Governors, Staff and Lunatics
Life in the Limerick District Lunatic Asylum 1827-1901

by Elaine O’Malley

The large mental hospitals on the outskirts of some Irish towns and cities evoke thoughts of dark and difficult times. The architecture is large and solid, foreboding even. The Limerick District Lunatic Asylum (LDLA), now known as St Joseph’s Hospital is one such building.

To understand the reasons the LDLA was built it is useful to outline the history of the treatment of mental illness in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Those suffering from mental problems were described as lunatics, imbeciles and idiots. These are the terms used to describe those with mental illness at the time, and will be used in the course of this article to describe those who were treated in the asylum. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries there were no designated institutional centres for the care and confinement of those suffering from lunacy. In England for example, lunatics were housed in gaols, workhouses and houses of industry and were described as the lunatic poor. While some were deemed to be cured and released back into the community, many others spent most of their lives within the asylums. Following the passing of acts of parliament, including the Prisons Act 1787, it was recognised that lunatics needed to be housed in separate wards within the prisons and the workhouses. In Ireland the system of confinement of lunatics was similar. The exception was Swift’s hospital, known as St Patrick’s, which was opened in Dublin in 1737 following a bequest by Dean Swift.¹

Following the Act of Union in 1800, the administration for Ireland was directed by the Lord Lieutenant, assisted by the chief secretary, based in Dublin Castle. In 1810 the Duke of Richmond together with his fellow governors from the Dublin house of industry, secured a government grant to build a separate asylum for lunatics in Dublin, it was called the Richmond Asylum. Lunatics from around the country were sent here instead of to the house of industry, but in time it too became overcrowded. Following the building of several district asylums it became a district asylum in 1830.²

In 1816 Robert Peel, Chief Secretary of Ireland (1812-1818), appointed a three man committee to investigate the best way to house and treat lunatics. The committee consisted of Sir John Foster, the governor of the Richmond Asylum, and Thomas Spring Rice from Foyneys, Co Limerick, who was a governor of the Limerick house of industry. Also serving on this committee was Sir John Newport from Waterford. Thomas Spring Rice was horrified at the conditions and treatment of lunatics in the Limerick house of industry. He described truly appalling conditions "in which the accommodation afforded to the insane will appear to be such as we should not appropriate for our dog-kennels."³ The committee found that it was no longer feasible to house lunatics in a central lunatic hospital in Dublin.⁴ A parliamentary decision was taken to build district asylums, each to house between 130 and 150 patients.⁵ This change in attitude to lunacy was influenced by the writings in John Locke’s Essays Concerning Human Understanding written in the seventeenth century.⁶ Psychologists felt that a stable, comfortable environment, in other words, moral management rather than physical restraint, was essential in the care and recovery of those suffering from lunacy. The treatment of lunacy in Ireland developed from this realisation. It was also felt that those suffering from lunacy should not be allowed to roam freely as they may be a danger to themselves and others.
Underlying all this was a need by the government to contain any social unrest. In 1835 an act of parliament, 1 & 2 Geo IV, c. 33, made provision for the opening of nine district asylums. The early phase of building asylums, up to 1835 was administered from Dublin by an eight-member board of control. Nine asylums were built during this period at a combined cost of £269,000. Central government supplied the capital necessary for the building of the district asylums and the grand juries had to repay the loan within fourteen years. The grand juries decided on presentments and the asylum was granted capitalization for each patient. While the early asylums catered for up to 150 inmates, by the 1860s the asylums were big enough to house up to 300 patients.

Against this background the LDLA was proposed in 1817 and opened in 1827. It was designed by Dublin architects Johnston and Murray and was built by Williams and Cockburn, also of Dublin. It was built of limestone with four wings radiating out from a central octagon. It was 429 feet wide and 314 in depth and could accommodate 150 patients. It was built on the outskirts of the city in the area known as Spittalands. (Fig 1). The street became known as ‘misery row’ due to the fact that the asylum, jail and fever hospital were situated there.

