

The Greenock medical martyrs of 1864–65

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ABSTRACT In the nineteenth century it was not uncommon for doctors to die from infectious diseases, but the death of five young physicians in Greenock – one third of the medical profession in a medium-sized Scottish town – from epidemic typhus, during four consecutive months in 1864–65, was an unusual event. This paper describes the lives and backgrounds of these five doctors, whose deaths in the line of duty earned them the description ‘medical martyrs’.

KEYWORDS Epidemic, Greenock, medical biography, nineteenth century, typhus

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INTRODUCTION

Much was known about typhus in 1864. The distinction between typhus and other fevers had been made in 1836, the clinical features had been well described and the fact that the disease was contagious was recognised by both doctors and the public. The association with overcrowding and a lack of cleanliness was acknowledged, and it was known that an attack conferred a considerable degree of immunity. However, knowledge of the role of louse faeces in the spread of typhus and the description of the causative organism *Rickettsia prowazekii* were not available until the early twentieth century.^{1–7}

Typhus was endemic in Scotland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with epidemics occurring in times of harvest failure and economic distress.⁸ In Greenock, the endemic and epidemic patterns of the disease are confirmed by the statistics for admissions to the town's Infirmary for the years 1862–67 (Table 1). The epidemic of 1864–65 affected the whole of Scotland but was particularly serious in Greenock. In January 1865 *The Greenock Advertiser* commented: ‘Typhus (or continued fever) in epidemic form was the leading epidemic of the year – Edinburgh suffered least and Greenock the most, from that alarming disease.’ The report stated that there were an ‘increased number of cases of typhus in January, increasing again in February and March: declining in subsequent months and rising steadily through September, October, November and December’.¹⁰ These comments are supported by the Registrar General's statistics, quoted in the same newspaper (Table 2).

Investigating the lives of men who lived nearly 150 years ago has obvious difficulties, and these are compounded by the fact that those involved died early in their careers, so information is necessarily limited. However, details are available from the three Greenock newspapers of the period, records of academic institutions, local postal

TABLE 1 Typhus* admissions and mortality at Greenock Infirmary, 1861 to 1867⁹

Year ending	Treated	Recovered	Died	Relieved	Self-discharged	Remained in infirmary
30/4/1862	196	162	20	0	0	14
30/4/1863	121	84	28	0	2	7
31/12/1863	incomplete data [†]					
31/12/1864	933	659	135	2	0	137
31/12/1865	743	636	82	13	0	12
31/12/1866	287	238	36	4	0	9
31/12/1867	272	221	35	2	0	14

*Fever, chiefly Typhus⁹.

[†]Until 1863 the year ended on 30 April; thereafter on 31 December. The report for the eight months from 1 May 1863 to 31 December 1863 is short and does not give full details of diagnoses, but there were 424 admissions to the Fever House, of which only 189 were due to fever; of these, 136 were due to smallpox.

TABLE 2 Comparison of typhus incidence and mortality in Scottish towns in 1864¹⁰

Town	Typhus cases (% of population)	Typhus deaths (% of total)
Edinburgh	1.4	Not available
Leith	1.6	5.3
Glasgow	3.1	7.8
Aberdeen	5.0	12.0
Paisley	2.4	6.3
Perth	3.7	9.4
Dundee	Not available	5.1
Greenock	7.1	14.2

