

## LUNCH AT EALING ABBEY

A MEMORY OF DOM PETER FLOOD (1898-1978)

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J.C. Flood has been, for me, a legend for as far back as I can remember. My father had entertained many a medical student with ribald anecdotes of his caustic wit and, later, Flood's contemporaries were to speak to me with some awe of a man who had had more than a little influence on Dublin medicine for many years. Then there were the stories from U.C.D. of the oratorical battles he waged at the L&H in the course of acquiring one of his many degrees at Earlsfort Terrace. When I was appointed to the staff of The Charitable Infirmary, I set off for Ealing Abbey to see if the myth was a reality. As I sat in the parlour awaiting this infamous misogynist, who it was said had declared women to be not only physically inferior but mentally subordinate to the male, I wished that the present I carried for my wife did not have *Just Jane Maternity Boutique* emblazoned across its wrapping. The door burst open and there, in flowing robe, erect, and looking a little like Alastair Sim in an opera cloak, was Dom Peter who looked me straight in the eye and said: "And so you're Doctor O'Brien of Dublin—welcome. You are to succeed Tommy Ryan, who I had appointed to Jervis Street, and as yours was a Charter appointment every member of the Board of Governors, myself included, had a vote. But, of course, it is nothing like the old days when there were some 200 governors, all of whom had to be approached personally if one was to succeed, and that meant days loitering around hospital corridors and kicking the sawdust from the portals of many a pub door. And in the end they always did what Reverend Mother said, but you had to do it, nonetheless—very tiresome."

As we made our way towards the refectory for lunch, he apologised for the comforts of carpeting and central heating, lamenting—"progress is irresistible, and these young fellows will have their way." He warned me that conversation was forbidden during lunch,—"a good thing in my opinion as it saves a lot of tiresome chatter, and besides only the Irish and the French are capable of good conversation, and there are no other representatives of either nation here."

After lunch, he recalled the old days when the likes of Johnny McArdle

"would be brought by special C.I.E. train (complete with nurse), as if a royal personage, to the home of a country dignitary so that the good gentleman might die with the best possible people about him." One day when conducting his outpatients according to his usual policy—new patients first, then women and children, and finally men—a couple of Jim Larkin's union members demanded immediate attention, warning that if they were not seen, Big Jim would hear about it; faced with Flood's refusal to change his policy the pair marched off in the direction of Liberty Hall, but Flood motored to the same establishment ahead of them and, bursting unannounced into Larkin's office, delivered a stern caveat that if Larkin's union ever attempted to dictate to him—Surgeon Flood—trouble of indescribable magnitude would ensue. He compared Larkin in appearance to Paisley, whose unfortunate parish priest Flood had admonished for failing in his duty to see that Paisley's children were reared as Catholics, and not only that, he had advised Cardinal Conway to give Paisley status as "a religious leader in the North of Ireland, so that two great moderating religious leaders might carry the people over their differences."

He had been fond of Dublin—"The Liffey-side houses gave to Dublin its continental atmosphere, and it was a tragic mistake to pull down so many. There is the most beautiful view of the city from one bed in St. Patrick's ward, from where at sunset can be seen Christ Church Cathedral throwing its shadow over the old part of Dublin and the Liffey—I always said I would die in that bed"—he chuckled at the thought. "I moved heaven and earth to get theatres built on the top floor of Jervis Street, but the Governors turned it down because in the event of fire water could not be pumped to that height. I told them to get better pumps, but they did not listen. Of course, the theatres are on the rooftop now."

Flood feared that standards in medicine were deteriorating—"There is no vocation left in medicine. I insisted on seeing my patients personally on the first post-operative day, even if that was a Sunday, and if I ever went to see a private patient on a Sunday, I would

also make a point of seeing my public patients. If you are ever having an operation, never leave it later than Wednesday, otherwise the entire staff will be golfing when your post-operative complications set in. I could forgive one of my staff making a mistake provided I was informed at a stage when corrective action was possible, but I would dismiss without hesitation the doctor who tried to cover-up, because then he or she is not acting in the patient's interest."

"I was in hospital recently myself having a prostatectomy, and quite enjoyed it. I refused all visitors. Things have not changed much except there are a lot of black people, including one charming black maid of great cultural worth—we talked for hours on China and she from darkest Africa. I did welcome one thing though; on recovering from anaesthesia, the surgeon said—"all is well, the operation was a success." Very comforting that; how often we forget to tell the patient the result of the operation, and they are afraid to ask."

"Actually my medical career only ended comparatively recently—I was sacked as infirmarian to the Abbey; they said I refused to give them aspirin and paracetamol, which is not quite true, although I would certainly have refused if they had asked. I will not be told by a patient what I should prescribe, and anyway aspirin causes gastric ulceration and paracetamol is broken down to phenacetin causing kidney disease; these drugs should be controlled by prescription."