Seven years after it opened it was overcrowded and additional buildings were added to accommodate an extra 150 patients. As it was a district asylum patients from Clare and Kerry were admitted. Following the opening of asylums in Kerry (Killarney 1832) and Clare (Ennis 1848) it only catered for patients from the Limerick area. This eased the pressure on space temporarily but due to the increasing numbers of lunatics the asylum became overcrowded once more. The maps (Figs 2, 3, 4, 5) show clearly the expansion of the buildings and the Roman Catholic chapel to the rear of the main building. This was built by Fogarty and Co. in 1863 and cost £700. By 1892 there were additional wings to the church (Fig 5). The Protestant patients did not have a designated church and the asylum boardroom was used for worship. A Turkish bath was also built in the 1860s, refurbished in the 1880s but was underused. The expansion of the asylum continued throughout the nineteenth century and by the 1890s it could accommodate 500 and remained frequently overcrowded. The airing yards, thought by the medical men to be so beneficial to the treatment of lunacy became enclosed within the additional buildings.

Until 1888 the Resident Medical Superintendent (RMS) and his family lived in the asylum itself. For many years the governors had sought to buy or build a suitable dwelling without success. Finally in 1888 Dr O’Neill (seen in photo Fig 6) was the first to move into the house called Elmhurst (Fig 4), which was built, in the grounds of the asylum. Today it is used as offices.

During the planning period for the LDLA a board of governors, was appointed to oversee the building and running of the asylum. Some of the names on the list include, the Right Honourable the Earl of Clare, the Honorable Colonel Fitzgibbon MP, Thomas Spring Rice Esq., MP Other men such as Lord Emly, Mr Harris, Mr Roche and Mr Spillane, millers and merchants are on the list. Prominent Limerick families represented on the board in later years were Barrington, Massy, O’Brien, Furnell and Howley.

The original order appointing members of the board of governors included the following.

... also the Right Reverend the Bishop of Limerick, the Very Reverend the Dean of Limerick, the Archdeacon of Limerick, the Mayor of Limerick, and the Recorder of Limerick, all for the time being Governors and Directors of said Asylum.

The phrase ‘for the time being’ was to cause problems in the 1870s between the RMS, Dr Maxierre Courtenay, the Mayor and the Privy Council in Dublin Castle. Letters were exchanged between the parties over a period of three years on the subject. The interpretation from Dublin was that no order had been made which entitled the mayor to act ex officio. Ambrose Hall, Mayor of Limerick in 1875 wrote in reply,
I have to say that I cannot understand why the right of ex officio members of the board to act should be called in question now, after such members had been acting for nearly fifty years. Nor can I, without further information, say whether or not I as Mayor of Limerick, shall claim my right to continue to act. I shall thank you to furnish me with a copy of any document which authorised the mayor to act, as I must presume that such a document does exist, or the several mayors who have preceded me, since the asylum was built would not have been summoned to attend as governors.

The Privy Council replied on 26th January 1876

1. On any ex officio Governor and Director of a District Lunatic Asylum ceasing to hold the office by virtue of which he acts as such, he shall cease to be a Governor and Director, and his successor in the office aforesaid shall not be entitled to act as ex officio Governor or Director of a District Lunatic Asylum.

2. No person shall hereafter be entitled by virtue of any office which he may hold to act as an ex officio Governor and Director of a District Lunatic Asylum, except those persons who are now ex officio Governors and Directors, and who, prior to the date of this Order, have been authorised to act as such by virtue of any Order heretofore made.

The row rumbled on until 1878 when the mayor Stephen Hastings wrote on 15 January 1878, to the Lord Lieutenant to clear up the matter. He argued that as the office of mayor was a perpetual office, anyone who held the office should therefore serve ex officio on the board of governors. He had turned up to a board meeting only to be informed by the RMS Dr. Maziere Courtiney that he could not attend. His annoyance is evident when he wrote on 15 January 1878.

