

The Irish Hospital in Buenos Aires

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Abstract

The Irish Hospital in Buenos Aires was created and led by the incomparable Catholic priest, Father Anthony Dominic Fahy (or Fahey). He was later assisted by the Irish Sisters of Mercy. The Hospital played a significant role in caring for sick Irish immigrants fleeing from the potato famine in Ireland, and later for the ever growing local Irish community. This fleeting jewel of its community, begat with intense devotion and hard work, deserves to be widely known in Argentina, and by Irish men and women everywhere.

During the eighteenth century in the Viceroyalty of the River Plate, and after the independence revolution in which the “*Provincias Unidas*” gained their freedom from Spain, the Irish community, which was to play an important role in the growth and development of Argentina, increased slowly and steadily in size. Thomas Murray, in his narratives on Irish emigration to Argentina, estimated that in 1824 there were 500 Irishmen living in Buenos Aires and the surrounding countryside, and in 1832 the community had grown to 2500 members (Murray 1919: 57). Since most of them were Roman Catholic, with a poor command of the Spanish language, there was a need for a priest who spoke their language; after being appraised of this, and of two frustrated attempts, the Archbishop of Dublin, Dr. Daniel Murray, sent Father Fahy (or Fahey as he preferred to write his surname) out to these lands (Ussher 1951: ch. 4,1).

Anthony Dominic Fahy was born in Loughrea, County Galway, Ireland, and after joining the Dominican Order in 1826, taking his vows in 1828, he was consecrated into the priesthood in 1831 in Rome. He spent a period as a missionary in a religious community in North America, and

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some years in the Dublin Archbishopry, before his arrival in Buenos Aires in January 1844. Very shortly, that same year, he supported the group of the British Hospital's founders, and joined their second Board of Directors. Soon he became the spiritual advisor and counsellor to the local Irish community. His parish was scattered over the vast distances of the "pampas", which he regularly traversed on horseback to visit his flock. Thus, besides dispensing religious comforts to them, he also became their marriage counsellor; interpreter, postman and custodian of their moneys, as also their financial advisor (Murray 1919: 140 and 147).

During the Irish potato famine in the 1840s, a great number of Irish men and women emigrated to America, most of them to the United States, though a good number of them came to South America, mainly to Argentina. Many of them arrived in Buenos Aires sick and malnourished after a three-month voyage from Liverpool, mostly in primitive and poorly equipped vessels. A lot of them were penniless and could not pay for medical care in Buenos Aires. This was the main factor in Father Fahy's decision to establish a Hospital for them and for the burgeoning local community, based on the concept of free medical attention. Thomas Murray brought attention to the Irish hospital in his book *The Story of the Irish in Argentina* in 1919, as it was not widely known that Buenos Aires had such a hospital (Murray 1919).

In 1848, with help from his countrymen in making up the "Irish Relief Fund", Father Fahy rented a house on Cangallo street, between Esmeralda and Suipacha, and started the Irish Hospital. To sustain this enterprise, many small donations were sent by Irish settlers from the outlying countryside, in a radius of approximately 100 to 150 miles out of Buenos Aires. Also, many local businessmen contributed handsomely, of which Thomas Armstrong, George Dowdall, Bernard Kiernan, Patrick Bookey, Patrick Browne and Wilfred Latham stood out. The new Institution was initially known as the "Irish Immigrants Infirmary". The building, which was four city squares away from the Our Lady of Mercy church, was adapted to the new purpose, and three rooms were added to it, plus other pertinent reformatations (Murray 1919: 157).

The initial governing Committee was made up of Father Fahy as President, Mr. Bartholomew Foley as Secretary and Mr. Patrick Bookey as Treasurer. As from 1851, a Committee of five trustees was formed, entrusted to look after matters pertaining to its property. It had no authority over the Hospital's administrative decisions, which was in the hands of Father Fahy; a few years later this was to be shared with the Sisters of Mercy. The Chaplain organized Fund Raising campaigns, the proceeds of which were used by the Sisters as necessary. As time went by, it was deemed necessary to include more help, both to work on these campaigns and for the increasing administrative requirements. Thus, in

1868, the property was put under a new Committee, for which it was responsible, as it was for the governance of the institution. Mr. Michael Duggan was named Treasurer, and Mr. Edward Casey was the Secretary. At that time, the physician in charge was Dr. Lausen, born in Denmark (Murray 1919: 354).

