

District Nursing in Ireland, 1815-1974

By Maria Luddy

The history of Irish nursing has been little explored.¹ This article looks briefly at one aspect of nursing which became formally organised in the nineteenth century, district nursing. I propose to outline the district nursing systems which operated in Ireland in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries generally, and to pay some attention to the work of district nurses in county Tipperary.

Nursing in the nineteenth century has become synonymous with the name of Florence Nightingale, for many the pioneer in the professionalisation of nursing. Changes in nursing practice, however, pre-dated Nightingale's more public impact on the profession. In Ireland, more so than in England, much nursing throughout the nineteenth century was undertaken by female religious either privately in the homes of the poor, or in the various hospitals they established throughout the century.

With the opening of St Vincent's Hospital in 1834 Mary Aikenhead, founder of the Sisters of Charity in 1815, consolidated the acceptance of nuns as nurses in hospitals. This was the first hospital in Dublin to provide care expressly for Catholics. To prepare for the opening of St Vincent's, Aikenhead had sent three of her sisters to France to learn the skills of nursing and hospital management. The Sisters of Mercy opened the Mercy Hospital in Cork in 1857 and the Mater in Dublin in 1861.²

Within workhouse hospitals nuns made profound advances. The Sisters of Mercy first gained entry – and not without difficulty – into the Limerick workhouse in 1861, and by 1873 there were eight workhouse hospitals under the care of nuns. By 1895 that number had risen to 63; by 1898 it was 73 and in 1903, 84.³ As the century progressed the workhouse hospitals became more important and developed into a broad-based system of public hospitals, where standards of cleanliness and care advanced under the care of the nuns.

Apart from that done by nuns the major part of nursing was undertaken, for much of the nineteenth century, by poor women, who had no training and generally carried out such work in return for maintenance within an institution. Before mid-century most hospitals employed untrained male and female nursing staff, many of them former patients. In Mercer's Hospital in 1874, for example, a nurse Quirke was admonished for being drunk. The committee had the power to dismiss any of the nursing staff and the registrar, it was agreed, "may give charge to the police and prosecute at once" any nurse found intoxicated on duty".⁴ In 1872, Jeremiah Dowling, MD, speaking of lay workhouse nurses stated that "they were generally taken from the lowest class, restrained by no sense either of decency or religion, loud voiced, quarrelsome and abusive – they are sometimes removed from the hospital to the gaol".⁵

While the poorest and most destitute members of society found their way to the workhouse hospitals, those who could afford it admitted themselves to "pay beds" in the voluntary hospitals. There was still, however, a demand amongst the population for home nursing. The earliest form of district nursing in the country can be seen in the work of the various religious congregations in visiting and attending to the sick in their own homes, and this was a practice that became common in towns and cities from the last decades of the eighteenth century.

The Sisters of Charity, for example, who had seven convents in Dublin, visited up to 200 sick each week. A number of visits were made to the home, usually two to three a week; so they were literally caring for thousands of sick individuals every year. While the nuns looked after Catholic patients, Protestant patients were cared for by members of their own denomination. In

Dublin the Dublin Women's Work Association was organised originally to reach the Dublin poor through the work of Biblewomen, mothers' meetings, and other activities.

The work of the missionaries revealed a great deal of poverty and sickness amongst those they visited and as a result, in about 1880, the Association engaged a district nurse from London. Nuns themselves were not formally trained and they learned the profession through experience. It was not until the last decade of the nineteenth century that nuns acquired formal training when a Nightingale nurse, a Miss Pringle, was invited to give lectures to the nuns and to go on wards with them.

Jervis Street, the Mater and St Vincent's hospitals organised training schools managed by nuns from the 1890s. With the increasing professionalisation of nursing, and the growing belief that improvements in health care could only be carried through by trained nurses, a number of lay women began to organise societies to look after the needs of the sick poor.

One of the first lay societies organised for this purpose was established in Belfast in 1874. The function of the Society for Providing Nurses for the Sick Poor was "to visit the industrious poor in their own homes and supply such ministrations as their care may require".⁶ The society was non-sectarian and cared for the poor of any religious denomination. By 1884, following the example set by the Belfast society, other women in Dublin, Lisburn, Downpatrick, Ballymena, Randalstown and Hollywood had begun their own societies to engage in district nursing.

