

The Life and Times of Dr Honoria Aughney 1900 -1991

Chief Medical Officer of County Wexford 1947 -1965

Monica Crofton

Honoria Aughney was born at Roscatt Near Tullow in Co. Carlow on Sept 13th 1900. Her parents were Patrick Aughney and MaryAnne Dargan, She was one of five children, John, Mary Anne, Elizabeth, Brigid, Honoria and Josephine.¹ She attended the Brigidine Convent in Tullow and both she and her older sister Elizabeth succeeded in winning scholarships to UCD. Elizabeth studied to become a secondary school teacher and Honoria became a medical student. Of the 193 students enrolled that year (1919) 32 were women. She was in the same class in UCD as Kevin Barry, the young medical student who was hanged in Mountjoy Jail for his part in an attack on military party at Monks Bakery at Church St. in Dublin. Three officers were killed in the attack. When captured he refused to name the others who were with him in the raid and so faced the scaffold alone at the age of eighteen on 20th Nov 1920²

A meeting between Honoria and Kevin is recorded in an article by the great great niece of Kevin Barry, Siofra O' Doherty.

"A fellow UCD student, Honoria Aughney, met Kevin at a céilí. They were dancing to The Siege of Ennis, a dance in which you change partners, and Kevin said: "I didn't know the Carlow girls knew anything about dancing", to which Honoria answered: "And I didn't know the rugby players knew anything about it either."³

While at UCD Elizabeth, her older sister, and Honoria joined the Dublin branch of Cumann Na mBan They attended meetings and learned first aid and drill. It was suggested to them that they should form a branch in Tullow during their long summer holidays at home. This they did.

Honoria taught first aid to the branch and Elizabeth who was now using the Irish form of her name "Eilís Ni Eachnaigh" taught the drill. The branch was active during the War for Independence.

After the treaty was signed in 1921 both women remained strongly anti treaty republican, something their parents did not agree with and they encountered hostility from people in their own locality. The women's job was to conceal weapons or carry them especially after a "job" was done, or to carry messages between the IRA guerrilla fighters.

Fr Eddie Aughney (interviewed Nov 1922) a nephew of Honoria's recounted driving on the Naas Rd one day, many tears later, with his brother who pointed to a small memorial stone on the side of the road. "That is in memory of Bobbie Bonfield" he said "Your Auntie Hon's boyfriend"

Robert (Bobbie) Bonfield was a young dental student. The sisters used to carry messages for him and a small group of college volunteers of which he was a member. They would collect the messages at Mc Carthy's shop at Lower Leeson St⁴. He was quartermaster and acting O.C. of the 4th battalion of

¹ Census of Ireland 1911

² Sean Cronin *Kevin Barry* P31

³ *'Yours 'Til Hell Freezes — A Memoir of Kevin Barry', by Siofra O'Donovan, is published by Currach Books*

⁴ Witness Statement No. 1054 Eilís Ni Eachnaigh 29-12-1954

the 1st Dublin brigade of the IRA. On Wed 20th Dec 1922 he walked into the shop of James Dwyer in Ranelagh. James (Seamas) was a pro treaty politician and a friend of Michael Collins. The IRA suspected him of being instrumental in the deaths of five young men of their ranks. Bonfield drew a gun and shot Dwyer twice in the head, killing him. Bonfield escaped but three months later he was captured and killed by the Free State forces. His body was found near the Red Cow, Clondalkin.⁵ There is no evidence at all of a romantic attachment with Honoria, it is just a story, which may or may not be true which her family picked up along the way.

Eilís and Honoria found it hard to keep up the Cumann na mBan activities after the treaty. Even though its members had voted against the treaty at an extraordinary general meeting of the association in Feb 1922 there was a split in the ranks and members drifted away. Eilís states that they tried to carry on until the ceasefire “each day getting more heart-breaking and more hopeless”⁶

Honoria qualified as a doctor in 1924 and from then she is listed as a doctor in private practice in Abbey St ,Tullow, Co Carlow until 1934. There is still a mark on the wall of the house where her plaque was when she practised there. She came to Wexford in 1934 as acting tuberculosis officer but left for Wales in the same year to go to the Welsh School of medicine in Cardiff to pursue a course of studies there in public health care and the treatment of infectious diseases⁷

TB (tuberculosis) was the biggest health problem in Ireland at the time. Called “consumption” the disease seemed to “consume” the person who was unfortunate enough to contract it. There was no cure and it was a death sentence for many. Because the disease was spread by infection from one person to another through coughing, sneezing and general lack of sanitation it was most likely to occur in overcrowded urban areas and in unventilated farm houses. Although anyone could be affected by it carried a social stigma that it was a disease of the poor. It attacked children but also young adults.