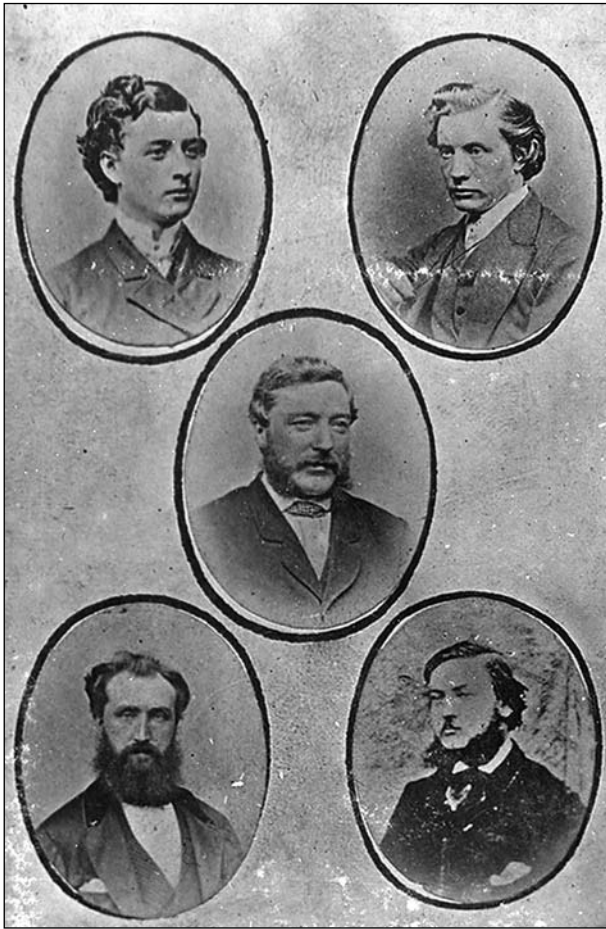


FIGURE 1 Clockwise from top left: James Fraser Paton, James Dowie, William Joseph Macloskey (centre), James Lamont Lochhead, Joseph Conway. (With kind permission of the Greenock Burns Club.)

directories and wills. Because of the habits of the time, religious affiliation is also readily detectable and the different church allegiances of our subjects represented an eclectic mixture of the various denominations of the day.

Medical education in the nineteenth century could be somewhat fragmentary. In Glasgow, classes were provided at the University of Glasgow and from 1799 at Anderson's University, from 1827 at a smaller college in Portland Street and from 1796 at a much smaller college in College Street.^{11,12} No records are available for the two smaller institutions and those for Anderson's University are limited. While tuition outside the University of Glasgow prepared candidates for the examinations of the Royal Colleges, for its MD degree the university recognised only attendance at a 'University in which Medicine is regularly taught, or Medical Lectures delivered in London or Dublin'.¹³ These regulations appear designed to exclude the competition from within the city and from the extramural schools at Edinburgh. Since four of the 'martyrs' had Glasgow MD degrees, data are available for parts of their academic careers. One qualified LRCS Edin. and, although information is far from complete, we have details for one year of his

education at Anderson's University and an indication that he attended classes in Paris; other details are lacking, but it is probable that he also attended the extramural classes, which were run by several individual teachers in Edinburgh.¹⁴

There were 16 doctors in Greenock in 1864; one of these was house surgeon at the town's infirmary and the remaining 15 were in private general practice. Several of the latter held appointments in the medical department at Greenock Infirmary or as district surgeons for the local poor law authority, the Parochial Board. Others acted as surgeon to the prison, as police surgeon or as surgeon to the port.¹⁵

Deaths of practising physicians were not infrequent in the nineteenth century, but the death of five doctors in Greenock, one third of the members of the profession in the town, during a period of four months in the winter of 1864–65, was unusual. Even before the last death on 15 March, the event was sufficiently significant to be noted in the *British Medical Journal* under the heading 'Fever in Greenock': 'A serious and fatal epidemic has been of late present in Greenock. Its nature may be judged of from the fact that, since November, no less than four medical men have died of it there, and all of them young and in the prime of life.'¹⁶ The ages of the casualties made an impression, since of six local doctors who were within 11 years of qualification, five died.¹⁵ The public's description of 'medical martyrs' sounds melodramatic to the modern ear but was a measure of contemporary local sentiment reflecting the high price the five Greenock physicians paid for treating the sick.