... The ancient Corporation of Limerick are naturally jealous of their long existing privileges, which it appears to have been the policy of recent legislation to maintain and enlarge, rather than to curtail; and I, as the present holder of the office of mayor, am unwilling to have any deprivation of such privileges established in my humble person.

The reply from Dublin Castle on 4 February 1878 stated

I am to state that the Order of the 28th January 1876 is within the powers conferred upon the Lord Lieutenant in Council by the 5th section of the 1 & 2 Geo. 4, c.33, and that its effect is, that you cannot in your capacity as Mayor of Limerick act as ex officio governor of the Limerick District Lunatic Asylum.

Further research is necessary to discover when exactly this state of affairs was resolved, as subsequently the mayor did sit on the board of governors. It does seem that Dr. Maziere Courtiney’s interpretation of the phrase ‘for the time being’ in the original order of 1822, was the cause of the confusion and subsequent efforts to have the situation clarified. He seems to have taken it upon himself to prevent the ex officio members of the board to attend the meetings. He was appointed RMS in 1873, after the resignation of Dr. John Fitzgerald.

Efforts were made for many years to have better representation of the local government on the boards of the asylums. Mr. Gabbett, a governor, stated that Limerick Corporation objected to the way governors were appointed as it gave the ratepayers no power. Following the local
government act of 1898 officials from the county and borough councils sat on the board. A special committee of Limerick Corporation monitored the intake of patients in the asylum. A deputation including Alderman Quinlivan, Fitzgerald and Mr Hastings, T.C. visited the asylum to inspect the list of 'pauper lunatics' chargeable to the city. This was to ensure that only people from the district were admitted.

Some governors were more diligent than others in attending the monthly board meeting. Mr Spillane, who was appointed in 1884 attended regularly and took his duties seriously. He was responsible for bringing the death of a patient in suspicious circumstances to the attention of the board and the inspectors. The patient, Mr Dunford, died as the result of being submerged in a plunge bath. The doctor had ordered the punishment because he had struck an attendant, and against the rules, did not inform to supervise the procedure. Mr Spillane subsequently discovered that the doctor had altered the written account of the event in the daily records. He brought this to the attention of the inspectors, expressing dismay that several visits by the inspector had not uncovered the event. As there had not been a coroners enquiry into the death, the attendant who administered the bath, went on trial for murder. He was cleared of all blame as he was following the instructions of the doctor. Dr Fitzgerald resigned in 1873 as a consequence of the whole affair.

The governors oversaw the running of the asylum and also the expansion of the lands and buildings.

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Accommodation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1827</td>
<td>150</td>
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<tr>
<td>1871</td>
<td>427</td>
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<td>1886</td>
<td>500</td>
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<td>1896</td>
<td>685</td>
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<td>1904</td>
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Total cost of buildings and land up to 1904 was £81,827.

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<th>Expansion of Land</th>
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<td>1838</td>
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<td>1838</td>
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<td>1897</td>
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The RMS and the matron carried out the administration of the asylum on a daily basis. The RMS was obliged to account for the finances and the conditions of the asylum at the monthly meetings. The governors dealt with tenders for supplies, admissions of patients and proper accommodation for them, the state of the sewers and the water supply. There were accusations occasionally of jobbery, that they favoured their friends when issuing contracts for supplies. The board challenged the rule of district asylums, which stated that all rejected tenders were to be sent to the board of control in Dublin for inspection. The members considered it a slight on their characters, the inference that they may not discharge their duties honourably, and campaigned for the rule to be overturned. They won the argument and the rejected tenders were kept in the asylum and made available to the inspector when he called. The new rule was adopted on 6 February 1875.

