Sir Wilfred Grenfell: an athletic missionary

Stanley R Sims

Sir Wilfred Grenfell as portrayed in his "Forty years for Labrador" (Hodder and Stoughton, 1934). Copyright © by the author

Just over 100 years ago, on 4 August 1892, Wilfred Grenfell arrived in Labrador. It was the start of a series of extraordinary achievements in establishing medical care for the region in the face of geographical difficulties, poverty, ignorance, and the opposition of vested interests. The effects of Grenfell's achievements are still evident today, yet few people, even doctors, know anything about this fascinating, energetic man.

Born in 1865, he may have inherited his adventurous spirit from his ancestor Sir Richard Grenville, who lost his life fighting the Spanish in 1591. Wilfred proved good with his fists at Marlborough School, and played rugby for Oxford. He might have joined his 48 cousins in the army or the civil service, had not his doctor shown him a pickled brain and inspired him with the wish to study medicine.

He went to London for his training, and what he saw in the Hogarthian environs of the London Hospital induced in him a hatred of strong drink and laid him open to the influence of two well known Christian cricketers, the brothers Studd, and a pragmatic evangelist, D L Moody. Grenfell came to perceive Christianity as nothing if not practical and occasionally muscular. He was his own bouncer at his Sunday school class, and when preaching temperance in public houses he had no problem repelling attacks from the already satisfied customers.

With his tutor and chief, Frederick Treves, he shared a love of the sea, and their sailing holidays together evolved later into summer camps for east end boys, an idea that caught on nationally. So Treves did not have far to look for a doctor when the National Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen launched a hospital ship in response to the high casualty rate among fishermen in the North Sea. Within a year Grenfell had become the mission's superintendent and was travelling widely, fund raising, and researching marine ecology.

In 1892 he sailed from St John's, Newfoundland, on board a ketch rigged hospital ship to explore the "starvation coast" of Labrador. Three months later, having treated 900 patients, he was welcomed back

by the politicians and merchants of the city, who undertook to provide two hospitals. He returned the next year, with two doctors and nurses and a 45 foot river steamer, called, by permission of the future Queen Mary, the *Princess May*. With a crew of two and a defective compass, but now able to navigate the shallow water of many inlets, he made an audacious voyage along the foggy, unlit, and virtually uncharted coast, preaching, treating the sick and injured, and distributing clothing.

Nomads and Liveyeres

The population of Labrador at this time consisted of about 1700 Eskimos in the far north, a few nomadic Indians, and 3300 Liveyeres ("we live yere") who originated from the west country, all widely scattered in small settlements. The Liveyeres trapped and hunted in winter and came to the coast in summer to trade their pelts and fish. They were at the mercy of despotic coastal traders, who by denying credit could impose a slow death—one man's last meal was his only dog; another shot his three children and himself.

But every year, the population swelled when hundreds of schooners from south Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, and the American coast gathered in St John's harbour waiting for the northern ice to melt. The fishermen they carried depended on wealthy merchants for their equipment, loaned on terms that ensured permanent indebtedness. With the men travelled their ill clad families, who were accommodated among the fishing gear, small boats, food, chickens, and goats that cluttered the decks. There was no privacy or sanitation. In May there were 30 000 people distributed along the Labrador coast, living in log cabins and fishing until October, when they returned to hand over their catch.

When Grenfell arrived he found dispirited people with a low level of literacy. They treated influenza by swallowing their own lice. The only doctor travelled on the mail steamer, making brief occasional calls at some of the larger settlements. Families were large despite unhygienic midwifery and there was much malnutrition. Any treatment requiring rest was out of the question for adults, and the parents of tuberculous families worked till they died. As for surgery—two young girls were found trying to amputate their father's leg.

The public conscience had already been aroused by the plight of these neglected people, but Grenfell's decision to initiate cooperatives provoked hostility, and he lost more local support when he denounced—none too tactfully—the sale of alcohol in a country legally dry, and the infamous truck system. Under this, most of the merchants, claiming all a man's fish, paid him in gear, salt, and food at their own valuation with no right of appeal.

Undeterred, Grenfell settled into a life of fund raising by writing and lecturing far and wide in winter and plying the coast in summer. He navigated, sometimes with more faith than professionalism, a succession of hospital ships donated by and named after Sir Donald Smith, later Lord Strathcona, director of the Canadian Pacific Railway Company. One was fitted with wireless by Marconi himself. Eventually

Ashford, Kent TN27 9SP
Stanley R Sims, retired chest
physician

BMJ 1992;305:1527-9

A Labrador fisherman's home. Reproduced from "Forty years for Labrador" by Sir Wilfred Grenfell by permission. Copyright © by the author

The first "Strathcona," from 1899 to 1922 hospital ship along the Labrador coast. Courtesy of Grenfell Regional Health Services

Grenfell established a permanent headquarters at St Anthony and extended his work to its hinterland, travelling about by dog sleigh.

