

Dr Leeson of Dublin, Buenos Aires and Montevideo

By Edward Walsh (1)

Abstract

Few nineteenth-century Irish medical practitioners can have had quite such a peripatetic and interesting a career as Dr Arthur Edmund Leeson. But is what some doctor did in the past of any importance today? Of course it is, for as the erudite general practitioner (GP) Dr John Horder notes 'the past still matters. The present brings constant change in the influences that play on our work, especially in the application of new knowledge, but there are basic elements in generalist practice which change little' (Horder 2003: 750). In this respect Leeson was in advance of his time, and his paper published in the Dublin Journal of Medical Science (2) is his legacy in the annals of the cure or arrest of incipient phthisis.

Born in Dublin on 26 March 1832, (3) Leeson studied medicine at Trinity College, Dublin, and graduated with an MB degree in 1854. (4) He was described as 'a distinguished graduate (MA, MD) of Trinity College, Dublin and a favourite pupil of the late Professor Stokes' (*The Hastings* 1908: 7). A year later he was practicing in Buenos Aires, where he would live and work for the next fifteen years. According to Mulhall, Leeson was resident at 66 or 72 Reconquista (Mulhall 1863). For a time he had worked in partnership with another Irish doctor, John Leslie (1817-1868), a native of Belfast. They appeared before Frank Parish, the British Consul on 8 and 9 April 1863 and 'declared and stated that the partnership which formerly existed between them and the contract of which was deposited in this office, was dissolved by mutual consent on the 3rd December 1861' (NA: FO 446/6, 374). Scarcely two months later, on 5 June 1863 Leeson was back before Consul Frank Parish, this time to 'solemnly declare upon oath, previous to my intended marriage with Alice Fraser, a native of Bayonne, of British parentage that I am a bachelor and that there exists no legal or other impediment whatever, to my entering the Holy state of matrimony. So help me God' (NA: FO 446/6, 377-378). Alice Fraser aged twenty-three years and a spinster made a similar declaration before Consul Parish. They were married at St John's Cathedral, Buenos Aires on 16 June 1863, with the Revd. J. Chubb Ford officiating. Charles B. Krabbé, Isabella Krabbé C. A. Milligan and Mary Krabbé were witnesses at the ceremony

(St John's Marriages). Was there pressure on Leeson to formally sever his links with Dr Leslie before his marriage with Alice Fraser? Maybe - maybe not. In any event there is no evidence to show any linkage between those two events. Two children were born to the Leesons, Elanor Constance (known as Nora) on 11 June 1864, and Mary on 1 October 1865. Both girls were baptised by the Rev. J. Chubb Ford at St John's (St John's Baptisms). Leeson's will shows that he also had a son (Arthur Gerald Leeson) whose date of birth is unknown (*Wills & Admons*).

During the 1868 outbreak of cholera in Buenos Aires there are glimpses of the doctor at work, as recorded in Ellen Wyatt-Smith's diary. Tuesday January 21 Ellen notes 'I sent for Dr Leeson to have his advice for all of us... The Dr came three times and this night as the fatigue had made me ill again he said I must go at once to bed and get up for nothing...' Wednesday 22 saw Mrs. Leeson coming to visit her husband's patient. Friday 24: 'I was very poorly & sick and Dr Leeson said I must have some soup - so he went home and brought me a little can full & after that they made me some every day - and this day cooked dinner for us...Mrs. Leeson also not well...' (Wyatt-Smith 1868).

Within two years of this epidemic Leeson was to leave Argentina. He appeared before the British Consul once more to declare that 'previous to leaving Buenos Aires on the fifteenth day of October 1870, [he] desired a memorandum to be entered in this Register stating that he had executed his Last Will and

Testament on the tenth day of December 1867, which instrument will be found registered in the office of the Notary Mariano Cabral, and this Will revoked a former one made before marriage also registered in the office of the same Notary on the twenty fifth day of November one thousand eight hundred and sixty two' (NA: FO 446/29, 161).