In 1850, Father Fahy purchased the property, and on June 2nd, 1851, before a Notary Public he donated it: "...to all the Irish catholics residing in Buenos Aires and in the districts of its territorial jurisdiction, as to all else who chose to come to these parts, and in name of all of them, to the five gentlemen who form part of the administrative committee of the Buenos Aires General Hospital for Catholic Irish Residents...". In this same Donation Act, there is a phrase in which he recommends the Trustees to put in every effort towards the conservation of the Hospital: "...that it should not deteriorate, so that Irishmen will have this safe refuge always..."²

A new property was bought in 1862, on Riobamba street, between Viamonte and Tucumán. The original Hospital building was sold to Dr. Dalmacio Vélez Sarsfield (Usher 1951: ch. XVIII, 1). Dr. Cornelius Donovan was the first physician. He was assisted by Dr. Andrew Dick and Dr. James Lepper, both of whom were Consultant Physicians to the fledgling British Hospital.³ In its first year, the Irish Hospital admitted 158 patients, of whom 116 were men, 26 were women and 16 were children. Of this number, 138 were discharged cured, and 15 died. So stated Dr. Donovan's first annual medical Report in September 1849, which also included all the diagnoses made.⁴

Medicines were dispensed in Cranwell's Pharmacy,⁵ which was close to the Hospital, and run by the brothers Edmund and William Cranwell, both from County Kildare in Ireland. Dr. Donovan was from County Cork, and after studying Medicine in Paris and in Edinburgh, he arrived in Buenos Aires in 1844, aged 26. He was named surgeon to the Argentine Navy, recently created by Admiral William Brown; his services were frequently required by the Governor Juan Manuel de Rosas, both for his troops and

² http://members.tripod.com/fahyclub_exalumnos.ar/padre_fahy.htm

³ A group of British residents, led by the Anglican parson Rev. Barton Lodge, founded the British Medical Dispensary in July 1844, soon to be known as the *Hospital Británico de Buenos Aires*. It has evolved into a high complexity University Teaching Hospital.

⁴ Dr. Cornelius Donovan, *First Annual Medical report of the Irish Hospital*, September, 1849, quoted by Thomas Murria (1919) 158-159.

⁵ Edmund Richard Cranwell was born in Co. Tipperary in 1805, and arrived in the River Plate in 1825. He studied Pharmacy, and got his local degree. He established a Pharmacy (Botica) on Reconquista street, with his brother William in 1828.

for his family. Dr. Donovan's consulting rooms were initially on Parque (now Lavalle), and he later moved to N° 13 Reconquista street.⁶

Initially, the daily care of patients in the Hospital was administered by women with no formal nursing instruction. To improve the situation, in 1855 Archbishop of Dublin, Dr. Paul Cullen, accepted Father Fahy's request to send out St. Catherine's Convent nuns, of the Sisters of Mercy's Order.⁷ Several of them accepted the challenge, and in February 1856 the following nuns arrived in Buenos Aires: the Mother Superior was M. Evangelista Fitzpatrick, the Assistant Mother M. Baptist. O'Donnel, and the Sisters M. Catherine Flanagan, M. Angela Rowlands, and M. Joseph Griffin. They were accompanied by two Novices, Rose Mary Foley and Anne Coffey, and a Postulant, Mary Moloney. They immediately took over the care of the patients, and established, with the help of the Chaplain, a school for young ladies. In 1858 three more Sisters arrived, and four more the following year. Shortly after, the Government questioned the legality of the newly established "foreign" Order, and its tenure of property. Up to the middle of the nineteenth Century, the only two existing orders in these lands were cloistered: the nuns of the Dominican monastery of St. Kathleen of Siena, and those of the Franciscan monastery of St. Claire. The presence of nuns going about daily, in public, teaching and ministering to the poor and sick, was a cultural shock. They were severely criticized and resisted, and their continuance was put seriously at risk: their unselfish devotion to the sick during a breakout of yellow fever, and Father Fahy's passionate defense of the Order, finally convinced the authorities that they could stay (Ussher 1951: ch. XI, 87). By the year 1859, in addition to caring for the patients, the Hospital and the new school, the Sisters had started up a convent and a public chapel. The building on Riobamba was adapted to house unemployed Irish girls, and to those girls orphaned during the frequent cholera and yellow fever epidemics (Ussher 1951: ch. XI, 94).

In the following years there were many difficulties in the upkeep of the Hospital, as all medical attention was free of charge, and its finances depended on donations. Several fund raising campaigns undertaken by Father Fahy and the Sisters of Mercy had very poor results. This caused the Chaplain to complain in "Letters to the Editor" in *The Standard*, that: "It would seem that the support given to the Irish Hospital is even worse

⁶ Susan Wilkinson, private notes, 1.

⁷ There is a certain controversy of how this came about: the authoress of "Pages in the Annals of the Sisters of Mercy" states that the State and the ecclesiastical authorities were responsible for requesting Archbishop Cullen to send them to Buenos Aires (Murray 1919: 172).

than the other Hospital, and it is a pity that the two have not joined up.”⁸ He also regretted the lack of support of some of his brother priests of his same Order. The attempts of Fr. Fahy and the nuns to obtain the necessary donations, to maintain the Hospital and to enlarge the premises, failed to reach the expected goals. Despite this, their assistance in the severe cholera outbreak in 1868, and the disastrous yellow fever epidemic of 1870 and 1871, was constant.⁹ During this last epidemic, Anthony Dominic Fahy passed away, aged 68. Though he died during the epidemic, his death certificate, signed by two physicians, establishes that he died of heart failure, on February 21, 1871 (Murray 1919: 344).¹⁰ His remains were buried originally in the clergy vault of the Recoleta cemetery, and later removed to a monument in the same cemetery, shaped to a Gaelic cross, built by Earley sculptors from Dublin.

