

WILBERFORCE ARNOLD

St Helena Colonial Surgeon 1903 – 1925

STEPHEN ROYLE AND THE LATE TONY CROSS

Introduction

Dr Tony Cross OBE had worked on St Helena in 1987 and in 1991 served as surgeon on the RMS St Helena. He became intrigued by the memorial to his fellow Queen's University Belfast medicine graduate, W. J. J. Arnold, in Jamestown and decided to find out more about him. Independently, Stephen Royle, of Queen's University, had visited St Helena to carry out geographical research and had written a short piece about Arnold for the university's newsletter (Royle, 1990, reprinted in Wirebird in 1991). Cross saw this and asked Royle to seek material in Belfast on Arnold's background, while he gathered information elsewhere. Cross had nearly finished this painstaking process when, sadly, he died (see the obituary by Trevor Hearl in Wirebird number 7, 1993). Mrs Sheila Cross agreed that Royle should inherit the papers on Dr. Arnold gathered by her husband.

An academic publication attributed jointly to Royle and Cross has been prepared. Entitled 'Health and welfare in St Helena: the contribution of W. J. J. Arnold, Colonial Surgeon 1903 - 1925', it is to appear in the medical geography journal, 'Health and Place'. It focuses largely upon Dr. Arnold's important public health work and many of the biographical details about Arnold's life on the island could not be included. It seemed a pity just to let this material lie in the files especially as Tony Cross put in so much effort to find out about 'the greatest friend St Helena ever had'. So Royle has written this rather more complete product than his previous attempt at an Arnold biography in Wirebird. An article here also has the merit of bringing Tony Cross's researches on Dr. Arnold before those interested in St Helena who would not see papers in medical geography.

Wilberforce John James Arnold, 1867 - 1925

W. J. J. Arnold was born in Belfast in 1867, the eldest of seven children of a noted Belfast doctor and J.P., W. J. S. Arnold and his Scottish wife. The Arnolds had a large house, which still stands, near Methodist College, and Queen's College (now University), the educational establishments which Wilberforce attended. Wilberforce

had an uncle in the Presbyterian church, but seems to have always been destined for medicine, though he had other interests and was, for example, to become a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society. He took biology graduating with a second in 1887. He then took a year out for the sake of his always troublesome health, which he spent on a sailing clipper, *Star of Italy*, belonging to Corrys, a local shipping company. He returned to Queen's to take his medical degrees and graduated with an M.B., B.Ch., B.A.O. in 1894.

Young Dr. Arnold's first post was in Wales, from where the family had come to Ireland, originally for the Boyne campaign, in the late 17th century. In 1895 he became Assistant Surgeon at Aberdare Cottage Hospital and Aberdare Works and Collieries in the Rhondda. He seems to have left Wales in 1898 and became involved in the Boer War. He was attached to one of the medical teams responsible for dealing with the troops and Boers on St Helena, probably as one of the Volunteer Medical Staff Corps, rather than part of the official strength of the Royal Army Medical Corps. Arnold described himself in 1902 as 'doing duty as a civil surgeon at the military hospital'. He may have served in South Africa itself but the fact that he had to return the King's South African Medal, having been declared ineligible to receive it, suggests that his war service may have been confined to St Helena. What is sure is that the rest of his life was largely spent on St Helena with just one long break for service elsewhere during the Great War.