Frozen legs as a flag pole

Grenfell was phenomenally fit. In middle life, after trudging 45 km in one day with a backpack, he ran another eight to amputate a shattered leg, helped by two assistants, one of whom fainted. He proved the equal of the explorer Bob Bartlett on a hunting expedition, and enlarged an ice hole made for fishing to have a swim. Before they parted company he extracted Bartlett's tonsils, holding him against a shed wall.

In 1908 Grenfell nearly perished when he took his dog team, against advice, across Hare Bay in a short cut to an urgent case. The ice broke up and he drifted seawards on a floe. He had to kill three dogs and wrap himself in their skins to survive the night and then use their frozen legs to make a flag pole for waving his shirt. He was rescued by five oarsmen at great personal risk.

The next year, at the age of 44, on his way from Liverpool to New York on the *Mauretania*, he proposed to a girl 20 years younger, after a three day acquaintance. On being reminded that he did not even know her name, he replied that he was only interested in what it was going to be.

In fact her name was Anne MacClanahan. Of Scottish descent but Chicago born, she was a graduate, a horsewoman, and well off. After their marriage she built a house for them in St Anthony, learnt shorthand and typing, and marshalled Wilfred's correspondence, often the casualty of his 18 hour day. She could match her husband's exuberance in riotous deck games, but ashore her regal bearing and social rectitude earned her the nickname "Queen of the North." Old friends calling on Grenfell were politely offered appointments.

Mrs Grenfell organised her husband's tours, corrected his sartorial eccentricities, and took over the editing of his many books, including the popular *Yourself and Your Body*. She developed a flair for raising funds—particularly from the rich and famous, whose psychology she understood—and she proved an apt consort for Grenfell in his encounters with the royal family and the American president.

Grenfell's efforts at alleviating the people's non-medical problems were equally energetic and pragmatic. Travelling the coast, he distributed clothing, which he collected from far and near. One nurse on board received a lame explanation when she saw her favourite sweater disappearing over the rail on a wearer. Once, finding on shore an almost naked old man, Grenfell gave him his own clothes and swam back to his ship.

He discovered many orphans. At first he sent

some to England and America, but later established orphanages, followed by schools offering university scholarships. Crates of donated books were shipped around the settlements.

Beginnings of frozen food

In an effort to expand the mission's fox farm Grenfell brought in a biologist to supervise breeding. This man, Clarence Birdseye, went on to found the frozen food industry after observing a fish, instantly frozen on capture, jumping about while defrosting.

With the aid of a pioneer occupational therapist Grenfell introduced cottage industries for women and disabled people including making mats, gloves, and boots and bottling berries. He promoted ship building and ship repairing, pestered the government to survey the coast and made charts himself, and shamed the authorities into providing lighthouses by threatening to build them himself. While campaigning for the enforcement of the law on maritime safety, he was prepared in his capacity as a magistrate, holding his courts afloat, to prescribe eccentric remedies. He discharged a cruel father but confiscated the man's child. Ever ready to destroy illegal stills, he nevertheless allowed an illegal divorce.

He enlisted hundreds of unpaid volunteers from all over the English speaking world to help in constructing and maintaining buildings and caring for their occupants. It became almost the vogue to work for Grenfell. A professor of mathematics dug a trench with a publisher. It was said that Grenfell did as much for the United States by awakening the spirit of service as he did for Labrador itself.

His selfless sincerity and irrepressible sense of humour won him unyielding affection, but his application of the principle "start something, someone else will finish it" could make him an exasperating colleague. His mind teeming with new ideas, he was forgetful, impulsive, and inattentive to detail, and not

Grenfell was wearing sporting gear from university days during his ice floe adventure. The sled containing his dry clothes sank through the ice; he split his thigh boots and lashed them together over his shoulders to provide some protection from the wind. From "Grenfell of Labrador: a biography" by Ronald Rompkey (University of Toronto Press, 1991)

above raiding a ward sister's blanket store—with the best of intentions.

Always a Bible Christian, Grenfell came to regret his youthful assertiveness and to recognise in others the pre-eminence of character over creed. By selecting for competence he created a health service that would pass amenably into secular control long after his death in 1940.

In 1911 work began on the King George V Institute in St John's, a building offering facilities to travellers and safe lodging for girls working as ships' cooks. The king, connected by transatlantic cable, pressed a button in Buckingham Palace to lay the foundation

stone on the day of his coronation. (A man was concealed under Grenfell's platform, ready to release the stone if the royal signal failed.) In 1912 the International Grenfell Association was founded and this continues to fund research projects.