THE FIVE MEDICAL MARTYRS

William Joseph Macloskey

The first doctor to die from typhus was William Joseph Macloskey on the 26 November 1864 at the age of 33 years (see Figure 1). The story of the Macloskey family is one of success and adventure. William was born in Greenock around 1832 to John Macloskey and his wife, Mary Ann Brookes.¹⁷ Macloskey Sr was a man of considerable ability: an immigrant from County Antrim, he had built up a successful merchant tailor's business at Shaw Street in Greenock and was active in town politics as a member of the Town Council and Water Trustee.¹⁸ These were no mean achievements for an Irish immigrant in the first half of the nineteenth century, since Macloskey was among the first generation of Catholics to be elected to such an office after the Catholic Relief Act of 1829. The Macloskeys were prominent members of the Greenock Catholic community and occupied the most expensive seats in the local St Mary's Church.¹⁹

In 1848 business interests took John Macloskey and his family to Liverpool. He then returned to Ireland to take up farming, perhaps with a view to semi-retirement or to

take advantage of the reorganisation of agriculture after the potato famine. His energetic personality is indicated by his next definite address: Collingwood in Melbourne, Australia. Gold had been discovered in the area in 1851, and multitudes flocked to the region driven by 'gold fever'. Whether John was so afflicted or whether he intended to re-establish his business in Melbourne is unknown, but since he was by then 64 years old and given the arduous nature of gold prospecting, it seems likely that he intended to profit from the boom times at his old trade. Collingwood was an overcrowded, working-class, inner-city suburb, not unlike parts of Greenock. The population of Melbourne had trebled between 1851 and 1854, exacerbating pre-existing problems with sanitation and water supply, factors which probably contributed to John's death from dysentery three months after his arrival in Australia. His death was reported by his son, William.^{20,21}

After his father's death, William remained in Australia for a time working as a gold prospector and then as a seaman before returning to Europe to study medicine in Paris, at Anderson's University and in Edinburgh, where he probably attended the extramural schools. He qualified LRCS Edin. in 1861.^{22–25} He had retained contacts with his home town and appeared there in the 1861 census as a 29-year-old medical student, a visitor at the Greenock address of his future wife.¹⁷ This romantic attachment led to his return to Greenock on qualifying. He set up a medical practice at 10 William Street and married the 22-year-old Mary Ann O'Neill. Old family connections are apparent since Mary's father and John Macloskey had been engaged in the same trade at adjacent addresses. Joseph Conway, also the scion of a clothier family and one of the later medical casualties, was a witness at the wedding.^{15,17}

William Macloskey was well educated and shared his father's energetic temperament. Like several of the other doctors described in this paper, he was a member of the Greenock Philosophical Society but the only one who presented papers at its meetings. His interests were varied, and he contributed on subjects ranging from geology to French literature. It was said that 'the literature of all countries was at his finger tips'. He also published a series of 'crisp and humorous' sketches on Greenock life describing such characters as 'The Policeman', 'The Engineer' and 'The Gentleman'. Of the five doctors, Macloskey is the only one from whom a contribution to medical literature has been found, describing the 'Treatment of ankylosis of the elbow joint' in two patients.^{24,26,27}

Macloskey's social conscience is evident from his obituaries, which state that 'the poor of Greenock have lost a friend' and that 'during his short professional life he took special interest in the Irish people of the town and actively promoted a reading room and other means to elevate and improve the character of those from among whom he sprang'. This interest may also explain

TABLE 3 Comparison of the estates of Macloskey, Paton and Lochhead¹⁷

	Macloskey	Paton	Lochhead
Estate excluding life insurance	£213	£1,439	£385
Fees due at death	£42	£1,281	£165
Fees judged to be unrecoverable	£39	£306	£32
No. of debtors	Not available	55	63
Average unpaid fee	Not available	£5,10s	10s

*No wills or inventories have been found for Dowie or Conway.

his appointment as 'medical attendant of the workmen on the Wemyss Bay railway line' which was then under construction.^{10,22}