While most of the supplies were bought locally, the farm made a significant contribution to the asylum. Not only did it provide occupation for the patients, many of whom had come from farming and labouring background, but it produced food and in some years a profit also. When the railway was built in 1848 it divided the farm. The governors spent many years trying to have a subway built to enable easy access for the patients to parts of the farm. The only access was to walk up Blackboy road and cross at Blackboy Bridge. This remained the situation until the early 1920s when a crossing was constructed.
Conditions within the asylum were not comfortable for either staff or patients. The inspector of asylums, John Nugent reported in 1872 that there was little amusement for the patients and described the day rooms as 'comfortless in the extreme'. He was critical of the governors for not providing suitable accommodation for both patients and staff and suggested hanging pictures to brighten up the rooms. Throughout the years 1827-1901, the inspectors, the governors and the RMS complained of the poor conditions within the asylum. Descriptions of unheated corridors, poor bedding, overcrowding, and temporary sheds being used as dining rooms were included in the inspectors' reports throughout the nineteenth century. The sanitary conditions were also very poor and the constant overcrowding with patients sleeping on the floor did nothing to alleviate the problem.

The first moral manager in the LDAL was Mr John Jackson. He had no medical qualifications. His wife was automatically appointed Matron. They were not allowed to leave the asylum together under any circumstances and were obliged to spend holidays separately. They were however granted compassionate leave together when their son died. Their daughter, Miss Anna Maria Jackson, took over their duties while they were gone. Mr Jackson died in 1849 and was replaced by a medical doctor. The policy of having a medically trained man in charge of the asylum had been adopted and Dr John Fitzgerald became the first RMS. After a short period he became ill and his brother Robert was appointed in his stead. Dr Maziere Court-enay who replaced Dr Fitzgerald came from Derby Asylum and set up the Irish branch of the Medico-Psychological Association (MPA). He corresponded with Darwin in relation to lunacy and had sent him a case study and photographs of a patient in the LDAL. These papers are held in Cambridge. He was subsequently appointed an inspector of lunatic asylums and was replaced in 1850 by Dr O'Neill who had been assistant medical officer in the Richmond in Dublin.

It was the practice that a visiting physician called regularly to the asylum and this continued after the appointment of the RMS. Dr O'Callaghan was the first assistant medical officer and was followed by Dr Gelston, Dr O'Mara and Dr Patrick Coffey.

Following Mrs Jackson's retirement in 1850 matrons were appointed on their own merits. They were required to have nursing abilities, capable of sewing and while their duties were as onerous as those of the RMS they were paid half the salary. They too lived within the asylum as did most of the staff and attendants. The matrons who served in the asylum afterwards were Mrs Sleeman, Mrs Maria Raleigh, Mrs F Ryan, and in 1889 Mary Cregan was appointed. Dr O'Neill wished to have a qualified nurse as matron because he did not wish to have to teach her on her arrival.

The asylum also had a clerk who was in charge of the stores and provision. He had to keep the books, copy letters and keep all accounts. The first clerk was Mr Mc Donnell and on his death Mr Bodkin was appointed. He served for forty one years until he retired due to failing health and Mr P.J. Frost from Cratloe, Co Clare was appointed in 1893.

Mr John Bouchier served as apothecary in the asylum in 1858 and was followed by Mr John Lee. In the early years of the asylum system medicines were purchased from shops in the nearby cities and towns and the apothecaries prepared them on the instructions of the medical doctors.

The attendants in the asylum had no medical training until the 1880s when the MPA devised a handbook for attendants. Having completed training and exams attendants were awarded a certificate of proficiency in mental nursing and earned an extra £2 per annum. They were then referred to as nurses. Eugene O'Curry served as an attendant from 1827-1835.
after which he began work with the Ordnance Survey Office. Following his time there he was appointed Professor of Irish History in the Catholic University of Ireland in 1854.

