

The Cover The Sick Call

This painting by Matthew James Lawless is reproduced by kind permission of the National Gallery of Ireland (signed and dated 1863, oil on canvas, 63 x 103 cm. N.G.I. 864). Cover sponsored by Wellcome Ireland Ltd.

The Sick Call, painted in 1863 and purchased by the National Gallery of Ireland in 1925, depicts a sombre occasion which heralds the fate of the consumptive artist, and in depicting the occasion Lawless has chosen to cast his close friends in the painting.

Matthew James Lawless was born in Dublin in 1837, the son of Barry Edward Lawless, a prosperous solicitor who resided at 13 Harcourt Street. He may have attended Clongowes Wood College before his parents moved to London, after which he attended Prior Park School, near Bath, and then went to art school in London, making his first contribution to the Royal Academy in 1858. He soon acquired a reputation as an accomplished draughtsman and book illustrator, displaying, according to Strickland, "a genius of invention and a sense of beauty and form which ranked him as but little inferior to Millais and Sandys". His considerable talent was not confined to painting, he was also a clever musician and some of his compositions became popular; he was a good dancer as well as being an excellent skater. In appearance he was slight and delicate, and his sombre attire was in contrast to the artistic fashion of Bohemianism which he shunned preferring "to be known by his canvases" than his clothes.

By the end of 1860, Lawless, as with his younger contemporary the poet John Keats, was in no doubt as to the prognostic significance of the haemoptysis of tuberculosis: "I have been very unwell but a climax was put to all by my having expectorated a quantity of blood a few days ago and so I was pronounced worse than I really thought I was, and of course ordered to do the quiet". It was against this background of personal calamity that he painted *The Sick Call*. In the painting we see a solemn-faced priest, accompanied by robed acolytes, being rowed across a calm river having been called by the weeping woman to the aid of a dying man. In the background against the still evening sky the towers and spires of a town, possibly Prague or Bruges, which Lawless had visited, are silhouetted. The models for the painting included one named Jack Hoodless, a frequenter of Tattersall's, and then an acolyte at the Bayswater Church, for the acolyte on the left, and the priest is modelled on Sir Benjamin Ward Richardson (1828-96), who was probably Lawless's physician. The allegorical significance of casting the physician in the redemptive priest's role must be interpreted against Lawless's intense piety and devotion to the Catholic religion.

Sir Benjamin Ward Richardson who was born in Leicestershire in 1828 received his medical training in Glasgow, and became a fellow of the Royal College of Physicians in London in 1865. He was physician to a number of London dispensaries as well as to the Royal Infirmary for Diseases of the Chest. His support for the arts is reflected in his appointment as physician to the Newspaper Press Fund and the Royal Literary Fund. He was knighted in 1893 for his services to humanitarian causes, foremost among which was public hygiene and anaesthesia. He was one of the earliest advocates of bicycling. In addition to a large output of scientific papers he wrote biographies, plays, poems and songs and it may have been his love of music that first brought him into contact with Lawless.

Lawless completed *The Sick Call* in 1863 and it was reproduced in *The Illustrated London News* as one of the gems of the Academy exhibition of that year. Sadly, the artist died of consumption the following year at the early age of twenty-seven.

The following sources were consulted for this note: Strickland WG. *A dictionary of Irish Artists*. Shannon 1969; Vol II: pp. 5-8; *The Compact Edition of the Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press 1975; Vol. I; p. 1180, Vol 2; p. 2456; Bailey C. *Matthew, James Lawless*. *Irish Arts Review* 1987; 4: 20-4.

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