November 1864 was a bad month for the Macloskeys: on the 25th, while William lay ill with typhus, his surgery was damaged by fire and on the next day he died.²² His death certificate was signed by Dr Marshall, whom Macloskey had succeeded as a member of the medical department at the Greenock Infirmary in 1862. That Macloskey's three years in the town had been insufficient to build up an extensive practice is suggested by his will: in contrast to some of his more senior colleagues, only £42 was owed to him in fees. Perhaps his trading ancestry is the reason that he had £157 'in the house'. Mary Ann lived on as a widow until 1905.¹⁷

James Fraser Paton

In contrast to Macloskey, James Fraser Paton came from an older Greenock family, which over several generations exhibited literary and artistic abilities. Paton was the son of a solicitor, John Paton, and Margaret Park. His brother, Allan Park Paton, was to become well known in literary circles and, although also a solicitor, was for 20 years at the end of his life the librarian at the Watt Library in Greenock. His nephew, also James Fraser Paton, was to achieve fame as an artist. An uncle, the Rev. John Park, was a minister in St Andrews and a lyricist of some repute, who wrote the song 'Whaur Gadie Rins'. Somewhat dramatically, the latter died in St Andrews during a performance of the *Messiah* and was commemorated by a memorial window in the Old West Kirk of Greenock.^{17,28,29,30}

Paton was born at Greenock in 1832 and educated at the University of Glasgow, where he attended the Faculty of Arts in 1848 and again in 1850 and the Medical Faculty in 1849 and 1851–54. His undergraduate career was not undistinguished since he was awarded class prizes during two of his medical years. He qualified LRCPs Glas. and MD in 1854.^{17,31,32} Unusually for the age, Paton spent time as a house surgeon at Glasgow Royal Infirmary. He had originally intended serving with the army but changed his

plans because of 'weakness of the constitution' and, like Macloskey, began in practice in William Street. In addition he served as the surgeon to Greenock prison and was elected to the medical department of the town's infirmary, but he relinquished this latter post because of the rapid expansion of his practice.^{15,22}

It was probably a reflection of his military interest and of the family's social status that Paton was Honorary Assistant Surgeon to the Renfrewshire Artillery Corps.¹⁵ His social status is also suggested by his will, in which he left around £2,500, including the sum of £1,281 in 'book debts', much of which was made up of largish sums. This contrasts with his contemporary James Lamont Lochhead and may indicate that Paton's practice was composed of a wealthier clientele (Table 3). His sociability is suggested by his possession of a share in the Greenock Coffee Room, a private club in Cathcart Square. He died on the 27 December 1864.¹⁷ His funeral was a grand affair, with crowds lining the street from his house to the Duncan Street burial ground, and was attended by large numbers, including members of the medical profession, 'members of the Brigade of Renfrewshire Volunteers' and Sir MR Shaw Stewart, the local landowner and MP. Paton had been unmarried and had lived with four siblings.^{10,22}

Joseph Conway

The next physician to die from typhus was Joseph Conway. Like Macloskey, Conway was the son of Irish immigrant parents, Francis Conway and Mary O'Neill; like Macloskey's father, Francis ran a clothier's business in Shaw Street.³³ That Francis prospered is evident, since at his death in 1847 he left the not inconsiderable sum of £2,820 and in addition to his clothier's business he lent money, including the sum of £200, to one of the local doctors.¹⁷ Like the Macloskeys, the family were prominent parishioners at St Mary's Catholic Church, and occupied pews in the balcony with the most expensive rents of the old church building (pre-1862).¹⁹ In addition to the similar paternal businesses at adjacent addresses, membership of the Irish immigrant community and connection with St Mary's Church, the ties between the Macloskey and Conway families are indicated by the O'Neill connection and Joseph Conway's role at the Macloskey/O'Neill wedding.

