

Pedalling into the Storm: District Nursing in mid-twentieth century Fanad, County Donegal

In the early 1920s, life in the newly established Irish Free State, particularly in rural west and north west, was extremely poor. Men, women and children were crammed into third or fourth class homes, still eking out precarious livings on tiny subdivided holdings in remote, rural, often inaccessible territory, in much the same way as their grandparents had done in Famine times a few decades before.

Donegal County Archives holds a collection of papers which vividly reveal the effects of a severe food shortage, leading to almost famine like conditions, across the western seaboard, in the early years of independence from 1923 to 1927.

Among these papers is a letter from John O'Neill, Meenatottan District Distress Committee, Dungloe to Eugene Doherty, one of the local TDs, dated 4 January 1924, describing:

'an impoverished migratory people here, living, or rather existing in the midst of a weary and barren waste of bog and rock with an occasional patch of what is termed soil thrown in here and there, and which has been redeemed by almost superhuman toil and with restless energy by successive generations from the surrounding barren and inhospitable rocks and bogs.'

Lamenting the subsistence living, and lack of good crops he added: 'what little we had, the forces of nature wrested from us...the potato crop an absolute failure...' potato is the staple food of the great majority here.'

It is hard to imagine that this letter was written in 1924, just a couple of generations ago. As the 20th century progressed, there was gradual improvement in living standards across the country, rural and urban. But despite national and local initiatives such as widespread purchase of land, public housing including the building of labourers' cottages, modernised water supply and sewerage, developments in skills and educational opportunities, agricultural improvements and the growth in industry, some circumstances remained fairly static, at least in the first few decades. Women were very much second class citizens. Married women were still faced with

the prospect of unending pregnancies and little public health support; unemployment benefit was marginal while unemployment was rife, a nascent public health system emerging slowly from the antiquated poor law system was basic and completely unresourced. Seasonal migration and emigration thrived whilst they also contributed to the difficulties suffered by those left at home. These difficulties included being sick and/or elderly in often remote districts with no resources. Thus the development of a comprehensive or indeed any nursing support, in such areas of the west especially, was of paramount importance to people throughout this period.

The Queen's Institute of District Nursing (the Irish branch of the UK based Queen Victoria Jubilee Institute for District Nursing) was established in Ireland in the late 19th century, its remit to train nurses to assist the poor and sick at home. District nursing associations were set up to manage the scheme locally. The committees were run by volunteers, usually wealthy and of some standing in the community. The Lady Dudley scheme, set up in the early 1900s, was affiliated to the Queen's Institute. Elizabeth Prendergast and Helen Sheridan have written an invaluable book on the subject of the Queen's or Jubilee Nurses in Ireland, using extensive archival sources, including from Donegal Archives. Entitled *Jubilee Nurse*, it chronicles the story of the Jubilee or Queen's Nurses in Ireland. The authors emphasize how undervalued and unrecognized the work of the nurses was. They suggest a few reasons why this was the case... because of the association of the 'Queen's Nurses' (symbolically at least) with the Crown, perhaps because the women or associations themselves didn't seek recognition or perhaps simply because 'they were women'. And also perhaps because their work involved benefiting mothers and children, and such work would have been considered of far less significance than national or political achievements at the time, particularly as the country emerged from revolution in the early 1920s. 'Women's issues' were not a priority.

The work of the Queen's Nurses was time consuming and physically and undoubtedly mentally exhausting, especially in the remoter parts of the country, including County Donegal. Training took place primarily in two locations, St Patrick's Home in Dublin and St Laurence's home, Dublin (one Protestant- ethos, the other Catholic). Training included supervised visits to districts. Subjects learnt included midwifery and maternity, child welfare, care of the old, treatment of TB and other

communicable diseases, nutrition, diet, hygiene including teaching people ways to avoid diseases such as typhoid and diphtheria. These were just some of the many health issues nurses would be dealing with as part of their daily duties once they were employed.

The district nurses who were appointed were usually experienced, always skilful and needed to be physically fit. They travelled far and wide, in good weather and bad, often by bicycle or horse and cart, they were on call 24 hours, they had to keep up their learned skills and develop new skills. Above all, they had to deal with a huge range of illnesses, diseases, injuries and health issues in the homes they visited. They were required to liaise with the local committee and to maintain meticulous records of their work. Nurses' tasks included recording deaths, birth and marriages. They travelled as many as 30 miles a day and many made approximately 5000 visits a year.

