

Medical History

The Launch of William Whitley's Medical Institute: Concept and Commissioning

Alun Evans

Introduction

For the first 23 years of its existence, The Ulster Medical Society (UMS) met in the General (Royal) Hospital in Frederick Street (see Figure 1), Belfast,¹ according to Joseph Nelson, "For several years...in the cold underground storey".² Alternatively, to John Fagan, the President in 1884-85, it was a "...congenial place, we must admit, for prosecuting its (the UMS's) operations."³ However, it had become apparent that a change of venue was necessary, but it would prove to be just one step in the quest for a permanent home for the UMS.



Figure 1:

The General (Royal) Hospital. Frederick Street, Belfast, c. 1900 (Courtesy of Archiseek)

The Belfast Museum

At a special meeting of the UMS on 23rd December 1884 a Report from its Council was:⁴

...desirous of increasing the interest of the members in the meetings of the Society, & feeling that your place of meeting is very far from being comfortable or attractive, with a view of bringing the members into closer fellowship one with the other.

It recommended a change of venue from the General Hospital to the Belfast Museum, and a change of day (from Tuesday to Thursday), and that tea should be served at 7.30 pm. The Museum, run by The Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society (BNH&PS), at No 7 College Square North, had been established by public subscription, the first of its kind in Ireland (see Figure 2).⁵



Figure 2:

The Museum, College Square North, Belfast, c. 1865 (Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland, Dublin)

The Report continued:⁴

Some of the junior members of the Society have felt that the meetings were very lukewarm and and that there is a want of sympathy displayed one with the other: & in order to bring about a closer acquaintanceship & cause a firmer bond of union to exist amongst the members of the Society – your Council recommend the “Social Cup of Tea.” Your Council express [sic] the hope that the members will throw more zeal & energy into the working of the Society, by attending the meetings in greater numbers and assisting the Society in procuring

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pabulum [intellectual sustenance].

This was passed and signed by John Fagan⁶ on 8th January 1885, when the first meeting in the Belfast Museum took place, although the UMS continued to hold its Annual General Meetings in the General Hospital.⁷ Fagan congratulated the members on the change of meeting place and expressed the hope that, "...the members would join more heartily in the working of the Society". The move, however, may have been triggered by external influences, because a piece in The Northern Whig reported⁸ the move, and continued:

This change has been rendered necessary by a decision come to that the meetings of the Society shall embrace the social element, and thus be conformed to the practice observed by similar scientific bodies in London, Dublin, and other large towns. The business of the meeting commenced at eight o'clock, but members assembled for tea half an hour earlier.

Some outside pressure may have been exerted by the British Medical Association which had held its Annual Meeting in Belfast the previous summer.⁹ In his Introductory Remarks,³ Fagan noted the change in venue, and hoped their work would be carried on with increasing energy under the somewhat altered conditions, adding:³

I entertain the hope that the meetings of this Society will be honoured as well as benefited by a larger attendance of its senior members than it has been heretofore.... We have, representing the various branches of the profession in this town, men of high culture and vast and varied experience, whose opinions in discussions on the subjects with which they have specially identified themselves would form valuable contributions to medical science....With a rich vein of material at its command, and as I hope, the active co-operation of all its members, both young and old, I see no reason, gentlemen, why the Ulster Medical Society should not hold a prominent place among similar institutions throughout the kingdom.

Indeed, the choice of the Museum as the new venue was an obvious one, as Fagan himself had joined the BNH&PS in 1875, as had a fair proportion of Belfast's senior doctors,¹⁰ including the doyens of early Victorian Medicine in Belfast.¹¹ Moreover, the Museum, as a cultural and social hub, was "A home of Science, Literature and Art," and, "...several of the other societies of the town...[had]... made it their home."¹²

Very probably, William Whitla (see Figure 3) had a hand in the UMS's choice of venue because he had moved into No 8, College Square North, next door to the Museum, in 1884,¹³ joining the BNH&PS in 1887.⁹ He and his Salvationist wife, Ada, resided there, until they moved into Lennoxvale in 1906, which was later to become the Vice-Chancellor's Lodge.¹³

