

Historical Paper

Two Sons of the First Congregation

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The population of Ireland was originally Roman Catholic but was diluted after the Elizabethan campaigns by Anglicans and the Plantation of Ulster by Scottish Presbyterians. While there may have been a Presbyterian church near the North Gate in either Hercules Street or North Street in Belfast, the well documented but later meeting houses were established late in the seventeenth century in Rosemary Street, where the church stands today. Two churches were built after the original one (the First Congregation). The first of these was built because the original could not contain all the congregation and the second because of doctrinal differences. Two of the early ministers of the First Congregation were Samuel Haliday (1720-1739) and Thomas Drennan (1739-1768)

SAMUEL HALIDAY AND FAMILY

The Reverend Haliday, born in 1685, attended Glasgow University in 1701, graduating MA four years later. He moved to Leiden and was licensed in Rotterdam and in 1708 was ordained in Geneva. He became Chaplain to the Scots Cameronian Regiment serving in Flanders and came to Ulster in 1712. Having been Chaplain to Colonel Anstruther's Regiment, he was called to the First Congregation in 1719. Refusing to sign the Westminster Confession of Faith, he lived a life of controversy. He married a wealthy widow and had three sons, one of whom, Alexander Henry born in 1728, became a doctor. (Fig 1).

Where the young Haliday received his early education is not known but it was probably at the hands of the Reverend Drennan. He followed his father and many other Ulstermen to Glasgow University where he matriculated in 1743 and graduated MA, MD in 1751, aged twenty three. This does not mean that he gained his clinic experience in Glasgow, as the first hospital there was built in 1794. Haliday wrote to Cullen from Belfast in 1751 stating that he had been in Paris when "the news of your establishment in the University of Glasgow reached me". This may have been in 1750 when Cullen was appointed Professor of Medicine. The official date given for Cullen taking up the Chair of Medicine is 1751. Haliday's letter is reproduced in a biography of Cullen, but this is only an extract from it. The original is in the University of Glasgow and outlines his undergraduate career and is best recorded in his own words.

"..... in the beginning of my Education I passed four winters happily and I hope not idly in Glasgow - for the last two you may remember (if time and distance of situation have left



Fig 1. Alexander Haliday. Reproduced with the kind permission of the owner, currently on loan to the National Portrait Gallery, London.

you any remembrance of one) I was chiefly engaged in the medical - very under your direction - the Summer between these and the one which succeeded the last I improved as well as I could in the shop of our principal apothecary in this place - the next winter was spent in Edinburgh, where I attended with some care Mr Monroe, Dr Rutherford (both his college and his clinic lectures) and which was of more advantage (in consequence of your advice) Dr Young and the Infirmary - from the Doctor I heard much and in the other saw somewhat of the genuine appearances of disease and the effects of applications - the summer was employed in essays in practice

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and in the reading of practical authors, particularly Hoffman whose writings tho diffuse and ill ordered, I have found much more instructive, than the clear well digested axioms of Boerhaeve - in the beginning of Winter I went to London, where I attended with a pleasure and improvement that well rewarded my care the lectures of Mr Hunter - and for eight months St Georges Hospital - from this I passed to Holland in which place and in Paris half a year was employed as usefully as my situations would allow - on my return to London I renewed my attendance at the hospital, inspected the files of an apothecary and dissected a little; - after some months I had proposed to revisit Glasgow, to conclude my Studies where they at first commenced and assume a character I began to think my self not altogether unqualified for - but the bad state of a tender Mother's Health and an only Sister's concerned with some other circumstances to hurry me home".

Of course, there was a reason for all the detail in the letter as he went on

"And now I wish I could as well excuse the request which is to follow as it will apologise for this long detail of the particulars of my Education - can I have the honour at this distance of taking a degree in my Mother University?"

This was not a matter of sitting an examination as he stated that he "could have obtained a degree on easy terms, but the view of taking an authentic one in Glasgow prevented my applying elsewhere -unforeseen circumstances have forced me to this irregular application here" It would seem unlikely that Haliday sat any form of examination as he wrote this letter in May 1751 and his MA, MD degrees were awarded the same year. At this time many doctors practiced on the strength of having a certificate stating that they had attended a medical school. Haliday appears to have started practice in Belfast in 1751 where he remained for the rest of his life.

THOMAS DRENNAN AND FAMILY

The Reverend Thomas Drennan was educated in Glasgow. He was assistant to Francis Hutchinson in a Dublin academy until Hutchinson was appointed to the Chair of Moral Philosophy in Edinburgh. He was ordained to the ministry in Holywood in 1731 and moved to the First Congregation in 1736. Like Haliday he did not subscribe to the Westminster Confession. He was to chaperon Anne Lennox in 1741 on a long coach journey at the end of which they agreed to marry. They had nine children only three of whom survived to adulthood. Of these only two are important to this account of medicine and politics in the eighteenth century, the third Nancy, being described as being very quiet and retiring. Martha, or Matty as she was known, was born in 1742 and her brother William in 1754 (Fig 2). They were very close.

