SAMUEL BELL LABATT (1770-1849): PIONEER IN PREVENTIVE MEDICINE IN IRELAND *

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For centuries smallpox had been one of the deadliest diseases in Ireland. Rogers, a Court physician, writing of it in 1734 said that "though of foreign growth and by Transplantation brought in amongst us, it now becomes a Weed of our own Soil, and a Native of our Country. 'Tis well known that Arabia and the adjoining Southern regions were the Mother Countries, the unhappy Parents of this Contagious Disease: and that it can claim no longer a descent with us than about two Centuries;' however, Sir William Wilde in the 1851 Census gives it a more remote Irish pedigree, beginning in the eighth century, and, according to Dr. O'Connor, a noted antiquarian who had at his disposal the contents of the Bodleian Library and that of the Marquis of Buckingham, the manuscripts from these libraries were written partly in Latin and partly in Irish. In one of these works, the Annals of Ulster, it is stated "that there was, in the year 679, a grievous leprosy, called in Irish 'Bolgach'," which translated, means the smallpox, and in this sense the word survives both in Irish and in Highland Gaelic. The inclusion of pox of a type of leprosy, as in Lepre gravissima in Hibernia qui vocatur bolgadi was no doubt suggested by the extensive seabbing which accompanied the drying of the pustules. In Ireland at this period, there were centres of culture and monastic learning to which many European students came, and who in time returned to the Continent with their Irish associates. This constant exchange could possibly have led to the introduction of smallpox in Ireland at such an early date.

Towards the end of 1766, a very severe outbreak of smallpox with resulting unbelievable havoc occurred and desolated the countryside. A similar outbreak was repeated in the following spring. The mortality rate was as high as 50 per cent. of the infected, and those who escaped death were left with the ravages of the disease, scarcely in many cases, being even identifiable to their nearest relatives. At this stage there was very little the 18th century doctor could do for the afflicted. Doctors had more promising results when they devoted their energies to prevention rather than to cure.

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Inoculation was no novel practice when, early in the 18th century, it was noticed in the British scientific press, and when in 1717, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s letters from Turkey brought it to the attention of a wider public. Lady Mary, wife of the British Ambassador there, reported that “they take the smallpox here, by way of diversion, as they take the waters in other Countries.” She knew of no case of anybody dying from deliberate infection, and she felt “patriotic” enough to take pains to bring this useful invention into fashion in England. Her son was successfully inoculated in Constantinople and her daughter by a Surgeon Maitland in Britain. By coincidence it is interesting to note here, if I may anticipate a little, that as inoculation had been introduced from East to West by the wife of the British Ambassador in 1800 the reverse process of the introduction of vaccination from West to East took place.* The circumstances leading up to this occurrence was when the son of the British Ambassador, Lord Elgin, was successfully vaccinated when only seven days old. A few Turkish parents followed the example and had their children vaccinated—but the practice did not gain ground there until Dr. Walshe, the learned author of *A Residence in Constantinople*, who had paid much attention to the practice of vaccination before he left Ireland, inoculated with cowpox lymph which he had obtained from the Institution in Sackville Street, Dublin, the child of Lady Strangford, and being anxious to disseminate abroad a practice which his previous experience had sanctioned, he took infection from the child’s arm and vaccinated others; and thus extended the practice to many hundreds.

Yet more publicity resulted from Princess Anne’s severe attack of smallpox in 1725. Queen Caroline, when Princess of Wales, concerned for her other children, secured permission to have seven condemned criminals reprieved, on condition that they allowed themselves to be inoculated. None of the prisoners had reason to regret his boldness: six suffered only from mild smallpox, and the seventh survived a more severe attack. Caroline, further reassured by the successful inoculation of eleven charity children, offered two princesses to the inoculators. The result was satisfactory and the practice became more widely accepted.

The first recorded inoculation in Ireland was performed by Mr. Hannibal Hall, a Dublin surgeon, in 1723. The practice spread very slowly, and only 25 cases are recorded in the whole of Ireland by 1729, and indeed, the early results were not encouraging, but inoculation as practised by itinerant quacks was indeed widespread. The people, having great faith in these practitioners, and even later in more enlightened times, there was great difficulty in restraining the populace from being treated by them.

It was known in England, and on the Continent as well, that if dairy-maids or other people, handling cows suffering from a certain pustular disease, were infected by them, they would acquire immunity from

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*"I did so in this place," he says, "and subsequently in others; and I have the pleasure to think that if the lady of the British Ambassador introduced inoculation to the people of the West, through the medium of her child, the wife of another, a century after, they returned the benefit by introducing a still further improvement through her child, to the people of the East, in places where it was not known or practised before."