Religious worship was an important part of the life and treatment of the lunatics and was thought to have beneficial effects on them. The Roman Catholic chaplains who served during the period 1827-1901 were, Reverend Malone, Reverend W Higgins, Reverend G Quain, and Reverend T Lee. The Protestant chaplains in the same period were, Reverend Jacob and Reverend T Meredyth.

The lunatics in the asylum did not benefit from comfortable surroundings, as in many reports of the inspectors and the RMS referred to the appalling and unsuitable for their treatment. The "causes" for lunacy were many and varied and included joy, immoderate use of tobacco, political and religious excitement, robbery, fortune, grief, pride and ambition and hysteria. Some of the physical causes were epilepsy, fever, effects of mercury and childbirth. However, the cause which was considered the most widespread was congenital. Efforts were made to pass legislation to prevent members of the same family marrying each other. Because of the poor conditions within the asylum many of those who were sleeping on the damp flagged floors died from pulmonary diseases.

Occupation for the inmates was limited to farm work for the men and laundry work and sewing for the women. The majority of those admitted were from a labouring and farming background. Many of the women were dressmakers before being admitted and their skills were put to use. They also worked in the laundry where in the 1890s over 8000 articles of clothing were washed each week.

The LDIA had an important role in the city in the nineteenth century. Asylums provided accommodation for large numbers of people and therefore needed supplies of food, candles, clothing and fuel. As these were purchased from local businesses, it was beneficial for the local economy. Employment was also provided within the asylum not only to the doctors and nurse attendants, but storekeepers, laundresses, ploughmen, tradesmen were also hired.

In 1873 the inspectors reported that there was more genuine lunacy in Limerick than anywhere else in Ireland. Further research is required to ascertain the causes for this increase in patient numbers in Limerick, which may be found in the records of the asylum itself. Life in the asylum was difficult for all who had to live there, staff and patients. It is evident that despite the efforts of the government, governors and staff, conditions were often very difficult. Basic comforts such as space, heat, occupation and good bedding seem to have been in short supply. There is little evidence that there was any improvement in conditions between 1827 and 1901. In fact the conditions deteriorated as the numbers of patients grew.

While research is ongoing, to date the study of the asylum in Limerick has relied on parliamentary papers, reports of the asylum and the monthly reports of the Board of Governors published in the Limerick Leader in the late 1890s. The asylum minute book 1822-1852 gives valuable information on the conditions and administration. However, there are inevitable gaps in the knowledge that can only be filled by the papers of the asylum itself. Access to the papers remaining in the hospital would provide a comprehensive study of such an important part of Irish social and medical history. As the numbers of patients in what are now the mental hospitals are dwindling and there is a change in the treatment of mental illness, it may be an appropriate time to chronicle in detail the history of the nineteenth century care of lunatics in the LDIA.
The building in Mulgrave Street stands as a monument to all the people whose lives were spent living and working within its walls.

REFERENCES

2. Finnan, p.22.
5. Finnan, p.23.
8. Finnan, p.32.
10. Ibid, p.33.
11. Ibid, p.32.
15. Ibid, p.651.
17. Limerick corporation special committee minute book 30 June 1859, L/SMin/2/1, Limerick Archives.
20. Ibid.
23. Minute book of the Limerick district Lunatic asylum 1822-1852, 10 June 1848.
24. Little of Dr Maziere Courtenay’s term as resident medical superintendent is known and source material from the asylum itself may help to correct this. His name appears as Maziere Court- enay on the website www.mdx.ac.uk/ www/study/4/ He is listed as Dr Maziere Courtenay in all other sources.
25. www.darwin.lib.cam.ac.uk.
27. Ibid, 13 Sept. 1893.
29. Report of the Limerick district Lunatic asylum for the financial year ended 31 March 1901 and the statistical year ended 31 December 1900, table xxv, p.36.
30. Limerick Leader, 10 Feb. 1897.
31. Twenty third report on the district, criminal and private Lunatic Asylums in Ireland, H.C. 1874, p.66.