William's life has already been documented in detail elsewhere and only an outline follows. His initial education was at the Belfast School in Church Lane. From there he went to Glasgow graduating MA in 1771 aged seventeen. In 1773 he went to Edinburgh to study medicine. From then until his return to Belfast in 1807, some fifteen hundred letters passed between him and Matty and her husband Samuel McTier. The Drennans were an important family in Belfast and Matty knew everything that was going on and relayed it to her brother. After his graduation in 1778 he became very

interested in politics and the letters have been very helpful to historians. He also had a friendship with Haliday and the letters are the only source of information about Haliday's medical practice.

Nothing is known about Drennan's activities in Belfast after graduation and setting up practice in Newry in 1782 where he wanted to be an accoucheur. However, his dislike of Newry and his interest in politics caused him to move to Dublin in 1789. He associated with many involved in politics there and was the founder of the Society of United Irishmen. He was tried for sedition in 1794 but escaped conviction. This cooled his enthusiasm for politics and he returned to Belfast in 1807.

Matty herself played a part in Belfast medicine, being present at the founding of the Lying-In Hospital which ultimately became the Royal Maternity Hospital. She was the first secretary of the charity and was succeeded by Mrs Haliday.

THE LETTERS

When the letters started, Haliday had been practicing in Belfast for twenty two years and in 1789 Matty wrote that Haliday's practice in the town had increased due to Ross's death. He did not confine himself to the town having developed a large country practice and Matty later reported that he left the town work to Mattear. Some of his rural work is documented and shows how arduous his life must have been. On one occasion he was in Armagh "attending Lord Chief Baron Burgh who was in a desperate fever", On another occasion he was unable to attend a meeting with Lord



Fig 2. Dr William Drennan MD, 1754-1820. (Artist Robert Home, 1752-1834). Photograph © National Museums Northern Ireland 2006, reproduced with the kind permission of the trustees of the National Museums Northern Ireland. Collection Ulster Museum, Belfast.

Charlemont because he was in Saintfield where “two infants under inoculation would not permit me to attend”. This was variolation or inoculation and not vaccination as we know it. When Drennan was seriously ill with typhus in Newry, Samuel McTier wrote that “Dr H was abroad I then sent an express to Dr H asking him to go to Newry as soon as possible”. After he arrived on Saturday “he was soon called away 54 miles off” and promised to return on Monday, but it was Tuesday before he turned up. He then insisted on sitting up all night with Drennan as McTier had been up the previous three nights. Drennan was treated with James’s Powders and his legs were “blistered” and he recovered.

Other examples of Haliday’s rural practice exist and they show how far he travelled, presumably on horseback or in a carriage. Sadly he did not record his feelings nor his treatment of his patients but it is known that he charged one guinea per mile for each Consultation. Fevers of various types, despite their unknown aetiology, seem to have been the most serious illnesses but smallpox and tuberculosis were also common. Drennan recorded that at one time he had “no less than five patients in consumptions which appear very prevalent”. A Miss Stapleton who was dying was expected from England and three of her sisters had died of the same condition within two years. Matty also recorded a case which Haliday said was “in a galloping consumption”.

The therapy employed seems bizarre today. For chest complaints “a Burgandy pitch plaster of sufficient size to be applied between the shoulders, to be removed once or twice a week and to be reapplied after rubbing the skin beneath in a gentle manner with a flannel”. The normal treatment for fevers was James’s Powders – one part oxide of antimony and two parts phosphate of calcium - first concocted by Dr James, an English physician. Headaches could be treated by “shaving the head and rub it nightly with flower of mustard until it grows red and warm”. Drennan’s mother was noted to have had an “issue” cut on her arm. This was an artificial ulcer created anywhere on the body depending upon the symptoms it was being used to cure. They were created either by making an incision large enough to receive one or two peas, or by destroying the skin by caustic. After three days fresh peas were inserted. A linseed poultice could then be applied twice daily until the eschar formed and separated. The wound was then filled with either peas, beans or beads which stayed in place best if put on a thread. There was little surgery at this time but Haliday and a surgeon called Fuller from Belfast were in Newry to inspect a patient’s foot and amputation was advised to save the patient’s life.