Any study of district nursing in England usually begins with the work of William Rathbone in Liverpool. Rathbone acted as a visitor for the District Provident Society, dispensing relief in the poorest parts of the city. In 1859 he employed a woman to nurse the sick poor of the city. By 1861 his family had established the Liverpool Training School and Home for Nurses, and in 1862 the Liverpool Royal Infirmary accepted women for training. The probationers were shared between

TABLE 1
Statistics for Tipperary District Nursing 1942

District	Hon. Secretary	No. of medical cases	General Nursing (No. of sick nursing visits)	Public Health (No. of visits paid)
Cahir	W.B.Talbot esq. Castle Cottage	130	3,468	2,495
Carrick	Mrs. J. Dowley Castlane	176	3,465	7,404
Cashel	Mrs. Shine Castlake	134	2,237	5,192
Clonmel	Mrs. Malcomson Melview House	238	3,157	1,374
Fethard	Mrs. Delmege The Bungalow	123	2,972	5,093
Nenagh	Mrs. Moira Lynch 19 Summerhill	149	3,394	3,654
Tipperary	Mrs. Hogan St Michael's St.	113	5,489	5,203

Source: *Queen's Institute of District Nursing in Ireland, Thirteenth Annual Report 1942.*

the hospital and the Training School.⁷ Rathbone was probably the first to use the term "district nursing", though as we have seen, it was a practice already widely engaged in by nuns.

The city of Liverpool was divided into districts, each district being in the charge of a lady superintendent who was not a nurse, but tended to be a wealthy woman of influence. The Lady Superintendent was expected to find appropriate lodgings for the nurse, to supply medical 'comforts' and to arrange meetings between the clergy and other influential individuals to engender support for the enterprise and also to raise funds for its sustenance.⁸ In 1874 the Metropolitan and National Association for Providing Trained Nurses for the Sick Poor was established in London, to train district nurses for London and then for the rest of the country.

As already noted, a similar society was established in Belfast the same year. District nursing was eventually to enter a new phase with the granting of royal patronage. In 1887 Queen Victoria celebrated the golden jubilee of her reign. A sum of £120,000 was collected by the women of England to commemorate this event. The Queen spent about £70,000 to endow Queen Victoria's Jubilee for Nurses, which was incorporated by royal charter in September 1889. There had been considerable controversy about the nature of the service which was to be provided by this organisation, and finally it was agreed that the scheme should be used to broaden the voluntary nursetraining movement by making it a nation-wide operation.

The Institute was expected to do three things: to train nurses for district work, to supervise the nurses and to organise the district work. The first approaches to have Ireland involved in the scheme came in 1888 when Mrs. Rathbone, wife of William Rathbone, made an unofficial visit to the country. Mrs. Rathbone had meetings with a Miss Hunt, who was in charge of St Patrick's Home, a Protestant institution which provided training for nursing the poor.

During her stay Mrs. Rathbone also met a Mrs. Brown whom she described as "one of the few Roman Catholic ladies interested in philanthropy". Mrs. Brown, advised Rathbone to hold discussions with Archbishop Walsh of Dublin, without whose support nothing could happen. They apparently got on well, and the Archbishop agreed that a new organisation could be formed, but that while probationers could be trained together Catholic nurses must have their own dwelling, under the care of a Catholic matron, separate from that of the Protestant nurses. The Archbishop also insisted that while the home could have Catholics and Protestants as members of a joint committee, it should have no clerical or women committee members.⁹

In 1889 the Council of the Queen Victoria's Jubilee Institute for Nurses invited the co-operation of the City of Dublin Nursing Institution (established in 1884) in setting up a system of district nursing for the poor of Dublin in their own homes. The Council agreed to give a sum of money to the Institution if it allowed itself to be recognised as a District Home for Queen's Nurses for the poor.

Four trained nurses were assigned to look after the poor. They had each received three months' training in maternity nursing and two of them had also received six months' training in district nursing in London. An Irishwoman, a Miss Dunn, was appointed as their supervisor. The cost of the enterprise was estimated at £240, of which £100 was contributed by the London Queen's Institute with the remainder to come from the funds of the City of Dublin Nursing Institution. The Council of the Queen Victoria's Jubilee Institute also made an agreement with the Institution to train two Catholic probationers who, when qualified, were to be employed as district nurses for the poor in Dublin.¹⁰

By the 1890s Dublin had two district nursing training centres, St Patrick's, the Protestant Home (established in 1872) and St. Lawrence's, the Catholic Home (established in 1892). Both these institutions were incorporated with Queen Victoria's Jubilee Institute for Nurses in 1903. In 1891, Rosalind Paget, William Rathbone's niece and the first Inspector of the Queen's