Arnold became successor to Lieutenant-Colonel C.G.D. Moss as Colonial Surgeon in April 1903. The colonial surgeon's post was responsible, but ill-rewarded. In 1903 the salary was £200, in 1911, £270, even by 1921 it had only reached £300. In addition to his salary, the Colonial Surgeon received a horse allowance of £27 to £30, a horse being needed to make house calls. However, despite the low salary, Arnold certainly lived in reasonable accommodation, first at St Paul's Villa, a square plain Georgian building erected in 1817 for Governor Sir Hudson Lowe, later at the colonial style *Maldivia*, a pleasant house with a verandah whose site suitably had been that of the island's first hospital built by Governor Lambert in 1741. As a bachelor perhaps Arnold's expenses were few and he could cope, but it seems probable that he had some private money from his Scottish grandfather he could use to supplement his salary. His will certainly makes it clear that he was not a poor man as he left legacies of over £2,200 and property. One of his three sisters got the silver; a nephew both Uncle Wilber's gold watch and gold cutlery. Only after Arnold's death was there a major increase in the Colonial Surgeon's salary, his successor, Dr. R.P. Cartwright, receiving £550 p.a.

Colonial Surgeon Arnold was responsible for the health of the civilian population. He had no assistant until 1912, although there would have been doctors attached to visiting ships and the island's garrison (though there was no garrison from 1906 to 1911, its withdrawal having caused dismay to those concerned with the island's welfare). As sole or senior doctor (of two, there was never more than one assistant) Arnold was also responsible for the island's public health as Health Officer and Chairman of the four member Board of Health. In addition, Arnold was constantly pressed into service in

other roles. Sometimes these were social, he would be invited to open things or present prizes and he was certainly expected to support local events including weddings. Often, too often for the sake of his own health, particularly at the end of his life, they were official. Dr. Arnold was a member of the St Helena Executive Council in 1911, a Justice of the Peace, served as Acting Governor of St Helena on no fewer than three occasions as well as taking responsibility at other times when the Governor left the island for short periods, for example to visit Ascension Island as Governor Peel did in 1922. He was first Acting Governor from September 1911 to February 1912 when Governor Gallway left without a replacement having been appointed, and again from June to December 1923 when Governor Peel went on leave. Finally he took over after Peel's death in 1924, serving until his own death in January 1925.



*Dean Family wedding group, c.1910 St Helena. Dr W J J. Arnold is seated fifth from left.
Supplied to Tony Cross by George Moss, 1991*

Arnold's health had never been robust, recall the year he had to take off whilst a student. Overwork on St Helena did not help, especially as the chances for relief and time off came rarely. Other than a leave which turned into war service he only had two leaves, one in 1906 and then six years later almost a year from 1912 to 1913 when he took a Diploma in Public Health at Oxford, his return 'hailed with welcome by one and all'. In October 1914 he had become ill whilst dealing with an influenza outbreak and returned to England. He took a course at the School of Tropical Medicine and then went to war with the Royal Army Medical Corps. Records of his war service are sketchy, most

service records from the First World War were destroyed by German Bombs in the Second. It is known that he was a Lieutenant in 1915, a Captain in 1916 and a Major in 1918 but there is some doubt as to where he served. Some evidence suggests on perhaps three hospital ships, including the SS Carisbrooke Castle, but there is no official record of his presence and this ship's complement did not normally include British Officers. He did serve in Palestine under General Allenby in 1917 where he contracted malaria. Arnold returned to St Helena as Colonial Surgeon after more than five years in May 1920 to three cheers from the crowds at the quay. He suffered continued ill health from that time, though his work load and social activities remained heavy. He won a bowls tournament in 1920 for example. He also attended regattas, the rifle range and actually died after collapsing at the golf club. He had had to take on the added duties of the governorship in June 1923 on Peel's leave. Peel's return in December was followed a few months afterwards by his death. He was taken ill without warning. Arnold, who else, was called in, operated but failed to save his friend. Despite his own health deteriorating he was then required to become, once more, Acting Governor on 10th August 1924. Having had a serious illness in October and November, Arnold had to be operated on by the surgeon from H.M.S. Goorkha. His recuperation was interrupted by him having to take on yet another role, this time as Acting Chief Justice of St Helena and he had to preside at the Sessions in January 1925. Perhaps Arnold's award of the C.M.G. in the 1925 New Year's Honour's List was some acknowledgement of this extraordinary triple role of being responsible for St Helena's governance, medical and judicial services.