While little is known about this aspect of Haliday’s life, we do know that he was considered to be the leading doctor in the town. This is confirmed by his appointment as a consultant to the Belfast Dispensary when it was opened in 1792. Of his other activities much more is known. He was married twice. His first wife was called Martha McCollum and they married in 1754. She was the daughter of Randal McCollum who was said to be well off. Sadly she died in December 1772. Three years later he married Anne Edmonstone when he was aged forty seven. Anne was said to be “affable and unaffected, but no way striking in either looks or behaviour”. This assessment was obviously by Matty McTier who was not inclined to flattery. Anne came from an affluent family who

lived in Red Hall, Ballycarry, County Antrim. Her father was Campbell Edmonstone, Lieutenant Governor of Dunbarton Castle. They seem to have had a very successful marriage. In his will Haliday after leaving larger interests to her left her “£100 by way of atonement for the many unmerciful scolds I have thrown away upon her at the whist table”. And a further sum of £500 “in gratitude for her never given on any occasion any just cause to rebuke or complain of her a further sum of £100 as an acknowledgement of her goodness in devoting an hour or two, which she could have so much better employed to amuse me with a game of Picket”.

They did not have a family but Haliday educated his nephew (Dr William Haliday) and his niece. Their father, Robert, was the Collector of Charleston in 1773 and was the only one to save the tea in storage rather than destroy it. He was banished to London on a paltry pension at the age of fifty eight. Later his son William was one of the founders of the Belfast Medical Society and was its second president.

THE VOLUNTEERS

When Haliday was at the peak of his career the American War of Independence had some dramatic effects on Ireland. The army had to be withdrawn to fight in America leaving the country vulnerable to invasion by the French. This led to the formation of the Volunteers, an armed citizens army. Haliday was involved but was annoyed that he was not made captain of the Blue Company when it was formed despite having been a lieutenant in an older company. Lord Charlemont commanded the Volunteers and Haliday became his right-hand man. They also became friends and Charlemont stayed with Haliday when he came to Belfast. They had an extensive correspondence of about two hundred letters between 1780 and 1799. This covered many subjects from politics to literature, another aspect of Haliday’s character as he also wrote poetry and a play.

The Volunteers were not only an armed force but were highly political and this led to the formation of the Northern Whig Club with Charlemont as president and Haliday as secretary. Their object was to endeavour on constitutional lines to secure for the people an adequate representation in parliament and a proper encouragement of agriculture, manufacture and trade of the country. However, at a meeting of the citizens he spoke against the repeal of the penal laws as he felt that the influence of the priesthood over the minds of the laity should be considerably reduced and that they should be better educated before getting the vote. This was also Charlemont’s view but it was not that of the Volunteers nor that of Wolfe Tone. He came to Belfast in 1791 and formed the first Society of United Irishmen. Haliday met Tone and wrote to Charlemont “I thought myself so unlucky of seeing so little of him; professional and other engagements deprived me of the pleasure of meeting him except one day, when his good sense and modest unassuming courage were truly engaging”. Despite their opposing views they liked and respected each other.

In a letter written from Larchfield in 1783 Haliday wrote to Charlemont “In fact I have been for these two months, an absolute stranger to leisure and my own town”. Despite this he made time for other activities. In 1788 the Belfast Reading Society was formed by fifteen artisans to promote

self improvement and to share the cost of buying books which were expensive. Later there was an influx from the merchants and professional classes including Haliday. The society changed its name to the Belfast Society for Promoting Knowledge. Initially meetings were held in a tavern, later in a private house and then in the White Linen Hall where the City Hall now stands. Finally, the society moved across the street to Donegall Square North as the Linen Hall Library and flourishes on the same site today. The members asked Haliday to be their president. Matty writing to her brother suggested that it was his books they were after rather than himself. He presented the society with three boxes of minerals, reflecting another of his interests. Ultimately he bequeathed his books to the library when he died. While he was president from 1792 until 1798 it is amazing that it is claimed that he never attended a meeting of the society. He resigned in favour of his nephew William in 1800.

Haliday was also interested in education as it is noted that when some inhabitants met to found the Belfast Academy, Haliday was elected as their president. His generosity can be realised in that he gave £30 to the school, an amount only equalled by Waddell Cunningham one of the wealthiest merchants in the town. The school ultimately became the Belfast Royal Academy.

There is little doubt that Haliday was a successful doctor and that this brought its rewards. He made donations to several causes including £100 towards the building of the White Linen Hall. He also took a lease from Lord Donegall for five hundred and forty acres. The rent was £120.16s.0d. and he had to pay a fine of £500. At this time Lord Donegall, who had huge estates in Country Antrim, was very short of money and was forced to raise rents and impose fines to increase his capital. The tenants were unable to afford these prices and only the better off merchants in Belfast could raise the money. The existing tenants responded by houghing or maiming the cattle of the new tenants. In December 1770 one of the perpetrators, David Douglas, was taken and imprisoned in the Belfast barracks. The tenants held a meeting in Templepatrick Presbyterian Church and formed a group called the Hearts of Steel. They decided to arm themselves and march on Belfast and secure the release of Douglas. By the time they got to Belfast they numbered about twelve hundred. At the barracks Douglas's release was refused. As it was a Mr Gregg's cattle which had been attacked they then went to the house of his partner, Waddell Cunningham, at the bottom of Hercules Street. They broke into it and set about breaking up the furniture. Haliday lived not far away in Castle Street and he came out and remonstrated with the mob who took him prisoner. He agreed to go to the barracks and try to get Douglas released and he promised that if he failed he would return and act as a hostage. When the mob returned to the barracks the gates were thrown open by the soldiers who fired on the mob killing five and wounding nine. The mob returned to Cunningham's house and set fire to it. There was therefore a risk of the town being burnt down and so Douglas was freed.