The Museum became the UMS's home, almost continuously, for the next 17 years, after which, Dr Nelson recalled that the meetings were held, "...amidst stuffed birds, jars of snakes, and Egyptian mummies. (Laughter)".² Clearly, the UMS had come into close contact with the Museum's 'Cabinets of Curiosities'.⁵

The Excursion to Lombard Street

Almost a decade later the UMS moved into new premises at 13 Lombard Street and held its Annual General Meeting there on 20th July 1894.¹⁴ But things did not go well, because on 16th April 1896 a Council Report stated:¹⁵

Owing to the rapid growth of the Society and the inconvenience of the present rooms, the Council recommend that the owners be noticed [sic] of our intention to leave on 1st November next.

William Whitla later described the move as a "...dreary experience,"¹⁶ and Joseph Nelson thought the rooms were "...almost attic."²² In November 1896, meetings resumed¹⁷ in The Museum, except for an occasional one held in Queen's College,¹⁸ until dedicated accommodation became available late in 1902.

A Permanent Home for the Society

William Whitla had been President from 1886-87 and was asked to stay on for another year but "...circumstances beyond my control prevented my accepting the position then".¹⁶ He became President again in 1901, when, in his Opening



Figure 3:

Address to Sir William Whitla, June 1902, 'Illuminated by McCaw, Stevenson & Orr Ltd, in succession to Marcus Ward & Co., Belfast' (Courtesy of Special Collections, QUB Library)

Address in November, he gave a potted history of the ‘greats’ of Ulster Medicine, and intimated that the time was ripe that “...this flourishing Society should aspire to a local habitation of its own.” The Annual Dinner for 1901-02 took place on 21st November 1901, in the Princes’ Restaurant, Donegall Square North.¹⁹ It was attended by 84 persons.

Whitla was in great voice at the Dinner:¹⁹

As regards the length of the talking period to-night, when I sit down I suspect that none of you will suspect that I abridged the toast list in order to give rein to my own poor chatter, or that any one will feel like the Irish sailor after his first visit to church – “that there is too much singing with too little drinking, and one man engrossed the whole conversation.”

He insisted that he would not be delivering a speech, but he wished to make a simple statement regarding the future of the UMS, adding:¹⁹

When it gets very ‘dry’ I know you have the antidote at your elbows in the form of moisture. (I have taken the precaution to send the waiters round with the ‘minerals.’) At our opening meeting I ventured to voice what I believe is the universal feeling of the Society - that we should have a local habitation of our own, in which we could hold our meetings, and enjoy the privileges of a first-class library and reading-rooms in a place of which we might not be ashamed.

He ruled out the “dreary idea” of renting a series of rooms in a large public building and dismissed the possibility of re-appointing a large derelict house:¹⁹

It would not even be a white elephant, but a dead leaden-coloured beast, whose maw we could never fill, and it would not even be a joy to look upon.

The only hope he held out was a “building of our own” – a “Medical Institute” –but, “let us confine our attention entirely to the question of its upkeep.” Various projections and estimates ensued as to how the upkeep might be assured, as it was up to the UMS to take over the building’s upkeep. He continued:¹⁹

Since I have been your President fifteen years ago, it has been the dream of my life that one day I should be able to leave behind me when that day came enough money to build for you a suitable Institute.

Whitla’s dream was now realisable, thanks to the prodigious success of his medical publications, especially his *Dictionary of Medical Treatment*, which was translated into many languages, including Chinese.²⁰ Whitla went on to describe the new Institute:¹⁹

It will have a frontage of 45 feet...Upon the first floor will be one large room, or small hall, 45 by 33, outside measurement. It will be quite as large as the large room in the Museum... I trust this is the last dinner the UMS will ever have in a Restaurant. I should expect that this

hall will dine 120 people with comfort. ...members can smoke in the billiard room ...I should hope that, whilst the billiard room will be fully enjoyed by the members, that no spirituous liquors shall ever be supplied in the building, save at times like the annual dinner...a plot of ground within 100 yards from where we now meet, in College Square North, is available.