Nurses could be transferred between district associations; on average they usually spent three to four years in a western district. Many found the work and life hard, with long hours, little time off and often very isolating. Remaining longer than a couple of years in a remote rural district was usually believed to be too arduous for even the hardiest of nurses. *Jubilee Nurse* records that Annie P Smithson (later a novelist and INMO general secretary), who was a district nurse in Glencolmcille for eighteen months left her post in 1912, as she felt lonely and isolated.

Nurses worked closely with local doctors and reported directly to the local dispensary doctor. Nurses, already overworked, often had to take over some of the doctor's routine tasks including making up poultices and ointments as well as the expected preparatory tasks, preparing bandages etc. Nurses could be called on to tend to people who had been injured in the course of their employment, on farms, fishing trips, in factories, even down mines. Care of the elderly and frail was a vital part of the work done for communities. Duties regularly involved midwifery and maternity care; preparing the dead for wakes; dressing burns, wounds and cuts; maintaining the TB register. Children's health included running clinics for the under fives. As the century progressed nurses administered diabetes injections and penicillin. It seems incredible to think that, with everything else they had to do, somehow they fitted in

school visits, with basic health checks such as examining children's eyes, ears, height and weight, even combing hair on the hunt for lice.

Given the era and the sheer scale of their many tasks, it was inevitable that nurses' salaries did not match their efforts out in the community. Local committees were expected to do much fundraising to keep the schemes in operation. Local clergy and medics were important factors in fundraising. Doctors were often vital to the setting up of nursing associations or 'clubs' to which households were encouraged to subscribe for a small fee. The new clubs or associations were careful (at least theoretically) not to interfere or to be seen to be interfering with the duties of the midwives of the Board of Health, established since 1924. In practice many had no choice but to carry out midwifery functions.

Fanad Health Club

Two people paid a vital part in the setting up of Fanad Health Club in 1931 –1932: the County Medical officer, Dr Sean Ó Deagha and Miss Edith Rosamund Chichester Hart. The latter, born in 1893, was the daughter of well known botanist Henry Chichester Hart and Edith Susan Anna Donnelly. Miss Hart lived in the family home, Carrablagh House, Portsalon. In 1931 Dr Sean Ó Deagha was asked by Miss Hart to help organise what was to become Fanad Health Club (District Nursing Association). The surviving records of the association are now online at www.donegalcoco.ie/archives.

Dr Ó Deagha had earlier that year been involved in setting up a similar club in Carndonagh. It was felt if one person in each household in the district became a member of a club for a small fee, with few or mainly no additional charges for nurses' attendance, the community as a whole would feel invested in the project and support and assist in financing associated costs. To develop Fanad Health Club Dr Ó Deagha sought the support of the local clergy and wealthier families. The newly established committee consisted of Canon Gallagher (chair), Rev. Faulkner, Dr McMenamin, Miss G Barton and Miss Hart.

The starting salary for the Fanad district nurse was £60 per annum with small allowances for board, laundry and uniform. According to a UK Official Data website,

£100 in 1930 had the same "purchasing power" as £6,148.09 in 2017. They were also entitled to allowances for uniform, travel, heat, light and accommodation, amounting to £154, so perhaps by the standards of the time it was believed to be a reasonable salary, though it is known that many district nurses were not well off.

As well as being provided with a furnished cottage the district nurse also had a bicycle. In terms of the associations' responsibility for provision of a nurse's accommodation Dr Ó Deagha noted that 'her health must be considered in order that she would give of her best to the people'. The Jubilee Institute was firm about this, he stressed. No doubt for good reason given the taxing and all consuming nature of the job expected of these women.

Ó Deagha managed to secure a subsidy from the Queen's Institute towards the running of the club including towards accommodation for the nurses; it was also partly funded by the Department of Local Government & Public Health and County Donegal Board of Health. The local association paid towards each nurse's affiliation with the Institute of District Nursing.

The April 1932 meeting setting up the club was attended by prominent people, men and women including clergy and Mrs Nora Blaney (nee Nora Sweeney), wife of Neal Blaney, FF TD. It was decided that one nurse would focus on North Fanad, the other on the southern part, but where they would be based was immediately a bone of contention. For example some locals from Kerrykeel petitioned for one of the nurses to be based in their town.