The Free State government of the time had put health as one of its priorities, especially public health. There was, however, no proper social welfare in place so if a young worker got TB he often tried to conceal it so that he could keep earning a wage to support his family. In this way it spread to his co-workers of whom many would die.

Wexford had the most cases of tuberculosis in the Free State with the highest number of deaths. In 1928 the death rate for the rest of the country was 1.37 per 1000 people, in Wexford it was 2 per 1000. No one knew why, was it the climate? the soil?, the air? The milk? There was no convincing answer. As there was no cure the only thing to do was to try to isolate the patient. A grant was given to anyone who had a family member stricken with the disease to build a wooden hut to be put in the garden, or to build an annex to the house in which the patient could be kept away from others.

The idea of a hospital , or sanitorium was gaining ground too. In 1930 Brownswood House was purchased by Wexford County Council from the Grey family for this purpose. Here patients would live, rest in bed, have nourishing food and lots of fresh air. Beds were put outdoors even on cold days. Many people spent years in bed in the sanatorium, some recovered, some were very much weaker and many still died. Experimental treatments were undertaken using gold derivatives in medicine and surgical interventions included lung collapse, rib removal and nerve

⁵ ibid

⁶ ibid

⁷ New Ross Standard Oct 19th 1934 P.8

crushing. While some of these measures provided temporary relief, recovered victims could, and many did, suffer relapses.

In 1935 Dr Honoria Aughney had acquired a TB diseases diploma from the University of Wales⁸. She had also administered an isolation hospital in Cardiff, had been in charge of a sanatorium in Digby and Flint and had also been house surgeon at the Meath Hospital for a time and a locum with the Donegal Health Board. No wonder Richard Corish, Mayor of Wexford was quick to propose her for the position of Assistant CMO (Dr Bastible being the CMO at the time) She took up the position in 1936.

Now as a public health doctor she began working with communities and especially with women whom she felt could play a huge role in the prevention and eradication of infectious diseases in the places where they lived. At this time diphtheria was raging though the country. This was a terrible disease which affected mainly children and which could, and did on many occasions wipe out every child in a family. She spent time talking to wives and mothers about hygiene and cleanliness and encouraged immunisation against diphtheria. There was a free immunisation service available which she offered to them though it was not always easy to convince them that it was the right thing to do. There was a huge fear that vaccination could actually give the child the disease.

In a report to Wexford County Council in June 1936 she revealed the extent the outbreaks of yet another killer disease, Scarletina.⁹ In that year there had been 25 outbreaks in the county. This was another death sentence for unfortunate children.

In 1937, after just one year in Wexford, Dr Aughney took up the position of assistant CMO in Kildare, not returning again to Wexford until she became CMO of Wexford County on March 31st 1947 on a salary of £800 per year.¹⁰

It was unusual, to say the least for a woman to hold this position. Efforts to find out what she was like as a person seem to turn up the same words from people who remembered her time in Wexford. “formidable,” wouldn’t take “no” for an answer, “Extremely hard working” “She was a tartar because she had to be a tartar” Nicholas Furlong, a well-known journalist and Wexford historian wrote of her in the Wexford People newspaper

In her battles for public hygiene she had to deal with farmers’ lobbies, butchers’ lobbies, food chain lobbies, to mention but a few. She faced them down and cut the tripe out of the red necked bullies¹¹

Small in stature, (according to her family she was about 5ft 2 inches in height) where ever she went she was single minded in her objectives and dedicated to her work and in no way intimidated by those who sought to bully her. Her nephew remembers her well “ You never crossed Auntie Hon, I don’t know why, she was never mean to us and gave us the odd half crown¹² but we were always on our best behaviour when she was around.” Another younger relative who remembers her calling to the house when this relative was just a small child remembers her mother getting out the best china when Honoria visited. “She was always dressed in a suit and she always wore a hat”¹³

⁸ June 8th 1935, list of Qualifications in Wales from Queens University Belfast

⁹ Wexford County Council Minutes June 1936

¹⁰ New Ross Standard 30th May 1947 Page 8

¹¹ Nicholas Furlong Wexford People

¹² Two shillings and sixpence (a lot of money for a child at the time)

¹³ Alicia Aughney interview Dec 2022

In 1947 changes were happening with regards to health in Ireland. The Department of Health was established and the first minister for health Dr. Noel Browne was appointed. Browne took on the task of eradicating TB immediately. A new health act came into being. Browne, who had himself suffered from TB, and had spent two years in hospital, used every penny he could to build new sanatoria provide free TB testing for all and free chest x rays and x ray vans were soon to be seen all over the country. He certainly helped with the eradication of the disease, numbers began to decrease and this was improved by the introduction of the BCG vaccination.