Institute, visited Ireland and found everything progressing satisfactorily. The only problem emerged in Newry, where the society was named the Newry District Nursing Society for the Protestant Sick Poor. While claiming to be strictly non-denominational, the society accepted that Protestants had a "first claim" on its nursing services but that Catholics would not be denied those services. However, the London Society advocated a change of name to make the society appear less sectarian, and eventually it was called the Newry District Nursing Society.¹¹

While Jubilee nurses had a relatively high profile in the area of district nursing, they were not the only group offering such a service in Ireland. In 1903, Lady Dudley, as Vicereine of Ireland, formed a committee under her presidency, which employed at first four nurses to nurse in the poorer parts of Ireland. These nurses were fully qualified, having spent at least three years in a recognised hospital and also having undertaken a six months' training course at the Queen Victoria Jubilee Nursing Institute.

By the mid-1930s about 28 nurses were employed under Lady Dudley's scheme at an average cost of £200 per annum. The mere presence of these nurses among the people, it was believed, "acts as a refining and civilising influence, through which, it is hoped, the standard of life among the rural folks may be raised".¹² Indeed in the first decades of its operation the district nursing schemes were seen to hold not only a practical health benefit for the poor assisted, but also to play a role in their moral well-being.

One correspondent related: "We went into a cottage that was one long room. The mother was ill, she was clean and comfortable after the nurse's visit. One of the many girls said, 'Sure, 'tis not only all she does for us, *but what she teaches us*'".¹³ Lady Dudley's Nurses were affiliated to the Queen's Institute. Another organisation which employed district nurses was the Women's National Health Association, which was established in 1908 by Lady Aberdeen. This Association was concerned with the spread of TB and attempted to raise public awareness of health issues. In the 1950s the Cashel District Nursing Association appears to have worked under the auspices of the Women's National Health Association of Ireland, though it was also affiliated to the Queen's Institute of District Nursing in Ireland.¹⁴

It is difficult at present to discover how many district nurses were working throughout the country in the first decades of the century. While exact numbers may not be easy to come by, some accounts of the types of work and conditions under which these nurses laboured can be seen in the annual reports of the Queen's Institute of District Nursing in Ireland. In 1904 one nurse, who had experience of nursing in rural Ireland,

noted that the first thing to be done is to put the patient on a shakedown on the hearth. A few bundles of straw or a sack or two spread over it and if such a thing can be spared, sometimes a small feather tick is put on top of it. As often as not there is no sheet, bits of sacking and blanket and old bits of shawls and patchwork quilts cover the patient – the dust from the earthen floor and the ashes from the open hearth blowing over the whole ... The chances are there is a hen coop – a long wooden affair with wooden bars at intervals on the other side of the patient between him and the wall, and into which the hens walk across the bed and lay their eggs.¹⁵

Nurses found that relatives were not always co-operative. Too much washing and good nursing order might suggest "laying out" and result in bad luck. The popular writer Annie M.P. Smithson worked for a number of years as a district nurse, spending time in Newmarket-on-Fergus, Donegal and Dublin. She found Donegal particularly lonely and resigned her post there, only later to be asked to act as nurse at the T.B. Dispensary in Charles Street, Dublin. This dispensary was, at the time Smithson worked there (1912-13), under the management of the Women's National Health Association.

TABLE 2
Number of Nurse Visitations in Clonmel, Cahir, Fethard and Tipperary, 1943-64

Year	Cahir	Clonmel	Fethard	Tipperary	Nenagh	Carrick	Cashel
1943	10,248	4,509	9,036	9,922	6,218	12,022	10,826
1951	4,484	4,638	3,564	6,008	4,070	4,594	4,053
1954	4,261	4,723	—	5,157	4,766	5,447	4,630
1956	4,322	3,682	—	—	4,173	5,681	5,321
1957	4,686	3,025	—	—	4,532	6,196	5,558
1958	4,152	3,577	—	—	3,732	6,254	4,500
1959	3,890	3,725	—	—	—	6,110	4,944
1960	2,592	3,422	—	—	—	4,430	4,912
1962	3,520	3,630	—	—	—	2,592	5,313
1964	3,734	1,911	—	—	—	—	6,460

Source: QINI, AR 1943-64.

