

Opening Dusty Boxes

The Life of a County Surgeon in Edwardian Ireland

by Neil J. Brennan

It gives me great pleasure to be asked to review the book entitled "Opening Dusty boxes" by my first cousin Neil Brennan, which describes the life of our mutual grandfather a County Surgeon in Edwardian Ireland.

Not alone does this publication represent a family chronicle for future generations, but also gives a very exact and illuminating insight into various aspects of life, both medical and non-medical in the Ireland of that period, at a local and political level.

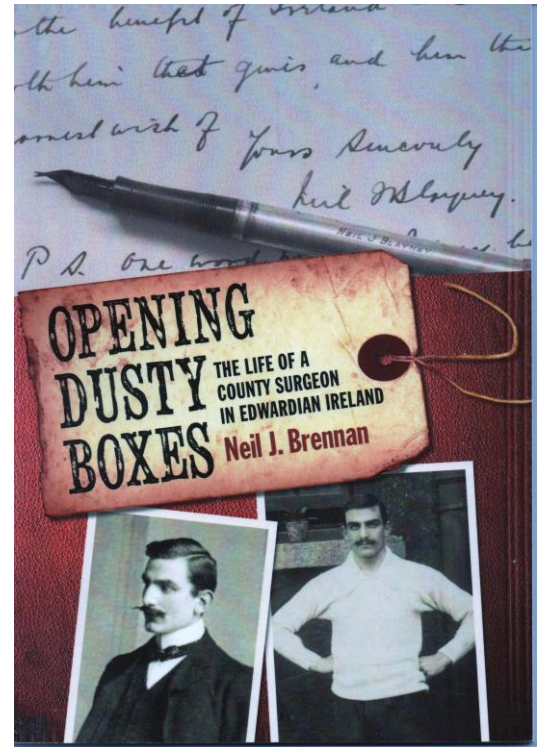
Neil John, henceforth referred to as John, was born on the 28th of April 1874 to Alexander and Anne Jane Blayney in Cushendall, Co. Antrim. He was the sixth of seven children. His father came from a family of ship-owners and seamen.

Without going into the details of the family, it is worth singling out his oldest brother who had a stellar career in St. Malachy's College, Belfast and subsequently the Royal University of Ireland before becoming Consultant Surgeon to the Mater Hospital in Dublin.

John likewise attended St. Malachy's College. He followed his brother into Medicine at the Royal University and subsequently the Catholic University School of Medicine, St. Cecilia Street, later subsumed into UCD. Qualifying in October 1897, he was elected "resident surgeon for a year" at the Mater Hospital, a form of apprenticeship during which time the young doctor lived in the hospital. A photograph of the 1898 resident staff reveals a group of nine, all men, dressed formally, seven of whom sport moustaches!

After his year in the Mater, he moved back to Belfast to work in the newly-commissioned Mater Infirmorium Hospital. During this period he had to deal with an outbreak of Typhoid. Six months later he signed on as the ship's surgeon on the Pacific Steam Navigation Company's ship the Orellana bound for Valparaiso. The account of his journey provides a superb travelogue and pastiche of life at sea during that period, from the ports visited, to the menus served. In researching the book in 2014, the author actually revisited many of the ports mentioned.

Before describing John's subsequent career, it is worth noting his sporting prowess. He was a talented tennis and hockey player, but more importantly he scored a try in the Mater Hospital's first win in the Hospital's cup against Dun's Hospital in 1897 and was also part of the famous Bohemians football Club, one of the oldest such clubs in the Republic. On occasion a "Bohs" team might include no less than 9 doctors or surgeons at any given time! John's brothers Alexander and Dan had both played a major part in the establishment of the club on 6th September 1890.



John was appointed as County Surgeon in Maryborough, the Queen's County, (now Portlaoise, Co. Laois) on the 10th of January 1900, possibly the first surgeon to be appointed in the new century! His appointment did not go smoothly, as heretofore the Jacob family held the post of Physician & Surgeon for generations. But as the Local Government Act 1898 sought to pass control of the older infirmaries into the hands of the County Councils, the influence of the nationalist population increased.

Mr. Patrick A. Meehan, formerly a Fenian and Land League Activist, subsequently an M.P. for the Queen's County, became Chairman of the Hospital Board and eventually was to become John's father-in-law.

John's career was very multifaceted and included a variety of projects and positions including: the development of a new operating theatre in the Infirmary, improvements in the quality of the beds, dietetics, and water supply. He insisted on introducing higher standards in nurse training equivalent to those in the UK, and presented a draft set of rules for Hospital governance, including holiday leave, the acquisition of a "Roentgen" X-Ray Machine, the purchase of an anaesthetic apparatus, the establishment of a Dispensary in the grounds of the Infirmary and the building of a Sanatorium for the treatment of Tuberculosis. With the outbreak of war he applied to join the Army Medical Corps. but had his application rejected. He did however occupy the post of Medical doctor to the Army Barracks in Portlaoise and the RIC.

His relationship with the local general practitioners tended to fluctuate and maybe a dissatisfaction with his position led him to apply for the post of Inspector of hospitals, a quest in which he failed.

On the night of the 23rd of September 1910, he was involved in a fatal road traffic accident in which he ran over a drunken man lying on the road as he returned home from Abbeyleix.

Though cleared of negligence, he became severely ill with pneumonia 2 months later and as in the past he had to take time off to recuperate; on this occasion he took a ship from Marseille to North Africa and home via Sicily.

John married Eily Meehan on the 2nd of February 1916. His daughter Mary Alys was born on the 13/12/16 and on the 5/12/18 his son Alexander was born. He was premature, not expected to survive, and was wrapped up in warm clothes and put in a shoe box under the bed! He survived and became the first Consultant ENT Surgeon west of the Shannon, attached to the then Regional hospital Galway and UCG.

At a political level John represented many of his era. He was a supporter of the Irish Language movement, the Gaelic League and wrote letters to both the Manchester Guardian and the Daily Mail, regarding the Irish Question and the necessity for free choice without coercion for the Unionists both north and south. As his brother Alexander operated on the wounded in the Mater during the 1916 uprising, and as Dublin was under martial law, John, his brother-in-law and others delivered 800 loaves of bread to the St. Vincent de Paul in Ozanam House in Dublin, using their various travel passes to clear security.

John had suffered from chest problems throughout his life, but it is probable that the flu epidemic of that period was responsible for his demise. He died on 26th February 1919. He had packed a lot into his life even including participation in musical events and wood-turning. In assessing his position as gleaned by others it was reported in the Leinster Express that "in the social circle no more genial or kindly person can be met. Always ready to assist a colleague, or take part in entertainments or amusements, an ardent sportsman, he was a favourite with all". Not a bad legacy.

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Price: €14.99 (incl. postage within Ireland)