

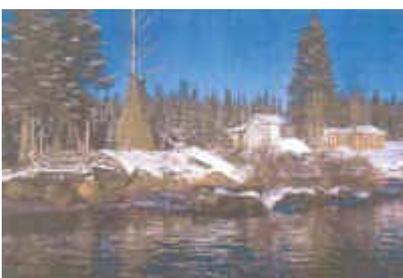


## Among the Deep Sea Fishers - the Glasgow-Grenfell Link.

Bill Hutton\*

Sir Wilfred Grenfell was a boyhood hero of mine, one of a group of late Victorian adventurers whose exploits illuminated many of the more obscure corners of the globe; certainly those areas which were in those days coloured red on the map. He lived from 1865 to 1940, and is described in my biographical encyclopaedia as "A physician and missionary who founded hospitals, orphanages and other social services in North Newfoundland and Labrador, as well as fitting out hospital ships for the fishing grounds." Grenfell was born in the village of Parkgate on the Wirral Peninsula where his father ran a school. His early life seemed to consist of exploring the foreshore and sailing in the waters of the Dee Estuary. At the age of 14 he was sent to Marlborough College, where his principal achievement was to be able to take the main stairs six at a time. From there he enrolled as a student in the London Hospital, in Whitechapel, described by Grenfell as "the largest in the British Isles, and in the midst of the poorest population in England!" There his keen intellect and powers of observation, allied to his appetite for hard work and his good fortune in having teachers of the calibre of Sir Frederick Treves, enabled him to pass the exams of the Royal College of Surgeons of England and the College of Physicians in 1886. Grenfell's father, originally a schoolmaster, had in later life become a clergyman, but Sir Wilfred admits that religion played little part in his life until one evening, returning from a visit to a patient he happened upon an evangelical meeting led by Moody and Sankey. A long prayer started and Grenfell was about to leave when Moody stood up and said "Let us sing a hymn while our brother finishes his prayer." This down-to-earth practicality impressed Grenfell and throughout his life his religion was essentially practical, free from pretentiousness or humbug. He once interrupted a Sunday service he was taking in Labrador when the coastal steamer, a vital contact with the outside world for these remote communities, was heard outside the harbour. He signed off his prayer with the words "and you will have to excuse us Lord, the steamer has arrived."

He was always at pains to make it clear that his decision to devote his life to service in Labrador was neither the result of "religious excitement, nor of the urge of personal sacrifice." In his own words, "I went because I wanted to."



After he qualified, he worked in the North Sea on a small vessel fitted out by the Mission to Deep-Sea Fishermen in an attempt (which eventually proved completely successful) to break the hold of the infamous grog ships over the inshore fishermen. Conditions were spartan, and only someone with Grenfell's constitution, determination and compassion could

have coped. A chance remark led him to cross the Atlantic in 1892, arriving in St Johns in time to witness a fire which destroyed 90% of the houses. He was, however, headed "down North" to the Labrador Coast and his life's work. "The coast offered work that simply would not be done unless we did it." He identified sites for two cottage hospitals, and while they were being built equipped a small vessel to take medical treatment directly to the fishermen. He persuaded colleagues to work with him for little more than their keep, and spent winters lecturing in Canada and the United States and Britain to raise funds to sustain his work and allow his foundation to expand.

When I was a student at Glasgow Dental Hospital I was lucky enough to come into contact with the Kennedy family, three of whom assisted with my dental education - Arthur in the Royal Infirmary, and Tom and Gordon in the Dental Hospital. Tom Kennedy went to Labrador to work for the International Grenfell Association in 1952, establishing a link which to my knowledge lasted 35 years. When I heard that it might be possible to go and work in Labrador, I resolved to apply, and so it was that I crossed from Liverpool to St Johns in August 1961.



We learned of the building of the Berlin Wall from the ship's notice board, and I was disembarked along with a consignment of jam from Scotts of Carluke. I arrived in the spectacular harbour of St Anthony, the site of the main mission hospital, at 6.00 a.m. on a lovely sunny morning, wondering what was ahead of me. An hour or so later, I arrived in the hospital just as the O.R. staff were assembling - following the American custom they operated first thing then did their surgeries later. A few introductions later saw the arrival of the mission superintendent, Dr Gordon Thomas, who greeted me with the following words: "Hi. We are sending you to Harrington Harbour. Dr Hodd has had a heart attack." It took me most of my two years with I.G.A. to catch up with this start, but that was how the mission worked - seat of the pants stuff, get things done.