By mid 1932 the two Fanad nurses were in place. Margaret Elizabeth O'Dowd was from Sligo. Since 1925 following her initial training, she had worked in St George's Hospital and East End Maternity Hospital in London; she had then trained as a district nurse in St. Laurence's Home, Dublin. She was to be based in Ballyhiernan, north Fanad.

Kathleen Clancy was from Galway. Her credentials were equally impressive; since 1923 she had trained in Wexford County Hospital, worked in a fever hospital and a 'nursing institute' in different parts of England, and in the National Maternity hospital

in Dublin; she had also trained as a district nurse in St Laurence's Home. She was to be based in Drumfad.

These women were seriously well trained, experienced and qualified professionals. They received official recognition as health visitors by the Department of Maternity and Child Welfare.

The association followed the Queen's Institute's written Constitution and Rules. The rules laid down were strict, and on paper seemed reasonable for the time. For instance, nurses were supposed to adhere to an eight hour working day, with a half day off at weekend and 'occasional weekends off'. In practice they appear to have been permanently on call.

The nurses took up duty in the summer of 1932. Official duties included maternity work and they became part time nurses for the County TB and School Medical Scheme.

Fundraising was a vital factor in the District Committee's *raison d'être*, because funds raised included for district nurses' pension fund. Fundraising materials abound in the Archives' Fanad Health Club Collection. Finance-raising methods included setting up a finance subcommittee; garden fetes, carnivals and dances; requests to charities such as the Irish Peasantry society (London); and door to door subscription collection. Nationally there was a Big House 'opening of gardens' scheme as part of the fundraising. Miss Hart's family opened their own gardens several years in a row including during the summer of 1932; that year, organisers bussed people from other parts of the county and from County Derry to Portsalon for the occasion but they were forced to cancel a planned motorboat across Lough Swilly due to inclement weather.

Evident in the correspondence in the collection is not only the hard work carried out by members of the committee but the mutual respect between Dr Ó Deagha and Edith Rosamund Hart and the Queen's Institute Superintendent for Ireland, Miss Coburn.

A County Committee of District Nursing was formed in September 1932 to coordinate the then seventeen County Donegal district nursing associations and Lady Dudley schemes (rising to 40 in a few more years). It held its first annual dance in the Butt Hall, Ballybofey, in November of that year and encouraged the health clubs to fundraise similarly. Not every health club committee thought dances were a good idea. Some thought dances morally dangerous, preferring whist drives.

Conclusion

By 1935 Donegal had more district nurses than any other county. By then sadly the tireless Dr Ó Deagha had died, aged 42, of complications with appendicitis. His sudden death occurred just a few months after he had married Dr Attracta Halpenny, a pathologist from Dublin. (Dr Halpenny is recorded in a medical dictionary as having trained in the Royal College of Surgeons of Ireland.) But Nurses O'Dowd and Clancy were still going strong in Fanad as is evident from an article entitled 'In Wildest Donegal' in the *Nursing Mirror and Midwives Journal* 1935. The writer of the article noted there had been an increase in membership over the three years of the club, as 'many a farmer's wife saves the pennies by rigid economy in order to contribute a share for the family'. Nurse Kathleen Clancy, interviewed briefly for the article, still lodged at a local farm, having been unable to secure a cottage. She didn't stay long to talk to the interviewer saying 'I have one more late call to make before I get home'. The interview ends with this paragraph:

'The rain had come and the wind was blowing gustily but Nurse Clancy smiled aside my suggestion that she should wait, mounted her bicycle and pedalled into the storm, one hand holding together the skirts of her waterproof coat.'

This last paragraph possibly sums up the spirit, work ethic, dedication and relentless toughness of the Jubilee/Queen's/District Nurse.

*Note on the records held in Donegal Archives

Donegal County Archives holds archives relating to Fanad Health Club dating from 1931 to 1945. These archives are now accessible to view online at

<http://www.donegalcoco.ie/culture/archives/>

The County Archives also holds some records for Ballyshannon District Nursing Association and for Newtowncunningham and Burt District Nursing Association.

For more information please contact Donegal County Archives, archivist@donegalcoco.ie; and find us on Facebook and Twitter.

Jubilee Nurse: Voluntary District Nursing in Ireland, 1890 - 1974 by Elizabeth Prendergast and Helen Sheridan was published in 2012.

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