Father John Leahy, who had assisted Father Fahy for some years, replaced him in the running of the Hospital, but due to illness, he returned to Ireland in 1873 (Murray 1919: 359). Subsequently, the Sisters of Mercy relinquished their role in the direction of hospital affairs to a committee of community laymen, which was called “Irish Hospital Committee”.

The committee devised the Irish Hospital Code, which outlined the rules to be followed in subsequent years. It is clear from the code that the committee was trying to deal with the challenges which confronted the hospital, develop a structure of patronage and also take care of those who needed care. The committee was impelled to impose certain restrictions and costs on care depending on patients’ situations. At the same time, a sentiment of caring for the patients is evident in the clauses which prevented patients being admitted who might harm others through illness or behaviour.

Irish Hospital Code:

- * That this Hospital be called the Irish Hospital of Buenos Aires.
- * That this Hospital be open to subscribers in case of sickness.
- * That the following be considered subscribers: Persons paying \$100 currency yearly, and workers and peons in the camp in the receipt of \$400 or less salary, on payment of \$50

⁸ “The other Hospital” is the Buenos Aires British Hospital. *The Standard* February 18, 1865. Quoted by Ussher J.M. op.cit. Ch XIX, p. 147-149.

⁹ All references agree on this point.

¹⁰ Fr. Fahy was treated in his last three years for heart disease, despite which he continued his demanding work unabated. During the Yellow Fever epidemic, whilst he cared for many of the sick, he was unwell, and his physicians diagnosed him to have ‘Bilious Fever’, unrelated to the epidemic. Two physicians stated that he died of heart failure. The location of his death Certificate is unknown.

- * That any person paying \$ 1000 yearly shall be considered a patron of the Hospital with privilege of sending two patients yearly; and those paying \$500 of sending one.
- * That no patient can be admitted without a written order from some party duly authorized to give same, except in urgent cases, when the Sisters of Mercy can determine as to admission of applicant.
- * That only subscribers will have the privilege of voting at General Meetings.
- * That an Annual General Meeting will be held on the 15th of August, for the appointment of Committee of Management for ensuing year, to which Meeting the outgoing Committee will submit a statement of receipts and expenditure during their term..
- * That the internal management be under the Sisters of Mercy, as it has been up to the present.
- * That patients who are non-subscribers be admitted, on bringing testimony of poverty from any authorized person.
- * Should the Hospital accommodation so permit, non-subscribers who can afford to pay may be admitted, on payment of \$50 a day.
- * That no case of smallpox or of virulent contagious fevers can be received, but that arrangements shall be made for the reception of such cases in some of the City hospitals.
- * That no patient will remain in Hospital after the Doctor decides he is to leave.
- * Persons whose reason is disturbed cannot be admitted.
- * All moneys collected for the Hospital shall be deposited in the Mercantile Bank of the River Plate (Murray 1919: 363).

Despite the introduction of a code, the Irish Hospital Committee could not revert the deteriorating economic and financial situation over the next few years, as the donations they relied upon were never enough to cover their expenses. In addition to this, there were discrepancies and differences of opinions between the governing trustees, the Sisters of Mercy, the clergy and prominent members of the community, on the role of the Irish Hospital. The result was that the Hospital closed down in 1879. *The Standard* published an editorial on the subject the following year, and among other concepts, mentioned that “The Irish Hospital flourished for a few years, and whether for want of patients or of support, or through defective management, its doors were closed and it became a thing of the past”. Also, “The Irish College was attempted by the late lamented Father Fahey, and whether for the want of support, or other cause, it was found not to succeed. The property was transferred for a small sum, and upon conditions reserving certain privileges to the Irish people, for the education of their boys. The college that has risen on that property in the Calle

Callao is the stateliest in the whole of the Republic!" (*The Standard* September 1919: Editorial).

In 1891, the last survivor of the initial committee, who had accepted the original donation, ceded the land and its buildings to the Irish Catholic Association.¹¹ Over a century later, it is difficult to speculate on the real reasons why this Institution ceased to exist. Leaving this aside, the contribution to the health care of the Irish community's sick and needy was truly enormous, and at the right moment, as the influx from Ireland thirty years after the Hospital's foundation lacked the drama of those first years in the forties and fifties, as the economic situation of the community had improved. Despite the fact that its contribution was brief –barely thirty one years–, the Irish Hospital played a significant role in caring for the Irish immigrants, and other members of the growing Irish community. The sustained efforts of Father Anthony D. Fahy and the Sisters of Mercy in organizing and running this not-for-profit charitable Institution were commendable, during a challenging time, and deserve more scholarly attention.

¹¹ The Irish Catholic Association was founded on June 5 1883, sponsored by the Archbishop of Buenos Aires Mgr. León Aneiro, and by Mgr. Patrick Dillon. It was empowered to administrate the Irish Orphanage and the Irish Hospital, and to receive donations and bequests pertaining to these properties. (See www.acirlandesa.org.ar)

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