A CMO's life was a busy one. She was responsible for the roll out of the programme to eradicate disease by promoting hygiene, educating the people on the prevention of disease and encouraging parents to have their children vaccinated. Persuading parents to vaccinate their children was no easy task. Very many were scared of immunisation and some GPs were also wary of it. They didn't vaccinate in their districts or if they did they did not send her the numbers of vaccinations done to her office or the results of tests carried out. This was something that greatly annoyed her.

She got a chance to voice her opinions and to press home the importance of community working together not only to get rid of disease but to prevent it when she read a paper during "Rural Week" hosted by Muintir na Tire in 1951. The full script of this talk was printed in the local papers at the time and parts of it in National papers on the recommendation of the then Taoiseach. Eamonn De Valera who was present on the occasion.



(From New Ross Standard Fri Aug 24th 1951)¹⁴

In her speech she encouraged the people to act as a parish unit and to cooperate with the public health services to beat infectious diseases. The knowledge of how a disease is caused is the way to

¹⁴ Full speech is printed Page 6 New Ross Standard Aug 24th 1951

prevent its spread. Immunisation was an important part of this and it was important, too, she stressed, to look after the recovering patients and to help in their rehabilitation.

“ In public health a state of emergency always exists- it is not enough to wait until an epidemic starts and then try to mitigate its ravages. Prevention, no matter how costly is always cheaper than treatment. If you want to make prevention less costly less costly, try to influence others to give full co-operation to public health schemes. It is a great encouragement to public health workers to know that people are working with them and that they realize that suggestions and regulations for the prevention of disease, though perhaps sometimes irksome, are essential for the common goal”¹⁵

Her speech was very well received by all who were present.

School visits were a big part of her work. All children in primary school were examined by public health doctors and nurses. Their health was reported to the CMO and mothers were advised on what to do to cure ailments that were detected. Thousands of children were seen every year. Below is a part of a report sent by Dr Aughney to Wexford County Council for three schools in rural Wexford in December 1950.

Kilmyshall N.S.	-	47	38	15	1	17	33	-	-	7
St. Ibar's N.S.	-	29	20	13	1	3	20	1	-	20
Castledockrill N.S.		19	15	7	-	4	14	-	-	3
Killesk N.S.	-	36	19	4	1	5	17	-	-	2

The number of defects found were as follows:-

Fair Nutrition	39
Defective Eyes	29
Skin Disease	3
Defective Teeth	84
Defective Speech	-
Defective Ears	1
Diseased Tonsils & Adenoids	32

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A meticulous report running into many pages in length was sent by Dr Aughney to the County Council every month. At first it was read into the minutes, later it became an attachment to the minutes, but it must have been taking up a lot of time at meetings because in 1959 the councillors

¹⁵ From her 1951 paper for Muintir na Tire Rural week

were asking for her report to be shortened.

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Report of C.M.O.

The members indicated that they would like if this report could be considerably reduced in size so that copies of it could be circulated to the members at each meeting. They suggested that the report should be confined to matters of unusual interest, such as an outbreak of disease occurring during the month.

She reported that in 1956 3,256 in 53 children had been examined. This worried her because the previous year her team had succeeded in getting to 3595 in 60 schools. The reason they had not been able to keep up the numbers was because there was an outbreak of polio and some of the doctors were employed full time in vaccinations. She appealed to the County Council for help with the extra work. Although they were sympathetic, (Senator J O'Leary stated that it was very hard to be overworking a lady, whatever about a man), as the hospital at the time was also looking for extra staff and funds there was little to be done. They felt that vaccination schemes were the responsibility of national, not local government.