I was employed as a Travelling Dentist on the coast of Labrador and Newfoundland which meant that from the base at St Anthony, I could find myself at any one of a dozen or so outpost nursing stations, some only accessible by plane in winter or boat in summer. Roads were mainly forestry roads belatedly adapted to civilian use; wintertime transport was by dog team or increasingly during the sixties, ski-doo. My working life involved staying for varying lengths of time at a nursing station, setting up a "surgery" in whatever part of the building the nurse in charge could spare, and working until the demand for treatment abated. Treatment was quite basic - relief of pain by extraction, and the provision of dentures whenever possible. In the main hospitals - I worked in Harrington Harbour and St Anthony - it was possible to do restorative and preventative work, and I even managed some simple orthodontics. As road communications improved more communities could gain regular access to the dentist and the service developed greatly under successors such as the late Jim Messer.

Reports from the coast now suggest that the local population expect to have access to the same kind of dental services as we do in this country. This represents a huge step forward from my day and a real achievement by the IGA and its dental staff, many of whom were Glasgow graduates like myself. From Tom Kennedy in 1952-53, an unbroken flow exists through to Jim Messer, who in 1985 was Chief of Dental Services with eleven dentists reporting to him.

Records and information are sketchy and this might be the time to try to collect whatever information there is so that the definitive story of the Glasgow-Grenfell link may be told.



Most people will remember experiences unique to the coast. The climate dictated what was possible in the way of travel. Winter freeze-up came in November inland, and December on the coast, and the snows did not disappear completely until May, when there was still a problem with slob ice. Travelling was best by plane; De Havilland Otters and Beavers run by Eastern Provincial Airways, with wheel-skis in the winter and floats in the summer. These bush planes were incredibly reliable - and the pilots a breed of men apart - and I came across one in service with Loganair on the Glasgow Machrihanish route as recently as 2003. The Canadian Company which has taken over from DH provides the water taxi service in the Maldives. It was quite a shock to see a Twin Otter taxiing over the brilliant blue lagoon towards the pontoon at Eydhufishi, bringing back memories of a very different sea - and climate - nearly 40 years before, in the Canadian sub Arctic. When the freeze-up came, travel "in the country" became not only possible via the broad rivers, but a pleasure in the absence of the dreaded black fly. Anyone venturing more than half a mile from the sea coast soon became aware of these monsters, like a midge but 100 times bigger and 100 times worse. Travel in the interior was either on foot if one mastered the snowshoe, or "on dogs", in a komatik hauled by a team of eight or twelve dogs. They were Husky crossbreeds which looked very mean to me! In summer they were typically chained up in the settlements and fed a fish a day, or marooned on an island with the odd scrap thrown to them. Yet they seemed to work well enough in winter. They were being abandoned in favour of the skidoo, which didn't have to be fed in summer and never attacked children in the settlements. Travelling "in boat" in the summer was a treat provided you kept a weather eye open for the frequent Atlantic storms which could spring up in an instant. Apart from the storms, I remember the foghorn bleating forlornly over St Anthony, and the violent extremes of weather, 90 degrees F in May, minus 20 degrees F in winter were quite common. I recall crossing the harbour in Cartwright on the Labrador Coast in January to dine with friends and attend the cinema (a rare treat): - when I left the hospital, it was 20 degrees F: when we went to the cinema, zero (32 degrees below!) and when I recrossed the harbour -20 degrees F - a drop of 40 degrees in 4 hours - wow!!



I still have fond memories of the people I worked with. I was one of three dentists on the Coast, along with David Mason from Glasgow and Ruth Griffiths (Welsh) a Durham graduate. We either travelled round the nursing stations with all equipment, or were based in the permanent fully equipped surgery in St Anthony hospital. The doctors were from Canada and the U.K., and there were some U.S. trained doctors who came through the Mennonite Central Committee. The M.C.C. volunteers, who included nurses and teachers, were working for their church and could be sent anywhere. The most colourful was Dale, the R.T. (radio-telephone) operator who contacted each Nursing station 3 times every day, (the 'sched'), discussing weather, patients, doctors whereabouts, likely aeroplane movements, orders for hospital supplies and general gossip on a wavelength which every radio on the coast was tuned to - better than a daily paper! The nurses assistants - the "aides and maids" were recruited from the local communities, and many of these girls went on to do nursing training away from the coast, sometimes returning but more often not. Most of the technical staff were local men, and when I was based in the hospital I helped to