Joseph had been educated at a school in Greenock run by a Mr Buchanan, thereafter spending two years as a seminarian at the Missionary College of All Hallows in Dublin. This training indicates his original vocation, but a change of course was dictated by poor health and he subsequently attended the medical faculty at the University of Glasgow from 1856–60, qualifying LRCPS Glas. and MD in 1860.^{34,35,36} Joseph began in practice in Greenock, consulting at 21 Hamilton Street,¹⁵ but died within five years on 26 January 1865. His obituary in the local newspaper describes him as 'a native of Greenock – a member of a much esteemed family – he had for a time not been in robust health'.^{10,22} His general health may

account for his change of profession and the fact that he held no public appointments, but death when it came was due to epidemic typhus. He too was unmarried.

James Dowie

James Dowie, the son of Ebenezer Telford Dowie and Mary Storer, was born in Greenock in 1844. Ebenezer Dowie had had an unusual career: the son of a printer in Glasgow, he had established a dental practice in Greenock by 1834, presumably after an apprenticeship.^{17,33} In 1856, at the age of 48, he graduated MD from the University of Glasgow and thereafter practised as a physician, surgeon and dentist.¹⁵ This was a relatively unusual achievement: the Glasgow Postal Directory for 1854–55 lists 20 dentists, of whom only two had MD degrees.³⁷ That Ebenezer attended the University of Glasgow in 1852–56 while supporting a family of seven surviving children and running a dental practice in Greenock indicates considerable tenacity. His entry in the census of 1861 suggests that he took justifiable pride in his medical degree.^{17,35} No doubt he was also pleased when his eldest son graduated with the same degree in 1864. Ebenezer was elected President of the Greenock Faculty of Medicine in 1866, which suggests recognition from his colleagues but may also indicate their sympathy for the loss of James.³⁸

The Dowie family were Baptists with links to the Haldanite revival movement of the early nineteenth century. Ebenezer was a lay activist who was a member of the Committee of the Baptist Home Missionary Society for Scotland for some years and for most of his life a senior office bearer in Greenock temperance organisations.^{15,39} There were two Baptist congregations in Greenock, and there is reason to believe that the family attended the more theologically liberal one which met in Nelson Street. When that congregation ceased to exist in 1864, Ebenezer became a seat holder at George Square Congregational Church in Greenock, which also had its origins in the Haldanite movement.^{40–42} That in the remaining 21 years of his life Ebenezer did not become a member of this church may indicate that he retained Baptist views.

James Dowie attended classes at the University of Glasgow during 1859–64^{31,36} and graduated MD with honours in 1864. At the time of his death on 2 February 1865 he had scarcely embarked on his career. He had worked for a short time at Rothesay on the Isle of Bute and had acted as a locum for Dr Marshall of Greenock while the latter was ill. He was then employed for a short period as one of the district surgeons to the Parochial Board on a temporary basis, probably in place of Macloskey after the latter's death. This appointment, which involved caring for the poorest section of the community and thus those most at risk from the epidemic, was to result in Dowie's death. The records of a meeting of the Parochial Board on the day before he

died state that he ‘had caught the infection during his duty for the board’.

It is evident that Dowie did not have a substantive appointment since he had applied for a position with the Board created by the resignation of Dr Marshall, to which he was only appointed the day before his death. The Board had debated the appointment and the choice lay between Dowie and a competitor, but they felt under an obligation to Dowie, who was by that time gravely ill. The workload of doctors during the epidemic is indicated in Dowie’s obituary: ‘on the last day Dr. Dowie was out of the house, he saw no less than twenty-eight cases of fever... with the premonitory symptoms upon him, ...he persisted in going out to see one of his fever cases, as he had promised to do.’ Again his death was certified by Dr Marshall. Dowie too was unmarried.¹⁰

James Lamont Lochhead

The last doctor to die in the epidemic was the only family man of the five. In 1858 James Lamont Lochhead married Jane Warden, the 22-year-old daughter of a local farmer, in the Middle Free Church of Greenock. This church association is confirmed by the fact that at the time of his death Lochhead was an elder at St Andrew’s Free Church; one of his daughters subsequently married a Free Church minister.^{15,17} The Lochheads had a total of four children, the youngest of whom was born after the death of their father, while another, also James Lamont Lochhead, became a foreign missionary with the North Africa Mission, a non-denominational protestant missionary society. Jane lived on until 1891, first in Greenock and then at the nearby village of Kilmacolm.¹⁷

