, the O'Briens, descendants of the last Kings of Thomond, have had the Hickeyes at various times as their physicians and so sustained the ancient tradition.

In view of their position as Hereditary Physicians, the O'Hickeys held the Clan lands of Ballyhickey, Drim and other townlands in the vicinity of Quin, Co. Clare. There is in the British Museum, a record in Latin by General Vallany[1] which sets out that "in the last year of the reign of Conor O'Brien, “na Srona” (of the nose), King of Thomond, an obstinate battle was fought by this Chief against Gerald, 8th Earl of Kildare, the Lord Deputy, near the Castle of Ballyhickey, which the Earl took soon after by assault, together with the castle of Fead Beg and other castles in Thomond". (A.D. 1496).

These castles were no doubt subdued by artillery fire which was first used by the Earl of Kildare in 1485. Ballyhickey Castle was razed to the ground as no trace of it is shown in the Down Survey map of the Baronie of Bunnratty in the County of Clare, 1658.

During the reign of Elizabeth, there were constant risings against the government, and the family were turned out of the major part of their lands at Drim and Ballyhickey. They were, however, owing to being physicians, able to sustain themselves by their medical talents. By grant of Elizabeth in 1602[2] a pardon was granted to Donnell O'Hickey of Ballymacdonnell near Tulla. It is further disclosed at an Inquisition at Quin 1605[3], reign of James I, that Donnell

---

O'Hickey of Ballycoregane, father of Donnell Oge, was conveyed certain other lands near Tulla. Two other members of this family were John O'Hickey 1648, also of Ballycoregane, recorded in Lenihan's History of Limerick, and James O'Hickey of Ballymacdonnell, son of Donnell Oge above. All these O'Hickey's are described as "Physicians".

In addition, at this time other O'Hickey Physicians are recorded as living in Glenacallagh near Killaloe and also across the Shannon in Aradh, and as such, had mensal lands around Portroe and Ballina long before Cromwell's time. They were the Hereditary Physicians to the Mac Ui Bhrain of Aradh. One of these O'Hickey's was a civil survey commission juror.

In the General Confiscation of 1654 the entire O'Hickey lands were swept away both at Ballyhickey and Drim and at Ballycoregane. In the Hearth Money Rolls of 1665-67, many of these Hickey's are shown as living in the parishes of Kilrush and Temple a Calla across the Shannon from Killaloe.

Further light is thrown on the family affairs in the Chichester House records of 1702. After the abortive rising in support of James II those suspect of being involved must once again prove title to their lands. Loughlin O'Hickey, in his petition No. 1250/51 states that "Viscount Clare being indebted and under obligation to his father, Maurice O'Hickey of Tarmon, did, by purchase in 1672 convey the lands of Drim to his family." The claim succeeded, and the main portion of the property remained with his descendants until 1803.

The original Drim House has been in ruins for many years. It was there that the family gave refuge to the last Friar of Quin Abbey, the Rev. Father Hogan, who died in 1819. He is buried in the precincts of the Abbey, as were for many generations, the Hickey's of Drim. The last of this family, Patrick Hickey, resident on the remains of the Hickey lands, died in 1909. There are, however, collateral branches of his family, Macnamaras, Hoggins and Corbetts still resident in East Clare.

The Drim family is now represented by the Hickey's of Kilkee and other descendants of the Hickey's in Co. Limerick and Tipperary. The Ennis Hickey's whose forebears went to India in mid-eighteenth century and distinguished themselves as soldiers and administrators in that country, also derive from the Hickey's of Drim. They are now resident in Co. Wicklow and in Sussex.

In ancient times, medical knowledge was handed down from father to son; prospective medical students were also apprenticed in doctors' families. Other students proceeded to learn on the continent of Europe, where still remain in the ancient archives of libraries and monasteries, the Gaelic medical books and papers which they used.

From the 5th to 10th centuries, culture and learning in Ireland was at its peak. Latin was spoken as a vulgar tongue, so students abroad had little difficulty in mastering foreign books. In medical families, records of cases were maintained, describing symptoms, cures tried, and the results. These documents were passed from father to son—hence Hereditary Physicians were established.