I asked him if there was truth in the story that after Leonard Abrahamson had presented to the Academy a complicated case of rheumatoid arthritis treated over many years with gold, Flood had asked—"Can the learned professor tell us if, after the good lady's demise, he managed to recover the gold?" He laughed quite heartily at this, but said he did not think it was true, adding that whoever had concocted it had done a good job. I told him that his was not to be the last laugh, and that to 'the Abe' was attributed the classic mot—"Flood has more degrees than a thermometer without the same capacity for registering warmth." He also laughed at this, but not with much enthusiasm,

and went on to tell me that he had acquired another degree since then—a doctorate in Canon Law during his fourteen years as Professor of Moral Theology in Rome; he had found this more difficult than all the others put together, namely, an M.B., M.Ch., membership of Kings Inns, a B.A. in economics and in languages. I asked him why he had acquired so many degrees and he told me that some, such as economics and law, were of necessity as he had “commercial interests”, but there was more to it than that—“I never talk about anything unless I know my subject extremely well. If I don’t know anything about something, I say nothing. Simple, is it not? A pity everybody doesn’t follow suit.” He went on—“When I am giving a lecture to seminarians, I tell them of the recently ordained priest giving his first sermon, which he prepares and rehearses with great care and finally delivers with reasonable assurance, if a little hesitantly and shyly, but this is forgiven because everybody knows it is his first sermon; he then puts the text of the sermon in a box, and he does likewise with subsequent sermons, and when, forty years later, he is called upon to preach on the same topic, he roots around in the box, finds the appropriate sermon and delivers it again.” Flood banged his fist on the table in rage declaring; “I say to them, what that ignorant man has done is to state to his audience that he has learned nothing in forty years—he has denied them the experience of forty years—isn’t that an awful thought? But, of course, these young fellows don’t listen to me—they will all do exactly what I tell them not to do.”

We discussed cardiology for a while—a short while. “Actually, I have very little time for cardiologists, although I do attend one regularly; an extremely nice chap, Dublin of course; perhaps you know him. Got quite a bright wife too, I believe. Yes, he gives me tablets, a new thing called a-something-blocker. He took me off aldomet, which had suited me quite well for many years without, I might add, lowering my blood pressure one whit, but of course, the Inderal has no effect either. I told Walter, I said to him, there is no point in giving me anything, all will be useless, but he insisted on my taking these, telling me that they were tiny and that I would hardly notice them. I reminded him that I could give him cyanide which he would hardly notice either,

apart from the result, at which stage, of course, his observations would be of little avail. Anyway, I take them for Walter, at least, occasionally when I remember them. Yes, I really have very little time for cardiologists. A friend of mine, a doctor, phoned me one day from the London Clinic to say he was dying and would not last very long and could I come to see him—quickly, as he might not be able to wait. So, of course, off I went, but was told at the reception desk that he was critically ill and was not being permitted visitors. Ignoring these protestations, I proceeded up the stairs to his room, where another nurse informed me that the presence of a visitor would most surely precipitate the doctor’s departure. Sweeping her aside, I entered the room where I found my friend looking remarkably fit, definitely not a dying man, even I could tell that, but he assured me that he was on the way out and that time was short. I discussed some of his many family problems, for which he blamed himself. I then told him to get up, and giving him my hand I helped him from his death-bed, assisted him to dress, and on leaving the room I informed the horror-stricken nurse that the patient was now ready for discharge, and would she be so kind as to inform his consultant cardiologist that his patient was cured.”

With a mischievous glance, he forecast my future—“So, you’re going to listen to hearts for the rest of your life, tut, tut! I suppose it could be worse. You hear nothing really, nobody at the bedside believes you’ve heard anything regardless of what you say. They just keep talking while you listen. It’s very difficult to be flamboyant with a stethoscope, very difficult to have style, but I suppose you’ll get new machinery, something bigger and better than the E.C.G., play around with it for a while and then discard it. Mind you, it’s very difficult to be an eccentric character in medicine nowadays—you are all paid too well, and when you are well paid there is no need to have flair. Of course, the surgeon has a much better chance, a knife is much more theatrical than a stethoscope, and then there’s all the dressing up to go with it. I suppose they even wear make-up nowadays.”

I ventured that Gogarty had flair, but he found this suggestion as unpleasant as the memory of that contemporary wit—“Perhaps he was good at ENT surgery, but I would not be in a

position to judge; he was a complete chancer, a phoney, and a show-off—always a sign of weakness in a man. I suppose his swans have disappeared from the Liffey—ran from his own shadow, heh, heh! Joyce had his measure as Buck Mulligan, but then Joyce had great power of character description before he went mad and wrote that last tome of mumbo-jumbo. Imagine that fellow Gogarty being called in one afternoon to operate on a wealthy private patient who, lying terrified on the table, sees this breathless fool arriving late, declare as he took two pistols from his coat pockets, ‘I am a marked man’—really shameless showmanship, tut, tut!”

He asked about my family, and on learning that I had one son and one of unknown gender on the way, commented with some feeling—“That’s nice, great to watch them growing up. I would like to have had ten boys and ten girls—came from a large family myself—but, of course, having taken orders this wasn’t possible. Still, I do have my spiritual children, a number of young seminarians, very devoted, treat me much like a father, same sort of relationship, better in a lot of ways—I can choose them!”

“I served for fourteen years on the GMC, most of which was spent dealing with drunken Irish doctors. The difference between an Irishman and an Englishman is that when an Englishman totters out of the Cafe Royale and a policeman says to him ‘Ave a good evening, Governor, let me take care of your keys and get you a taxi’ the Englishman duly does so and collects his car next day. The Irishman in the same situation retorts—‘accusing me of being bloody well drunk, are you,’ and then knocks the policeman down for good measure.”

At one stage he guided me towards a large window—“There,” he said, pointing to a small beech-hedged area, “that is the graveyard; so we know exactly where we are going, we have some vague idea whence we came—it is the in-between that is irritating, but there is little we can do about it. There is no point in dwelling on the past, nothing that is past can be altered, so why think about it? Ten o’clock this morning is gone irretrievably, so therefore, I never dwell on the past.”

Dom Peter Flood died on December 16th, 1978, at the age of 80 years.