She described her days as follows: "every morning I would go to seven o'clock Mass...then to the dispensary for the morning, visit cases in the afternoon, and on two nights in the week attend the dispensary from seven to nine".¹⁶ Smithson's first novel *Her Irish Heritage* tells the story of Mary Carmichael and her work in the Dublin slums as a district nurse and is clearly based on Smithson's own experiences.¹⁷

The pioneer district-nursing journal the *Queen's Nurses' Magazine* was founded in Ireland, being edited and financed by Lady Hermione Blackwood, a daughter of the Marquis of Dufferin and Ava. In 1910 the Queen's Institute adopted it as their official publication. In 1922 the Irish branches of the Queen's Institute became independent from the London organisation. Prior to 1922 the London organisation had provided all the money, about £2,000 per annum, required to carry on the work in this country. From 1922 a sum of about £40,000 had been raised to act as an endowment for the Irish society. Lady Galway had raised £10,000 of this sum from the Irish in America.¹⁸

The extant reports dealing with the Jubilee Nurses in county Tipperary are to be found in a collection of annual reports of the Queen's Institute of District Nursing in Ireland held by the County Museum in Clonmel.¹⁹ These reports date from 1941 to 1964 and most relate to district nursing in Cahir. In 1941 there were 25 nursing districts throughout Ireland (excluding N. Ireland). In county Tipperary district nursing centres existed at Cahir, Carrick-on-Suir, Cashel, Clonmel, Fethard, Nenagh and Tipperary town.

Table 1 details the work of the Institute in the county in 1942, and also provides the names of those who supervised the scheme. General nursing involved medical and surgical cases, and a very small number of midwifery cases. Public health nursing covered child welfare, ante-natal visits, the examination of children in schools and clinics, and visits made to TB patients. By the end of 1942 two new associations had been organised in the county, one at Ardfinnan and the other at Clogheen.

Both the northern and southern branches of the Jubilee Nurses worked together until the establishment of the welfare state in Britain after the Second World War, when the British Health Service transformed the pattern of district nursing. Northern Ireland legislation transferred district nursing to the control of the local authorities, leaving the southern Irish

branch to operate by itself. The other major distinction which existed between the northern and southern branches was the fact that the word Queen had been dropped from the title in the south and the nurses were simply known as Jubilee Nurses.

By 1943 the committee of the Irish branch were noting the fact that few candidates were coming forward for training, blaming the higher wages available in wartime England. As a result, the wages of the district nurses in Ireland were increased by £10 per annum. By this year also a number of associations had organised a stamp scheme whereby minimum wage earners contributed 1d (2p) per week to ensure skilled nursing when required, free of further charge, for themselves and their dependants. This scheme also provided some of the income for the local district and appears to have been popular, with 367,680 stamps being purchased in the year.²⁰

In 1956 a deputation representing the Queen's Institute, the Training Homes, and Lady Dudley's Nursing Scheme met the Minister for Health, Mr T.F. O'Higgins. The Institute was anxious over a number of points: that fewer candidates were coming forward to be trained, that the number of nurses leaving for the better paid public health appointments was constituting a considerable drain on the Institute's finances, the serious financial position of the training homes, and the discrepancy between the salaries of public health nurses and Jubilee nurses. St Lawrence's Home closed in October 1956, due to financial reasons, after over 60 years of providing nursing for the sick in their own homes.

The desire to remain independent of the Government as far as possible was frequently expressed by the committee of the Institute. In 1962 Lady Donoughmore pointed out the danger of taking state aid for granted. "We must", she said, "progress and it is better to do so as a voluntary organisation as there is no red tape and therefore we are in a position to give help quickly and when most needed".²¹ However, insufficient financial resources were the fundamental cause for the demise of the Council of the Queen's Institute of District Nursing in Ireland and the Committee of Lady Dudley's Nursing Scheme. In October 1963 the committee of the Queen's Institute seriously thought of closing down its service, only to be persuaded by the Minister for Health to keep going. However, the training programme of the Institute was discontinued in 1967 and its activities brought to a close; the work of Lady Dudley's Scheme lasted until 1974.²²

Some detailed information is available about the situation of Jubilee Nurses in Cahir. A nurse Margaret Tracey looked after this district for a number of years. In 1941 she was the sole district nurse for the area and in that year made 1,990 visits to mothers and children, and 470 visits to TB patients. She also saw 2,586 patients with minor injuries in her surgery, which was a room in her home. In 1943 her annual salary was £75-10 and this had risen to £145-10 by 1950. The district expenditure was £239-17-9 for 1943, covering the nurse's salary and the cost of a temporary nurse.²³

District nurses also attended at schools and the Cahir nurse saw 3,969 schoolchildren in 1959. To help with her rounds the district nurse in Cahir was provided with a motor-car in 1949.²⁴ By 1962 the annual salary of a Jubilee nurse, with allowances, was £460-10 in the first year, rising to £490-10 by the seventh year. Temporary nurses, those who were married or were non-Queens nurses were paid £440-10 per annum or £35-16-2 a month.²⁵

Table 2 shows the number of visits made by district nurses in Tipperary for the period 1943-64. All kinds of illnesses were treated by the nurses. A large number of cases resulted from injuries received during farm work, such as accidents with tractors, or attacks by animals such as bulls. Mothers with young children were visited regularly, as were TB cases. Each nurse also held a surgery in her home. In 1958, 9,945 patients attended the Cahir surgery.