---

(4) Book of Forfeiture & Distribution, P.R.O. Dublin.
(5) Court of Claims—Petitions, P.R.O. Dublin.
Kingdoms and tribes maintained physicians to deal with the ailments of their Chiefs and people, and a sort of nursing home was kept in being where acute cases were handled. These were known as Houses of the Territory. Serious surgical cases were treated in these small hospitals, as were battle casualties. Deep wounds were drained by tubes, and skin grafting was employed to help in healing. There is a record of sheep skin being grafted on successfully, but exception was taken to the operation as the area continually grew a fleece which had from time to time to be shorn. Sweating baths were also available.

By tradition, the O'Hickeyes were noted for brain surgery and the art of trepanning with silver plates the fractures and other skull injuries sustained in battle by the soldiers.

History does not record, nor do the O'Hickeyes claim to be in the same class of physicians as the great Druid, Dianceecht, who treated the common cold with his magie porridge of hazelbuds, chickweed, wood sorrel and dandelions, nor indeed to be so skillful as the renowned Troesdale, also a Druid, who could prepare a bath from the milk of whitefaced cows, in which warriors bathed before going into battle, and so became immune to the poison in spear or arrow.

In the Ireland of the Dark Ages and down even to the nineteenth century, the doctors, be they Druid, witch doctors, or physicians, had much to contend with. The climate was soft and moist, and so all forms of bacteria flourished. The recurring famines were also responsible for a high mortality owing to the people being weakened by starvation. Every form of disease seemed to thrive. In St. Patrick's time there was leprosy and, in the fourth century, a king of Tara was carried off by a "flux of the belly"—dysentery. In the sixth century there was famine, yellow fever and smallpox. At the same time a plague killed many of the cattle. Disease in honeybees denied the population of part of their staple diet—honey. Famine forced the population to resort to cannibalism. In the eight century there was famine followed by pestilence, and the ninth brought famine again and cattle plague. In A.D. 1080 plague killed three-quarters of the population of Ireland. It is a dismal tale, even to the famine of 1847-8-9.

In addition to all this misery, there were constant frays, raids and battles between the small kingdoms and the tribes, apart from the invasion of the Danes and the Norsemen.

In all this turmoil the doctors played a major part, tending with skill the sick and seeing to the wounded. St. Breccain is recorded at this period as having founded in Ireland one of the first teaching establishments of a medical nature at Belturbet. He himself was a skilled surgeon and physician. He died in A.D. 578. The high standard of learning and education at the time offered great advantages to Irish medical students working abroad. They invariably knew Latin and, in addition, were no strangers to most of the chief languages of the Continent. Many foreign books were brought home for translation into Latin or Gaelic.

In 1403 Boulger O'Callahan and Nicholas O'Hicidhe wrote a commentary on the Aphorism of Hippocrates, of which a fragment is preserved in the British Museum. Here too is a translation of Medecinae by Bernard de Gordon—known as The Lilium.
In 1489 Donough O'Hickey translated into Irish the works of contemporary European surgeons and physicians, e.g., the work of Pietro d'Argeloto, the Chirurgia. Another treatise, Regimen Sanitatis by Arnuldis de Villa Nova deals with cancer and infections of the body. There are in the British Museum two further medical works, a vellum of 1589 by Thomas O'Hicceide of Clare and a second work by Donal O'Troy, written for the O'Hickeys. The best of the O'Hickeys work is set forth in the Book of the O'Hickeys now in the National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

Another doctor of a hereditary physician family, O'Mara, wrote many medical works which were much sought after, not alone in Ireland, but also on the Continent. Other hereditary physician families were O'Lees, O'Cassidy's, and O'Kennedys. The MacClancys, the great brehons of Clare, also wrote medical treatises.

Even to-day there are many Hickeys practising as doctors throughout the English-speaking world, who are totally unaware of their ancient connection with the medical arts.

And now, in our own times, the local medical practitioner remains equipped with the latest knowledge of medicine and surgery. Yet there is little change in the man himself. He is the same friend, helper and adviser to the sick and sorry as was his counterpart, the Doctor of Physic, in the days of long ago.

(7) Royal Irish Academy, MS 24, p.96.
(8) British Museum, Irish MSS, App LI.