Early in 1802 Matty wrote to her brother that "H declines (I fear) rapidly. Says he feels a rattle in his throat every night and must soon make a moonlight flitting". Drennan replied that when he was in Newry, Haliday had complained of

having "an intermitting pulseand he thought then it was somewhat mortal, but he long survived that fear". In April Matty wrote that Haliday had an "alarming spot on his leg". The next day both his legs were inflamed. Later she recorded that Haliday played cards and wrote letters the day before he died on the 28th April 1802. He was buried in the New Burying Ground beside Clifton House.

After his death in 1802, Benn wrote of Haliday "Besides the estimation in which Dr Haliday was held for professional talent, he was intimate with and associated with persons of the highest rank in the neighbourhood He was probably the best known and most influential inhabitant of Belfast". Drennan also wrote a eulogy of his friend and mentor and there isn't any doubt that he held him in great regard. When Drennan returned to Belfast in 1807 he lived in a small mud walled cottage which Matty had built in 1783. She called it Cabin Hill. As her husband did not like living out of the town, she sold it in 1789. It was again sold in 1800 when it was bought by Drennan's cousin, Miss Martha Young, who died in 1807 and left Cabin Hill to Matty and a considerable sum to Drennan. It was this legacy which allowed him to retire to the cottage and Matty returned to live in Belfast. Apart from his family, Drennan's main interest was in promoting the Belfast Academical Institution which was founded in 1810 and when it was opened in 1814, he gave the inaugural address. The school became the Royal Belfast Academical Institution and later gave rise to the Belfast medical school.

Osler wrote "the philosophies of one age have become the absurdities of the next, and the foolishness of yesterday has become the wisdom of tomorrow". I hope that we will have the wisdom to emulate and remember those mentioned above.

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Preparing for a medical job ‘Down under’

With the cold and wet Northern Ireland winter almost over, many people will have started fantasising about life in sunnier climes. We report our experience of a year spent working in Australia with pointers for those who are planning or dreaming of doing the same.

Preparing to go... Several agencies and hospitals advertise posts in the medical journals. Alternatively, as we did, one may obtain hospital contact details and approach the human resources department directly. The usual process of submitting application forms and curriculum vitae followed with telephone interviews if short-listed... expect calls in the early hours of the morning and be prepared for the surreal experience of taking a cheery Australian consultant through your CV while half asleep! Delighted at having obtained the positions of our choice at a large teaching hospital in Perth, Western Australia we thought the rest would be plain sailing. However, hours were spent obtaining and completing the documents necessary to practise medicine in Australia and it is important to allow plenty of time- we began preparations six months prior to going. A temporary resident visa is required- this can be applied for following offer of a job from an Australian hospital. All the forms needed for the visas and medicals are available online from the Australian immigration department.

On arrival... We would advise if possible, to arrive two weeks before starting work. This allows time to recover from jet-lag, fill out yet more forms and sort out essentials like accommodation, bank account and mode of transport. You must present to the state medical board to get an equivalent of the General Medical Council certificate. Obtain a tax file number to avoid emergency tax.

The job... Australia has an impressive health system with an excellent combination of public and private healthcare. Approximately 60-70% of the population have private health insurance which visibly reduces the strain on the public sector. Waiting lists for investigations and treatments are shorter than in Northern Ireland which makes for a pleasant and rewarding work environment. When we arrived in August, the hospital was in the midst of their winter bed crisis... consisting of two trolley waits in the Emergency Department (A&E)! Most conditions are those typically seen in Western countries with a number of issues particular to the indigenous population (the Aborigines) who have a life-expectancy in the mid-forties. Access to health services is difficult- many of the Aboriginal patients we met lived in remote communities in the outback, some having travelled up to four hours by air to reach hospital. History taking from such individuals was a fascinating experience, particularly social and dietary history- we hadn't been previously aware that witchety grubs were so high in protein or that a certain type of green ant will provide over the RDA of vitamin C!

It had been our ambition since medical school to work and travel in Australia. We found that a certain degree of courage is required to step off the traditional ladder of senior house officer and registrar rotations here in Northern Ireland. However, the experience gained- both personal and professional is invaluable.

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