The climax of Grenfell's career, and his knighthood, came in 1927, with the rebuilding, in brick, of the St Anthony Hospital as a centre of excellence, with 80 beds. When he retired there were six hospitals, seven nursing stations, four hospital ships, two orphanages, two large schools, 14 industrial centres, and a cooperative lumbermill in the region he served. And beri-beri had disappeared from Labrador.

The Amazons within: women in the BMA 100 years ago

Tara Lamont

MANSELL COLLECTION

Elizabeth Garrett Anderson in 1889—“the essentially conservative pioneer who represented the acceptable face of practising women doctors to the (male) profession”

Shall the Association decide to commit, in a moment of reactionary excitement, an act of hostility in itself useless and sure to be hereafter regretted, against a movement the strength and vitality of which cannot be doubted?

Elizabeth Garrett Anderson addressing the Representative Body in Bath, 1878

In 1892 the British Medical Association voted overwhelmingly to expunge a clause from its articles of association that debarred membership to women. Elizabeth Garrett Anderson had for 19 years been the sole woman member of the association during a stormy period in which the objective of full membership for qualified women doctors often seemed elusive. Editorials in the *British Medical Journal* and the *Lancet* had warned against the lowering in status that would ensue from the acceptance of women into the professional body of doctors. There were further fears about entry into the social networks provided by the BMA as the “club” for doctors. A Dr Wade, proposing the motion to exclude women from the association at the annual meeting in Nottingham in 1878, stated that “Even those persons who were most confident there were ladies capable of practising medicine and surgery would admit that it did not necessarily follow that they should become members of this Association, which was, in fact, a movable scientific and social club.”¹

Isolation and professional status

In 1873 Elizabeth Garrett (afterwards Elizabeth Garrett Anderson) was accepted for membership by the Paddington branch of the BMA, sponsored by a physician at the Middlesex Hospital and another at St Mary's Hospital. She was accepted by default, there being at that time no stipulation as to the sex of members in the rules and regulations of the association for the simple reason that it was assumed that all medical practitioners were men.² Elizabeth Garrett had become a qualified practitioner by a tortuous route, finally obtaining an MD from Paris in 1870, ten years after attaching herself to Middlesex Hospital as an aspirant medical student. She was refused formal admission to medical schools and instead pursued her studies privately in Edinburgh, St Andrews and London with extensive financial support from her father. The solitary mode of training was difficult: in 1864 she wrote to Emily Davies (later the founder Mistress of Girton College, Cambridge): “Snubbing... is unpleasant and for a time hindering. You cannot at once believe that personal effort can altogether make up for the help that teaching and guidance give other students... I must peg away alone and do as well as I can.”³

The sense of isolation experienced by Elizabeth Garrett was not only personally difficult but also politically weakening. In her letters to friends and colleagues, Elizabeth Garrett stated the need to open the way for other women doctors—“the cause” as she once called it—rather than just to achieve the individual objective of her qualification. Similarly, she was aware that the headway she made with individual physicians would be no substitute for change in the institutions and bodies that determined professional standards and rights. She wrote in 1862 that “The general feeling seems to be that each doctor is willing to help me privately and singly, but they are afraid to countenance the movement by helping me in their collective capacity.”

It was therefore important to Elizabeth Garrett to secure professional status rather than simply to practise as a doctor. She received the Licence of the Society of Apothecaries in October 1865, and in September 1866 her name was placed on the Medical Register. She started practising at the St Mary's Dispensary for Women and Children in Marylebone, where she worked until moving to Paris to 1869 a study for her MD. It was not until 1873 that she applied for ordinary membership to the BMA through the Paddington branch.

Storm over women members

Two years passed before the fact of her membership became widely known. At the annual representatives meeting in Edinburgh in 1875 Elizabeth Garrett Anderson was due to read a paper in the obstetrical section. The question of women members of the BMA erupted into a holy storm. Professor Christison was president at that time and declared his own antagonism towards medical women. A motion was put by Dr Pemberton proposing a vote on the question of admitting women members to the association. In a letter to her husband Elizabeth Garrett Anderson wrote that she had been advised by Ernest Hart, editor of the *British Medical Journal*, to “be on the watch for Pemberton's motion and be ready to speak against it.”⁴ Her earlier clashes with the medical profession in the years leading up to qualification had not hardened her to the trials of intense scrutiny and even hostility: “I don't want to fail as a leader even of a forlorn hope but it grates against my taste making anything of a self-defensive speech to such a body.”⁵

In this climate, the act of reading a scientific paper on obstetrics became politically charged. This was recognised by Anderson herself: “I do hope it [her paper] will be useful in a solid way to the cause.” She

British Medical Association, London WC1H 9JR
Tara Lamont, secretary,
board of science and education

BMJ 1992;305:1529-32