



A forgotten Benefactor

Not many Limerick people in this century will have heard of the name of Robert Frith. Yet, more than a hundred years ago, his name was a household one in the city.

Robert Frith was a doctor who lived at his medical hall in Charlotte Quay. He was an unusual kind of general practitioner: he went out of the normal medical way to help the poverty-stricken people of Limerick and his door was ever open to the poor of the neighbouring Irishtown.

His medical hall was often a clinic for many of those who were, too ashamed to avail of the dreadful Dickensian dispensary system of the time, and many a hapless pauper was spared the inevitable embarrassment and humiliation of that condition by the warm welcome received there. The story is told of a woman who presented a prescription for her sick husband. After reading the prescription, the doctor took a shilling from his till and handing it to the woman, advised her to buy a sheep's head to make soup for her ailing spouse, telling her that her husband needed only nourishment.

From the beginning of his life in Limerick Robert Frith was moved by the illiteracy among the poor, particularly among women. He had a driving zeal to educate the children of the Irishtown and Garryowen. The building of St. John's Girls' School in 1870 was a testimony to his munificence. Sadly, he did not live to see the completion of this beautiful limestone building. Dr Frith also endowed five cottages for poor widows alongside the school. His widow bequeathed a further sum for the construction of a new wing to the school in 1880. For many years afterwards the building was known as "Frith's School".

Thus Surgeon Frith, in life and in death, gave everything he had to the poor. He asked for nothing in return. Today his name is unknown. But if one pushes aside the long, tangled grass on his grave at Mount St. Laurence cemetery, the following inscription can still be seen on his tombstone:

Erected to the memory of Robert Frith, surgeon, who departed this life on the 21st day of November 1867. He was a just man. He served God. His hands through life were open to the poor and in death he did not forget them.