Emigration was a huge problem in Ireland in the 1950s. So many young people were heading for England looking for work, In the primary schools nuns and Christian Brothers continued to instil into their pupils the dangers to their Catholic religion which they would encounter when they went to work in England. Dr Aughney added her voice to this. As an ardent member of the Pioneer Total abstinence association she addressed a pioneer rally in 1955. She recommended to all women , especially, to make sure that their children took the pledge to abstain from all alcoholic drink before they emigrated because of the huge danger of drink. She said her mother had given her her pioneer pin and that it was one of the greatest gifts a mother could give to her child.

At that rally she informed her audience that on one particular Saturday she had been at Rosslare Harbour. She said she saw a group of young people going on board the ship for Fishguard. They were young and were obviously heading to England to work. One young boy was very nervous. He seemed to have no experience and had no idea where he would go or what he would do when he got to London. The others were telling him where to get trains etc. The next day was Sunday and she wondered how on earth he was going to get Sunday mass.¹⁶

Nothing seemed to escape her. Many children she examined in schools had bad teeth. As well as encouraging oral hygiene she became a crusader for the fluoridisation of water. On December 14th 1956 she was in UCC giving a lecture entitled " Some Aspects of Fluoridisation" This paper was published in the Irish medical Journal in 1957. She advocated adding fluoride to water to prevent dental decay. When speaking to the mothers of children either through her membership of Muintir

¹⁶ *Homes Wrecked by drink* Dr Honoria Aughney, *New Ross Standard* Nov 3rd 1955 page 6

na Tire or the Irish Red Cross she recommended strongly good hygiene proper diet and sound instruction to children on the care of the mouth.

Her paper on fluoridisation was not the first that had been published in the medical journal. In June 1955 she had written an article called "The Production and Distribution of Milk in County Wexford" Milk production was one of the biggest problems in the prevention of infectious disease and especially TB in the county. She stated that it was not the quality of the milk itself that was the problem but its unhygienic distribution. In 1956 only 11% milch cows were on premises registered under the Milk and Dairies Act of 1935. There were therefore not subject to supervision regarding the health and conditions of the cows and the methods of production and storing milk. In 1954 only 6% of the entire population of cows in Wexford had been tested for bovine tuberculosis.

She wrote that the production of good clean milk was essential for children and adults. Tablets and medicine would not be necessary if there is cheese, butter and a clean and plentiful supply of milk.

Instructions should be given to all children in senior classes in school on hygienic conditions for storing milk at home in shops and in dairy farms. She had some support from GPs in this regard. Dr Pax Sinnott in a fiery speech in the Talbot Hotel to farmers and milk producers in 1954 called the distribution of raw milk in its current state "The Massacre of the Innocents" claiming that those who gave this milk to children were causing them to get sick and die.

It must have been a relief to all when Snowcream Wexford began production of pasteurised milk in 1955. Though accepted reluctantly first and storage was still a problem due to lack of refrigeration in homes it did make a huge difference to the production and distribution of milk.

By the mid 1950s the mobile X ray unit was a common sight around the county. Chest Xrays were available free to the general public. People were encouraged to avail of them, and in general they did. School children had chest X rays regularly and TB was at last coming under control.

Polio outbreaks were still causing concern. An outbreak in 1957 and 1958 had people concerned that no one would want to come to Wexford on their holidays if they thought there was polio in the county. At a meeting in the Talbot Hotel in May 1959 Professor Neenan, Chairman of the Polio Research Council addressed a large crowd. He told the people not to be afraid to have their children vaccinated against polio. The virus injected was not alive and it was about 50% to 60% effective which was the best they could expect at that time. He thanked Dr Aughney for all her assistance done in the research work for the prevention of polio.¹⁷

In 1961 Dr Aughney was elected to the Irish Cancer Research Board and was also a member of Radharcmaisteoiri, The Irish Optometrists Association. She gave talks on the care of the eyes.

One of her greatest concerns in her time in County Wexford was the way in which old people lived. She had her public health nurses construct a survey of solitary rural dwellers in 1963. She had an intense interest in the lives of old people and used the results of this survey for a lecture she gave to the British Geriatric Society. She was on the board of the Irish National Geriatrics Committee in 1965 which was designated "The Year of The Aged" A meeting was held in St Michael's Boys' Club with the idea of forming an Old Folks Club. It was she who welcomed the people who attended that night and outlined the idea of providing access to care and social activities for older people in the community.¹⁸

¹⁷ New Ross Standard 15th May 1959

¹⁸ Ibid 19th June 1965

This meeting was to mark the beginning of St Brigid's Old Folks Club which provided services of all kinds for the old people of Wexford and has become St Brigid's Social Services today serving the community of Wexford in many ways.