Doctors and Drink

The report of the Dinner in the News-Letter drew a lively correspondence under the heading ‘Doctors and Drink.’ It was sparked by a letter²¹ from a Dr AHH M’Murtry, of the Crumlin Road, who was a strong advocate of temperance.²² His polemical letter included lines such as the “‘fearful pit and miry clay’ of drunkenness,” and described the Prince’s Restaurant as a “Fashionable wine-shop,” commenting:²¹

It is surely possible for sensible men, especially for the members of the noble, learned, and honoured profession like the medical, to dine together, to perform every social function and fulfil every hospitable duty, to cultivate every virtue of fellowship and gratify every longing of brotherhood, without drinking intoxicating liquors. What possible affinity can such demoralising drinks have with those pure and lofty sentiments?

This drew a short, restrained reply from ‘MEDICO,’ which concluded:²³

If Dr. M’Murtry joins the new institute I am sure all will be glad of his mature advice and co-operation. His enthusiasm for the temperance cause is well known, and perhaps some overflow might be directed to elevate the profession in other ways.

‘M.D.’ also weighed in,²⁴ regretting, “...for the sake of the doctor’s reputation and consistency” that Dr M’Murtry had failed to quote his own words he delivered in a paper two years before:²⁴

Twenty years ago I had a severe attack of pneumonia, accompanied by extreme prostration. Two esteemed and trusted medical friends.... believing that I was in danger of sinking, ordered me a small and carefully regulated dose of whisky, which I took, and began to amend the self-same hour.

M.D. maintained that the whisky had not only saved “Dr. M’Murtry’s valuable life,” but under similar circumstances, had saved thousands of lives.

M’Murtry responded²⁵ with yet more temperance rhetoric, attacking M.D. for cloaking himself in anonymity, and ended:

To every word of the foregoing I firmly adhere today, though I am sorry that some of my brethren have somewhat disappointed the hope expressed in it. I am consoled, however, by the belief that my previous letter has won the approval, and I the spoken or unspoken thanks, of thousands of your readers. I thank you for



your courtesy, and decline to take any further notice of anonymous assailants.

M.D. replied,²⁶ observing that, "Dr. M'Murtry hath waxed wroth once more." He accused M'Murtry of trying to pose as a victim, and fired this Parthian shot:

An indulgence in intemperate language is as baneful to a man's reputation as is an indulgence in strong drink, and it greatly mars his power for good.

This very public spat cannot have done the local profession any good and rather took the gloss off Whitla's magnanimous gesture. Indeed, it is tempting to suspect that M.D. was none other than Whitla himself, but in his *Materia Medica* of 1903, although he recommends²⁷ alcohol, particularly whiskey, as a narcotic in a range of conditions, and, "... occasionally by the use of alcohol life may be saved which would otherwise be lost", he doesn't claim that it had saved thousands of lives.

The provision of alcohol at UMS functions was a perennial, vexed problem: in 1886, the question as to whether wine should be provided at a *Conversazione* was debated, but on the result of a motion, it was agreed that "... there should not be any wine".²⁸ The following year a motion that the wine bill for the dinner would be paid out of the UMS's funds was initially passed, and then voted down.²⁹ In 1901, the ticket for the Annual Dinner of 10s – 6d included aerated waters & cigars, but the wine bill was divided among those taking wine.³⁰

The Smoking Concerts

All this may explain why the UMS elected for Smoking Concerts: the first, "most successful." in 1900, hosted by the UMS President, James Graham, for the members on a vile February evening,³¹ and another to entertain those attending the British Association Meeting in September 1902. It was held in the Botanic Exhibition Hall and was attended by about 200 "principal professional gentlemen." They were treated to "... an attractive and varied literary and musical programme... assisted by Mr Whitworth Mitten, the accomplished London tenor, who charmed the audience with his several contributions,"³² with light refreshments being served. The Smoking Concerts seem to have been *Conversaciones* with smoking substituted for wine. According to the Irish-American journalist, Frank Harris,³³ "... sobriety became the custom" in just a decade towards the end of the Victorian era, and it was, "The cigarette introduced by the Prince of Wales which made London Society sober."

The source of the Smoking materials for the Concerts is not recorded.