The family took up residence in Switzerland, and *The London and Provincial Medical Directory* in 1873 noted that Leeson was now resident in Vevey (Medical Directory 1873: 1042). Vevey is a beautiful town to the north of Lake Geneva, famous today because Charlie Chaplin lived and died there and also because the headquarters of the Swiss multinational Nestlé is located there. Vevey, Montreaux and Leysin in the Vaud Alps were world-famous centres for treating tuberculosis (TB) in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One may speculate as to why Leeson came to live in Vevey. Was it perhaps an interest in TB or an opportunity for further professional development? Although his stay in Vevey was short, he did write a letter dated 14 August 1874 to the Editor of the London based *Medical Times and Gazette*, entitled 'Montreaux As A Health Resort' (*Medical Times* 1874: 274-275). He noted that 'there are few physicians in England who will not be called upon, a month or two hence, to choose winter quarters for one or more of their patients. Now, as year after year a greater number of invalids come to winter in Montreaux....I propose to lay before your readers a few facts concerning this neighbourhood, and what it has to offer to invalids' (*Medical Times* 1874: 274). Leeson had become something of a specialist. As Dr David Haslam, President of the Royal College of General Practitioners tellingly observes 'in medicine, specialisation is relatively easy. If a problem doesn't fit your speciality, you don't deal with it. You send the patient back to his or her GP, or make a cross-reference to another speciality, usually unnecessarily. But being a generalist is increasingly complex; almost everything is our problem' (Haslam 2003: 7). Almost everything was Leeson's problem.

By 1875 Leeson and family had returned to the River Plate. For the next thirteen years until 1888 Leeson worked in Buenos Aires - much of that time (from 1882 to 1888) at the British Hospital both as a staff doctor and Chief of Service and Medical Committee Member (Warneford-Thompson 2001: 201-202, 218-219). Consumption, or the white spectre, were terms used to describe pulmonary tuberculosis (also known as phthisis), which at this time was rife in Buenos Aires. Phthisis is defined as any disease that causes wasting of the body especially pulmonary tuberculosis. Vera Blinn Reber, professor of history at Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania, is an expert in this area and has published some outstanding studies on the topic. But it seems that Blinn Reber was unaware of Leeson's work in this field.

Leeson's little-cited article in *The Dublin Journal of Medical Science* is a mine of detail and information. This publication was a pioneering medical journal of its time with distinguished editors like Robert Kane, Robert Graves and Oscar Wilde's father, William Wilde. The title of Leeson's eight-page article is intriguing 'On Emigration to the River Plate as a Means of Cure or Arrest in Incipient Phthisis' by Arthur E. Leeson, MA, MD, Dub.; Visiting Physician to the Infirmary for Diseases of the Chest, Margaret Street, London. (5)

Emigration to more genial climates, and that on a large scale, has been practised for the last thirty years as a means of curing or of arresting phthisis. Few physicians who have seen much of this disease but can record numerous instances in which a valuable life was thus saved, or an existence not bereft of usefulness and enjoyment prolonged to a much longer term than would be possible in this country...We have received from all sides warning to send out none but carefully selected cases; we are told that phthisis is almost as common in all these places as at home...My knowledge of this country [Argentina] dates from the year 1855, from which time, till 1870, I resided and practised there. Then, as now, I was much interested in the subject of consumption, and endeavoured to acquire some exact information as to the prevalence of this disease amongst the population in general, and the

various races and classes in particular. There was at that time no registration of deaths in any part of the country. It was only in 1868 that this was established, and then only for the province and city of Buenos Ayres. I am thus unable to bring forward any formal statistics prior to this date to illustrate the points I wish to establish...The rural districts of the province of Buenos Ayres contained some eight or ten thousand Irish, mostly engaged in sheep-farming. The vast majority of these were my patients, and I was accurately acquainted with the state of health of the whole community. Now, with the exception of a few cases of neglected pneumonia (chiefly amongst the intemperate), which had become chronic, and terminated in a group of symptoms which might be fairly classed as phthisis, I never saw one single case of this disease amongst this large number of persons. The few cases I saw amongst English or Irish were amongst the inhabitants of the city. So much for the Irish...Buenos Ayres was then as large as Dublin, with the population of Cork...The great industry of the country is sheep-farming, and life on a sheep-farm is the best conceivable for a pulmonary invalid - one spent almost entirely in the open air, with plain and wholesome food. But the immediate change and tending of sheep occasionally entails great exposure and exertion, and should not be undertaken until such an improvement has taken place in the patient's state as to inspire some confidence in his powers of resistance (Leeson 1878: 20).