Lochhead had been born in 1831 at Dunoon, where his father was a grocer.¹⁷ By 1847, Lochhead Sr having died, the family had moved to Greenock where the mother ran a lodging house.¹⁵ Lochhead was first employed by the Greenock Apothecaries Company and eventually became its manager. Since this was before the 1855 Medical Act, he would have acted as an apothecary, but his medical ambition is evident since he was to move to Cork as an assistant surgeon and then to a similar post at Killingworth in England. He is detected in the 1851 census as a medical student, living in lodgings at 6 Brunswick Street, Glasgow,^{17,22} where he attended classes at the University of Glasgow from 1851 to 1855 and received class prizes in all but one of his years of study.^{31,32} He also attended at least one class at Anderson’s University, on the practices of medicines, in the 1854–55 session. He qualified LRCPS Glas. and MD in 1855 and set up in practice at 35 Hamilton Street.^{15,25}

By 1865 Lochhead had built up an extensive practice. At his death debts owed to him amounted to £165; most were made up of small sums; the inventory extends to 11 pages. The average unpaid debt was 10 shillings, compared with £5,10s for Paton, which suggests that

Lochhead was treating a less wealthy clientele (Table 3). He had been elected to the medical department at the Greenock Infirmary in 1859, having previously applied in 1858 but then withdrawing his application in favour of Dr Marshall who was his colleague as one of the district surgeons for the Parochial Board.⁹ It is poignant that when Lochhead died on 15 March 1865 his death certificate was signed by Marshall, at least the third such task Marshall had performed for a colleague in a period of four months.

Just before his death, Lochhead had taken over as surgeon to the prison in succession to Paton. His obituary indicates that, at least for colleagues, the domiciliary visit was alive and well in 1865. *The Greenock Advertiser* notes that when he caught the infection he ‘did not entertain hope of recovery’ and that Dr Gairdner (presumably William Gairdner, Professor of the Practice of Medicine at the University of Glasgow and the first Medical Officer of Health for Glasgow) was consulted, saw him on 14 March 1865 and ‘observed no dangerous symptoms’. Despite the favourable consultant opinion, Lochhead died early the next day.¹⁰

REFLECTION

It is impossible to draw firm conclusions from this episode but it makes one think how fortunate those of us are who practise medicine in the West in the antibiotic era, and after the public health measures of the nineteenth century have made diseases such as typhus unknown to us. Whatever our problems in the UK with NHS resources or with career paths, they appear insignificant when compared to the risk of death from infectious disease and impotence in its treatment. However, the extensive spread of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) among healthcare personnel, with consequent deaths during the SARS epidemic of 2003, suggests the need for continued vigilance.⁴³ Typhus remains a threat where poverty, poor sanitation or war allow lice to spread *Rickettsia prowazekii*.¹

The deaths of the five Greenock doctors drew sympathy and respect from the public. In the rather exaggerated prose of the time, the *Glasgow Herald* opined: ‘They died like true men, at their posts, in the quiet performance of their duty, as little allured by the prospects of reward as they were deterred by the fear of danger.’⁴⁴ The public’s reaction is reflected in memorials to the five men set up in the Mid Parish Church of the town and in the Greenock cemetery.¹⁸ The text of the former reads:

In Memory of Five Physicians: William Joseph Macloskey aged 33, James Fraser Paton aged 32, Joseph Conway aged 25, James Dowie aged 22, James Lamont Lochhead aged 33: Victims in the fearless discharge of professional duty to the fever epidemic of 1864–65: Admired, Beloved, Lamented: Erected by

the Corporation of Greenock as Representing the Community, in Testimony of Public Respect and Gratitude: 1875⁴⁵

The author suspects that this episode played a part in accelerating improvements in public health in Greenock in the ensuing years.

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