The Medical Institute's Foundation Stone

The foundation stone was laid on April 12th 1902, by Professor Peter Redfern.³⁴ It was to be sited from land acquired from 'Inst' on the other side and end of College Square North. The work contractors were M'Laughlin & Harvey, and the architect, William J. Fennell. The estimated cost was about £6,500, and the building was due for completion by the

end of the year. The Chairman, the Reverend Dr Hamilton, President of Queen's College:³⁴

... understood there would also be rooms for recreation for such members of the medical profession, if there is any such, as ever condescended to such a light method of spending their time. (Laughter and Applause.)

The recently knighted Sir William Whitla then presented a solid silver trowel to Professor Redfern, who laid the stone amid loud applause, and declared it well and truly laid. In the cavity of the stone was placed a sealed bottle, containing records of the UMS. The silver trowel bore the Irish hallmark, an inscription, and a beautiful engraving of the new building, drawn to scale from the architect's plans.

The New Medical Institute's Opening

The Opening Ceremony on 26th November 1902³⁵ was a gala event with many guests invited (see Figures 4 & 5). It was performed by Lord Dudley, the Lord Lieutenant, accompanied by his wife, The Countess of Dudley. The three-storey building was perpendicular in the Gothic style,

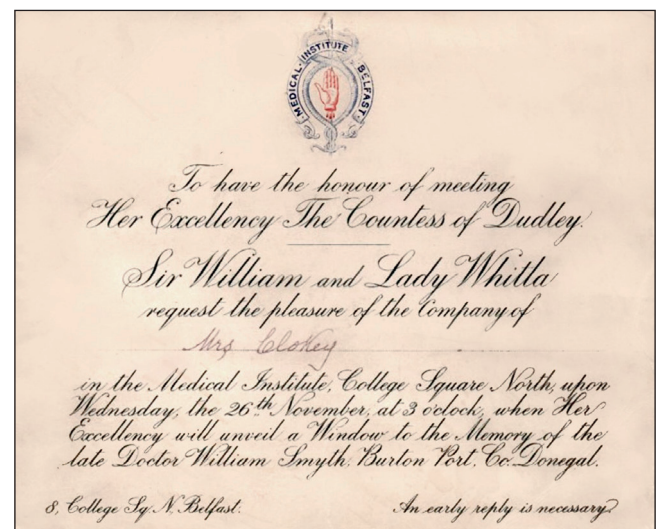


Figure 4:

Invitation to the Unveiling of the Dr Smyth Memorial Window (Obverse side – Author's Collection), sent to a 'Miss Clokey,' probably the Principal of Glencraig Infant School, and a friend of Ada, please see: <https://streetdirectories.proni.gov.uk/media/05PPtPE-sOd8ROtNTB5ugw.a?ts=xUFJvQJaGZFORucuqB5SmO5VrzQOQcRxaN77Ed2694q0.a> (Last visited: May 2022)

in ashlar with red Dumfries sandstone worked in moulded dressings, which included stone 'bosses' carved with the heads of four great local physicians: Andrews, Gordon, MacCormac (elder), and Redfern. The total cost of the new Institute was about £8,000 [£800,000 today].

The Chair was again taken by Dr Hamilton, President, who observed:³⁵

The hour of enfranchisement of the Ulster Medical Society, struck upon the clock of time, and with that hour

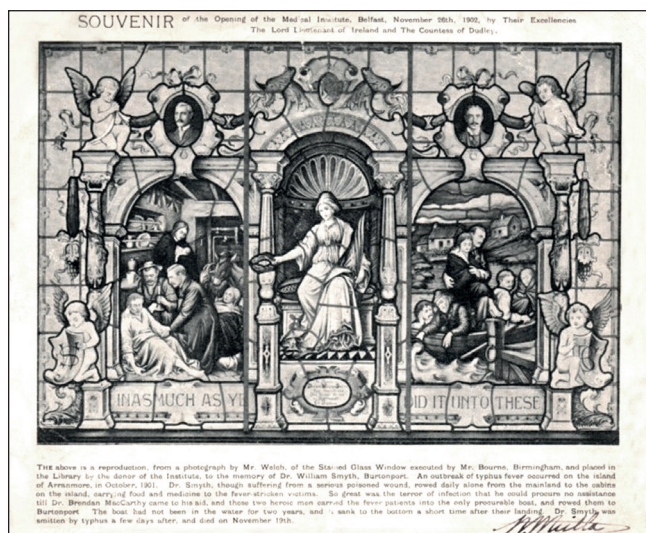


Figure 5:

Invitation to the Unveiling of the
Dr Smyth Memorial Window (Reverse side)

came the man in the person of my friend, your friend, Sir William Whitla.”