The British Consul in Buenos Aires Lionel Sackville-West, (6) by letter of 15 September 1877 provided Foreign Secretary Lord Derby 'with some statistics in relation to the mortality of Buenos Aires during the last years' (NA: FO 118/166; Dft., Consular No.5, no pagination).

Year	Population	Deaths
1871	195,262	20,748
1872	204,634	5,671
1873	214,453	5,891
1874	222,000	7,190
1875	230,000	6,751
1876	200,000	5,277

'Pulmonary consumption has increased rapidly of late years. From 1869 to 1871 it averaged 4 per cent of the mortality whereas in 1875, 1876

it ranged from 13 to 15 per cent, so that 4,800 died of consumption in eight years' (NA: FO 118/166; Dft., Consular No.5, no pagination). There were other no less serious problems as Sackville-West noted that 'infant "tetanus" known here as the *mal de 7 días* carries off 10 p.c. of the persons who die. The total deaths in 8 years reached 4,500. During the same period small pox carried off 4,534 persons. It is difficult to ascertain the numbers of violent deaths. The municipal report for 1875 showed however 600 deaths from stabbings in the city hospitals' (NA: FO 118/166; Dft., Consular No.5, no pagination).



Dr Leeson's grave at Hastings Cemetery marked with a Celtic cross (Edward Walsh 2008)

In 1889 Leeson came to live at 22 Dorset Square, London NW1, a three-story yellow brick Georgian town house in a fashionable part of town. For the next three years he would be a visiting physician at the Margaret Street Hospital and at another hospital in Richmond. The 1891 Census Return shows Leeson to be living with his wife, both of his as yet unmarried daughters and three female servants - a cook and two maids. (7) But his stay in London did not last long, as the medical directory shows Leeson as living in Montevideo from 1893 to 1895 (Medical Directory 1893: 1574; 1894: 1621; 1895: 1607). He may well have worked at the British Hospital in the Uruguayan capital. (8) And then for a second and final time Leeson moved to Switzerland and lived at Territet, Montreux between 1896 and 1905. Territet was the summer abode as

winter was spent at the Hotel Croce di Malta, Spezia, Italy (Medical Directory 1896-1906). In 1906 he went to live (as an invalid) at Franklands, 17 Cloudesley Road, St Leonards-on-Sea, Sussex, and died there on 4 October 1908. He left an estate of £10,203-10s-3d (The Hastings 1908: 7). (9)The doctor's last will (dated 21 October 1904) was drawn up when Leeson was living at No.1 Via di Barbano, Florence, Italy. He declared 'I desire to add that it is not from any want of affection that I have given my said son [Arthur Gerald Leeson] a less share in the residue of my estate than my said daughter [Nora] as I regard both with equal affection but because I consider that a man requires less help in the struggle of life than a woman' (Wills and Admons 1908). His daughter Nora never married, and in 1891 Mary would marry Major Dr John Elsdale Molson (1863-1925) a scion of the famous Canadian Molson family and brewing dynasty. (10)They had five children. Alice Leeson would survive her husband by fifteen years; she lived at 1 Blomfield House, Upper Westbourne Terrace, Notting Hill Gate, London, and died on 6 November 1923 leaving an estate worth £7,537-5s-5d (Wills and Admons 1924: 57). She was buried alongside her husband in Hastings Cemetery in a grave marked with a medium sized Celtic stone cross.