It was public knowledge that Arnold was 'in broken health' and that he should seek specialist treatment off the island. Arnold knew himself that he was likely to die because of high blood pressure and started to carry a set of instructions about what should be done with his body. Further intimations of mortality saw him make his will on 19th January which he signed with an unsteady hand. However, he continued to work, giving a lunch party on 27th January and going to the golf course on the 29th to present prizes. He collapsed with a stroke at 6.30 p.m., was taken to Longwood, Napoleon's house, where he died of a syncope following cerebral haemorrhage as the death certificate has it at 9.40 that evening. The new Governor, who arrived four days later, thought it 'fitting' that Arnold should have died whilst administering St Helena. He was buried with military honours on the 31st January in the churchyard of St Paul's Cathedral, next to the body of Governor Peel, having laid in state at Plantation House that morning.

Arnold's early experiences on St Helena included dealing with the influenza outbreak in 1900 and enteric fever in 1902, the latter seeming unpleasant work given the details of the enema treatments about which he wrote. Such experiences made him aware of the deleterious effects of the transfer of disease from the prisoners to the troops and the general populace and the way in which diseases could spread in an environment such as that on St Helena. He was also concerned by the fact that in 1903 one third of civilian deaths were of children under two, usually through bowel disease which he attributed 'very largely to improper feeding and a prevailing ignorance as to the

dietetic and hygienic management of children'. Thus, he was moved to labour mightily to improve St Helena's public health and it is upon that work which Royle and Cross focus in the forthcoming 'Health and Place' paper.

For the ordinary Saints, however, it was not the improvement in sanitation arrangements and public health awareness that impressed them, however important they were, so much as the way in which Dr. Arnold carried out his routine medical tasks among them. It was his approach and treatment that endeared him to his charges who 'learned to love and trust and believe in him' useful sentiments when this doctor had to do 'whatever was necessary knowing that he alone in the island could do it'. He often did not take the standard five shilling fee for a visit and when treating the poor it seems that he more often gave them money than the opposite. He would also make house calls on the elderly in the fashion of a clergyman, a practice which further endeared him to them. He was always to the fore in the charity subscription lists which were sometimes printed in the local press. In the newspapers we read that in 1912 he gave £1.00 to the St James Church organ fund; in 1921 £4.00 to a food depot for the poor; he donated to Anglican parochial funds in 1910, though brought up as a Presbyterian, and he gave ten guineas to the fund for passengers stranded on the island when the SS Papanui was beached there in 1911. He gave sweets and cigars to the hospital patients at Christmas 1924, and entertained the inmates of the asylum to tea on Christmas Day. There were probably many other donations and, although the sums involved on each occasion may seem small, they should be measured against a salary which never exceeded £300 and it was reported that 'he gave to a degree that must have almost emptied his purse'.

No wonder that about half the population attended his funeral and there was official mourning until 1st March. Within a few months, the substantial sum of £290:15s:2d had been raised for his memorial from the £5 of ex-governors to the coins of poor islanders and the now familiar four metre granite obelisk had been imported, engraved, fitted with his likeness and erected in Jamestown. His tombstone at St Paul's was engraved and a tablet was erected to him in the cathedral. His eulogies ranged from the Executive Council's (1925) statement that 'he wholly and unselfishly dedicated his life to the service and welfare of the colony', through the new Governor's report that he 'won to an extraordinary degree the affection of all classes' to, most tellingly, an old Saint woman saying 30 years later that 'I tell you a shiver went through this place the day the doctor died'.

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Two Members Honoured

For the first time, Honorary Life Membership of the Society of the Friends of St Helena has been awarded to two of its members in recognition of outstanding service.

The tributes paid at the A.G.M. to
ALLAN CRAWFORD for his service to TRISTAN DA CUNHA,
 and to **TREVOR HEARL** for his service to ST HELENA,
 are reproduced here.