Sir William then spoke, and having handed the deeds to Dr Campbell, the incoming UMS President, amid great cheering, he presented the key to the Lord Lieutenant. The key had its head in the form of an open shamrock. It is joined to a fluted and tapered stem by richly carved mouldings; the former was encircled by sprays of shamrock. The obverse of



Figure 6:

The Whitla Medical Institute, College Square North,
Belfast, in 1986 (Courtesy of Dr Paul Larmour)

the key bore an enamel replica of the seal of the new Medical Institute, with the Red Hand of Ulster in the centre. The Institute finally became ‘The Whitla Medical Institute’ after Sir William’s death in 1933.³⁶

The Lord Lieutenant then declared the new Institute open (see Figure 6) and lavished praise on Sir William’s generosity. Speeches followed from Dr Hamilton, Professor Redfern and Dr Nelson.

The Lord Lieutenant and Countess of Dudley next drove to the Harbour Office (stopping on the way at Mr W Kilpatrick’s establishment in Donegall Place to get their photographs taken). It was a tight schedule for the Dudleys, as only two days before, he had laid the foundation stone of the Municipal Technical College³⁷ which, once built, was to spoil the Museum’s outlook and blight its setting.

The Dr Smyth Memorial Window

That afternoon, Her Excellency The Countess of Dudley returned to unveil the Dr Smyth Memorial Window.³⁸

Sir William, who took the chair, reported that The Duke of Abercorn had “...a long-standing engagement in England... [but]...I rejoice to know that Sir Thomas Myles, as one of the Smyth Fund trustees, will not be absent.” The window, by the artist Swaine Bourne of Birmingham, was placed above the fireplace in the reading-room.

It was uplifting stuff from The Countess:³⁸

The few and striking facts connected with the life and death of Dr. William Smyth are well known to all of you – the years in which he attended the sick, the outbreak of typhus on Arranmore, when he nursed the fever-stricken islanders and rowed them in an open boat to the mainland; finally, his death from the infectious fever. The profession to which he belonged is one with which is associated a lengthy chronicle of noble deeds, many of them unostentatiously performed in the ordinary course of duty, often unrecorded and unacquainted with fame. Of this profession he was a true and worthy representative. (Applause.) ... His life teaches many lessons, and his memory distils a pleasant fragrance. Upon it rests forever the dignity of service and sacrifice.

The window was then unveiled: “It was greatly admired by the Countess, as well as by all present.” Sir William then read the poem, “Amid the wastes and wilds of Arranmore.” A souvenir album was presented to Lady Dudley. Dr Joseph Nelson, senior trustee of the Institute, proposed a vote of thanks. This was seconded by Sir Thomas Myles, President of The Royal College of Surgeons in Dublin, who had been a college mate of William Smyth.²

Annual Dinner

At the Annual Dinner that evening, Sir William, responding to a toast to him and his wife, referred to Dr Nelson’s description of the Museum, and, betraying his interest in Biblical prophecy,¹³ added:³⁸



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...their sojourn among the snakes, stuffed birds, bottle specimens and mummies. They had now come up from the land of Egypt, and if he was to judge from the oratory they had listened to that night, they had come into a land flowing with milk and honey. They had placed at the top of their roof the fiery serpent as a memento of their journey in the wilderness.

Introducing a note of levity, he was comparing the serpent on the Staff of Aesculapius, gracing the crest of the new Institute, with the snakes that the UMS had encountered during its time in the Museum.

Conclusion

The UMS's first meeting took place in the new Institute on 11th December,³⁹ its first in its dedicated home since its formation 40 years before. It also severed its links with the BNH&PS, which it had enjoyed almost continuously for the past 17 years. These may have been 'wilderness' years, but during that time the membership of the UMS had almost tripled, doubtless driven by the introduction of UMS Fellowships in 1885. This, after all, was the reason for moving to the Museum in the first place.

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