Curiously there is no mention of John Leslie or Arthur Edmund Leeson in Eduardo Coghlan's great opus *Los Irlandeses en la Argentina*. Religious prejudice or ethnic discrimination? It is most unlikely, for as Edmundo Murray comments 'Coghlan's main source was the census returns (1855, 1869 and 1895). Usually he included in his lists anyone who declared "irlandés" nationality, who had an "Irish" family name (according to him) regardless of nationality, and others prominently or presumably Irish (e.g. Thomas Armstrong). In a second phase he annotated the records with information including passenger lists, announcements in *The Standard* (11), *The Southern Cross* (12), etc. A statistical analysis comparing Coghlan's data with those in Maxine Hanon's *Diccionario* (which is based on consular records) identifies biases towards Roman Catholic and rural segments, against Protestant and urban. However, this may have not been on purpose. There are many instances in which Coghlan included Protestant settlers, even if he wasn't sure about their place of birth.' (13)

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Notes

1. I am indebted to Beverley Berry, Librarian at the Royal College of Practitioners, London; Luca Dussin, Assistant Librarian at the Royal College of Physicians, London; Mary O' Doherty, Special Collections Librarian, The Mercer Library, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, Dublin; Gillian Newman, Assistant Librarian, Hastings Library, Hastings, East Sussex; Edmundo Murray, Geneva, who have helped and assisted me in preparing this article; and Judy Barradell-Smith.
2. This medical journal was founded in 1832 as *The Dublin Journal of Medical and Chemical Science* and over the years became the prestigious *Irish Journal of Medical Science*. See E. Colman MD (US Food and Drug Administration, Rockville, MD 208577), online available (www.ijms.iy/Portals/_IJMS/Documents/16910.pdf), Robert Graves and the origins of Irish medical journalism, cited 7 February 2008.
3. Detail from the headstone of the Leeson grave at Hastings Cemetery, Hastings, East Sussex, UK. Arthur Leeson's father was the architect John Leeson (d.1855). In 1819-1822 John Leeson was clerk of works at the Pro-Cathedral in Dublin, and mapped out the principal lines of the church of St Nicholas of Myra, Francis Street.
4. See *The London and Provincial Medical Directory*, London 1873, Practitioners Resident Abroad Possessing British Qualifications, p.1042.

5. The Margaret Street Hospital, or 'The Infirmary for Consumption', 26 Margaret Street (Cavendish Square) London W1, was founded in 1847 and known as 'Margaret Street Hospital for Consumption and Diseases of the Chest' until 1908. The old structure was demolished many years ago and the site is now occupied by a modern office block. The only known photos of the façade of this edifice are in the Margaret Street Hospital 1898 Report, London Metropolitan Archives, Call No. SC/PPS/093/36, p. 27.
6. Lionel Sackville West, Foreign Office diplomat who had served in Lisbon, Naples, Stuttgart, Berlin, Turin, Madrid and Paris before being appointed Extraordinary Minister Plenipotentiary to the Argentine Republic 17 September 1868.
7. 1891 Census Return, Ref.: Class TG12; Piece 100; Folio 28; p.52; GSU Roll: 6095210.
8. The British Hospital of Montevideo was founded in 1857; the present edifice located on Avenida Italia dates from 1867.
9. There was also an obituary in *The Times* of London.
10. Major Dr John Elsdale Molson TD. Son of Samuel Elsdale and Agnes Molson, born in Montreal on 6 August 1863. Educated at Cheltenham College and Emmanuel College, Cambridge, MD qualified 1889. Major RAMC(I). Conservative MP for Gainsborough, Lincolnshire, 1918-1923. J. P. for West Sussex. See Michael Stenton and Stephen Lees, *Who's Who of British Members of Parliament*, Vol. III, 1919-1945; *A Biographical Dictionary of the House of Commons*, Harvester Press, Hassocks, Sussex, 1979, p. 247.
11. *The Standard* newspaper was founded by Edward Thomas Mulhall in 1861; he would subsequently be joined by his brother Michael George Mulhall and they worked together as joint editors.
12. *The Southern Cross* newspaper was founded by Dean Patrick Dillon in 1875.
13. Communication with the author, 27 May 2008.

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