While the major portion of funding came from the parent body in Dublin, local districts also

had to raise their own money. Donations, subscriptions, flag days and carnivals were the methods used. The nurses in Tipperary also benefited from a bequest. The Ellen Armitage Memorial Fund had a capital of £684-11-4 in 1942, the interest of which was intended to "provide additional nourishment and comfort", for patients in the townland of Noan, who had first claim to the money. After that it could go to the patients in the South Riding.²⁶

It is evident from the figures cited above that the district nurse provided a substantial service to the locality in which she served. Much more research needs to be carried out to investigate the pattern of district nursing over the entire country from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth century. What is missing, unfortunately, from the records held at Clonmel is any account of the personal dealings which nurses had with their patients. Further investigation along this line would prove interesting. The potential rewards from such an undertaking are indicated by the remark of one authority that if Jubilee Nurses in the 1920s, and perhaps at other times, wanted adventure, then Ireland was the place to be.²⁶

FOOTNOTES

1. See Pauline Scanlan, *The Irish Nurse, A Study of Nursing in Ireland: History and Education 1718-1981* (Manorhamilton, 1991).
2. Member of the Congregation, *The Life and Work of Mary Aikenhead* (London, 1925), pp. 146-70: Sr. Angela Bolster, *Mercy in Cork, 1837-1987* (Cork, 1987), pp. 24-5.
3. Maria Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 48-9.
4. J. B. Lyons, *The Quality of Mercer's, The Story of Mercer's Hospital 1734-1891* (Sandycove, 1991), p. 95.
5. Jeremiah Dowling, MD, *The Irish Poor Law and the Poor House* (Dublin, 1872), p. 86. Dr. Dowling was a Tipperary man, whose nephew (also Jeremiah) was a doctor too and practised in Tipperary town in the present century.
6. Annual report, Society for Providing Nurses for the Sick Poor, 1877, p. 5.
7. Robert Dingwall, Anne Marie Rafferty and Charles Webster, *An Introduction to the Social History of Nursing* (London, 1988), p. 174.
8. William Rathbone, *The Organisation of Nursing in Liverpool* (Liverpool, 1865).
9. Mary Stocks, *A Hundred Years of District Nursing* (London, 1960), p. 85.
10. Lavinia Dock, *A History of Nursing*. 4 vols. (London, 1912), iii, pp. 106-7.
11. Stocks, *op. cit.*, p. 106.
12. Countess of Mayo, 'Trained nurses for the rural districts', in William G. Fitzgerald (ed.), *The Voice of Ireland* (Dublin, 1924).
13. *Ibid.*, p. 363.
14. Cashel District Nursing Association, AR, 1956, p. 1, S. Tipperary Co. Museum, Clonmel.
15. *Queen's Nurses' Magazine*, December 31, 1904, p. 65.
16. Annie M. P. Smithson, *Myself and Others* (London, 1944), p. 226.
17. Annie M. P. Smithson, *Her Irish Heritage* (Dublin, 1917: reprinted, Cork, 1988).
18. *QINI AR* 1942, p. 7.
19. I would like to thank Mr Patrick Holland, curator, for bringing these reports to my attention. The material is catalogued under Box 2:1:B:8.
20. Queen's Institute of District Nursing in Ireland, annual report 1943 (Hereafter *QINI, AR*).
21. *QINI, AR* 1962, p. 7.
22. *QINI, AR* 1964, pp. 4-5: Scanlan, *The Irish Nurse*, pp. 143-4.
23. Circular form from the Department of Health relating to Cahir, in Clonmel Museum.
24. Cahir Jubilee Nurses, *QINI AR* 1950.
25. Typescript dated 1962, in Clonmel Museum.
26. For Armitage family of Noan, see Denis Marnane in *Tipperary Historical Journal* 1994, pp. 48-65.
27. Stocks, *District Nursing*, p. 165.