She was also interested in the improvement of the lives of women, in their education and in the empowerment of women. On the facebook page of the Wexford Branch of the Soroptimists , an international organisation for the better women Dr Aughney is acknowledged as the one who initiated the planning of the Wexford club which was chartered as a local affiliated to the international organisation in April 1961. The club today is amongst the most vibrant successful and hardworking in Ireland.

On December 17th 1997 a very important school in Wexford celebrated its silver jubilee. This was Our Lady of Fatima School in Carraigeen street which caters for children with special needs. At the celebrations Mr. Billy Ringwood, one of its founders said that 33 years previously (1964) the school was "only a vision of Dr. Honoria Aughney the then chief medical officer of the county.....a formidable lady who wouldn't take "no" for an answer." She got a group together and said she wanted to do something for the, as they were then called the mentally handicapped children of Wexford. There was nowhere for them to go except St Senan's Hospital in Enniscorthy and no education of any kind was provided for them. The school began in the Wexford Clinic (then a dispensary) in Grogan's Rd for two days a week with only one teacher, Mai McElroy. By 1967 it had enrolled 15 pupils and had moved to St Michael's Boys' Club. By 1968 it had been recognised as a school by the Department of Education and in 1972 a proper new school opened in Carraigeen at the cost of £60,000. It caters for children aged 4 to 18 years and over 100 pupils now attend from all over the County Wexford.

Honoria Aughney certainly knew how to motivate people, how to get committees working successfully and how to leave it in the hands of the committee and to step back herself and start a new project.

She retired on her 65th birthday in 1965. There were no big parties though there were many tributes.

Before she left she was involved in, but not the cause of, the removal of many of what were known as "the huts" in Rosslare Strand. The "huts" were places where people, often from Wexford town stayed on their summer holidays. Some were wooden shacks, some were railway carriages and some were quite respectable little wooden houses. Almost all had no planning permission, many had no running water or proper toilets. Sewage was often dumped into a hole dug in the sand or thrown out into the ebbing tide. When enteritis broke out in Rosslare in 1964 she was called as a witness to a court case against the owner of the land on which some of these huts were built. She said she had made recommendations with regards to hygiene not only in Rosslare, where she said many people were using just one tap for water but to the whole south east coast which was open to that type of development. Mr O'Connor said there was no evidence that the huts were causing the illness and declared that the doctor had a wonderful "imagination"¹⁹

This was the beginning of the end for many of the Rosslare huts. This court case led to the removal of some of them and more were removed in later years. At the time many people who owned the huts and the people who holidayed in them were very annoyed.

When she retired Honoria Aughney moved to Dublin to live with her sister Eilis. Eilis died in 1984. When she could no longer live alone she moved to Ballon Nursing Home . Her nephew Fr Eddie Aughney often visited her there. From her window she could see Mount Leinster. She remarked to

¹⁹ New Ross Standard 17th April 1965

him that when she was a child she could see Mt Leinster from her parents' home in Roscatt. She seemed to have come the complete circle.

She died on March 7th 1991 in Ballon Nursing Home. Her nephews, both of whom were priests, were preparing for her funeral when a group of men came to the presbytery door to enquire whether they should fire "a few shots" over her grave in honour of her time as a member of Cumann na mBan.

Dr Honoria Aughney is remembered by few in Wexford now and as time goes by that number will be even fewer. She is remembered as an ardent worker, and a generous giver of her time and considerable knowledge. She attended meetings all over the county and was always there to help and advise on all aspects of health and certainly her foremost objective was for the common good.

Her legacy in Wexford is far greater than anyone realises and the organisations she began have grown from strength to strength and still benefit the town and county to this day.



Mrs. T. C. Healy, President of the Wexford Soroptomists' Club, is shown handing over to Dr. Honoria Aughney, C.M.O., a cheque as club's contribution to the fund for the mentally handicapped. Dr. Aughney received the cheque on behalf of the Co. Wexford Association for Mentally Handicapped. In the picture are—left to right—Mr. William Ringwood, Joint Treasurer; Miss Mai McElroy, Sec.; Dr. Aughney, Mrs. Healy, and Mr. William O'Connor, Joint Treasurer.

[D. O'Connor, Wexford.

Photo]



With Margaret Pearse when Ms Pearse received the freedom of the borough of Wexford in 1952

Co Wexford in the Rare Oul Times Vol III P16 Nicholas Furlong and John Hayes