train a dental mechanic - when travelling, I did all my own set-ups and finishes. The nursing station nurses were usually British trained nurses at the top of their profession who had tired of administration work and had taken the opportunity to return to hands-on nursing. The nursing station provided the primary care on the coast, and the nurses were highly skilled, motivated and prepared to put in what today would be called a 24/7 shift. They were wonderful characters and it was a privilege to meet them and work alongside them. The patients had grown up in the fishing outports and had little experience of what the outside world was like. Fishing was the local industry and fishermen and their families are used to facing hardship daily.

People worked with and for each other, and were happy to welcome outsiders who were prepared to share their lifestyle and who had come to help. Many settlements were so isolated that they had their own exclusive surname, and older generations were addressed as Uncle and Aunt, recognition of the intermarriage inevitable with isolation. Doctor Grenfell was still fondly remembered (I worked on the Coast more than twenty years after his death) and the older people revered his name. Every family had their own story about "the Doctor", and it was recognised that if he had not come to the coast when he did, Newfoundland and Labrador would have lagged behind, and that Confederation with Canada (1949) could not have taken place. For many people, he could not be replaced, as in the case of an elderly lady who came to a doctor's clinic at Flowers Cove. When possible, the doctors from St Anthony would visit the Nursing Stations and hold clinics - very busy occasions. The lady remained seated throughout the session, and when asked by a member of staff if they could help, announced that she had come to see Dr Grenfell. When told that this was not possible since he had died 20 odd years ago, she gathered up her possessions and left, remarking "Nobody told me". Only Dr Grenfell would do.

The Grenfell Alumni will have their own personal memories. The time has perhaps come for those memories to be shared, and for the story of the Glasgow-Grenfell link to be preserved. If anyone who reads this article has a tale to tell of the life and work on the Coasts, please contact either the author or the editor of the Newsletter. The History of Dentistry Research Group would be delighted to hear from any Grenfell alumnus, or to welcome them at the meetings in Glasgow, which are held two or three times a year.



**List of Glasgow dentists who served with the Grenfell Medical Mission in  
Newfoundland/Labrador, and their location in 1985  
(Compiled by Miss E. Peden Fyfe)**

1952-53	Kennedy, Tom	St. Anthony	Died 1975
52-53	Swan, J.	Cartwright (Travelling)	Nfld.
53-54	McRae, Roderick	Northwest River (Travelling)	Muirend
54-55	Mulholland, John C.	Harrington	
54-55	Jones, Charles England ('76)	St. Anthony	
56-58	Lumsden, James	St. Anthony	Suffolk
57-58	Mackay, Finlay	Northwest River	Canada
59-60	Travers, Patrick	St. Anthony	Died 1977
59-60	Graham, Alexander	Harrington	?England
61-63	Hutton, William R.	St. Anthony	Lanark
62-63	Mason, David	St. Anthony (Travelling)	England
63-64	Binnie, William H.	St. Anthony	Texas
64-65	Grier, James D.R.	St. Anthony	Canada
64-?	Bell, Alex M.	Northwest River	
64-65	Messer, James	Harrington	
69-70		St Anthony (Chief of Dental Services)	
66-67	Muir, Alan M.	St. Anthony	Canada
66-67	Thomson, Hamish	Harrington	Bearsdon
66-67	Robertson, James	Harrington	Australia
69-70	Manson, Peter	St. Anthony (Travelling)	Canada
69-70	Morris, James	Churchill Falls	
72-73	Wood, Graham A.	Happy Valley	
73-74	Bain, Crawford A.	Churchill Falls	Canada
75-76	MacDonald, Stuart R.	St. Anthony	Nfld.
76-77	Magennis, Dr Sean	Northwest River	
76-77	Uytman, John M.	Roddickton.	
56-	Harris, W.	Cartwright	Tasmania
?	Allan, Chris	No record.	Dundee
65-66	Allan, Andrew M. (Edinburgh Graduate)	St. Anthony (Travelling)	

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