



Frederick Ratcliffe Riley was born in 1865 at Barnstaple, in Devon. His father was a civil servant of modest means. His early education was at The Grammar School, Eye, in Suffolk, and from school he entered the London Hospital as a medical student, qualifying in 1890. In 1896 he was admitted as a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of England, having been inspired to take up surgery by Sir Frederick Treves. At the London Hospital, he received many prizes and awards as one of its most distinguished students, and was highly regarded as a conscientious, kind and courteous person.

On completion of his term as a house-surgeon, Frederick Riley sailed with the North Sea trawlers as surgeon, learning of hardships and tragedies at first hand. Then in 1892 he sailed for New Zealand, where he worked as locum tenens for his brother Arthur and soon succeeded him in a general medical practice at Winton in Southland. At that time the Winton doctor was the only one between Queenstown and Invercargill. His varied and often exciting duties took him far and wide on foot or on horseback, in a horse-drawn buggy or by railway jigger.

After several years of practice at Winton, Frederick Riley moved to Dunedin, where in 1902, aged thirty seven, he married Charlotte Susan, daughter of magistrate C.C. Graham. The wedding, at All Saints' Church, was conducted by the Rev. A.R. Fitchett, who was later Dean of Dunedin, and the father of F.W.B. Fitchett who was to become Professor of Clinical Medicine and a physician colleague of Riley at the Otago Medical School.

In Dunedin he was able to develop his surgical talent, both in private practice and as a surgical tutor at the Medical School. In 1909 he was appointed a member of the Honorary Medical Staff of Dunedin Hospital, a position that he held until his death twenty three years later. His real interests were with people and the problems of childbirth, and he soon established a practice in obstetrics and gynaecology that covered the whole of Otago. A mother and her child were something for which he had a profound reverence and he regarded the rearing of a family as life's most sacred and satisfying duty. Frederick Riley himself had five children, one of whom died in early childhood.

As a young surgeon, Riley became Lecturer in Obstetrics and Gynaecology, beginning a long association with teaching students. This largely voluntary activity had to be fitted into the busy life of a vast general and surgical practice. Teaching conditions were then undoubtedly primitive - facilities in the Medical School and in the maternity hospitals suffered from lack of funds - and the amount of time available for instruction was limited.

During the last few years of his life, Frederick Riley was elected in 1927 as a Foundation Fellow of the newly formed Royal Australasian College of Surgeons and elevated to the rank of Professor. He felt deeply the criticism of the teaching of obstetrics and gynaecology that preceded the replacement of part-time teachers with full-time heads of departments, an inevitable step in the development of the Medical School.

Frederick made time for a variety of other interests. He briefly served as an elected member of the Dunedin City Council, but found this too time consuming. He collected a number of fine paintings and engravings and also Maori artefacts (which after his death were presented to the Otago Museum by his widow), and books on early New Zealand. He was also an enthusiastic photographer who took photographs in many parts of New Zealand.

Frederick Riley came from a deeply religious family. He had a family pew in Knox Church, Dunedin, where he served for many years as an Elder. His views were quite ecumenical - his family had left the Anglican Church for the Presbyterian Church due to its more liberal views on the admission to communion of adherents of other denominations - and Riley would attend both a Presbyterian and a Roman Catholic Church on the annual Hospital Sunday, when special services were held in many Dunedin churches.

Riley loved his home and his family. In his home at 6 Pitt Street and later in the former Knox Church Manse in George Street, he and his wife presided over many dinner parties of close friends. On Sundays a formal midday roast dinner was prepared by a Scottish cook and served by a young uniformed housemaid. On these occasions he would offer his guests an alcoholic drink and enjoyed it himself, although due to his early observations in the North Sea he regarded alcoholic liquor as a potential social danger, and always voted for prohibition because he was prepared to give up this pleasure for the good of the country as a whole. Frederick enjoyed intelligent conversation with touches of humour. Early in their married life dinner would be followed by a round of songs, Frederick providing the bass part. Many well-known persons came to the house including Truby King, founder of the Plunket Society. Frederick enjoyed perhaps more than any the dinners to which his house-surgeons from the hospital were invited; he always took a kindly interest in them. Indeed, in his later years he was known to his students as Father Riley.

Frederick Riley acquired properties in the country, firstly the beautiful 30-acre property "Opeke" on the edge of Blueskin Bay, at what is now known as Doctors' Point. He would join his family as time permitted, enjoying all sorts of outdoor activities there, and New Year's Eve celebrations including a huge bonfire. His trips to there in his 1910 Rover over the Mt Cargill road were seldom uneventful. Each year Riley and some of his colleagues would entertain fourth and fifth year medical students (who travelled by train from Dunedin), at a huge combined picnic at

Blueskin Bay. In the early 1900s he bought Timaru Creek Station at Lake Hawea, taking a party of his friends and colleagues there each summer, and sometimes in the winter, to enjoy walks and picnics around the lake. The journey to get there was a long one, by express train, motor coach and horse-drawn buggy. Riley had many friends in the district amongst the people who lived and worked there. In the 1920s Riley also acquired a sheep station in Hawke's Bay. This venture was a financial disaster and brought much sadness to its owner, who had dreamt of establishing his English relations on it. His own heavy losses and the repayment of his family's interest in this property weighed heavily on him and possibly hastened his death.

Riley's love for New Zealand made him resentful of those who despoiled it. He campaigned with some of his friends against advertising hoardings which were appearing at the exits from towns and cities, writing to the Otago Daily Times on the subject, and even cutting down all the hoardings between Cromwell and Clyde. This stirred the public conscience and for the next decade the numbers of road and railway hoardings diminished.

Frederick Riley died on 1st August 1932 of a heart attack shortly after an operation. His death came as a shock to the many who loved him and tributes poured in from far and wide.

Elizabeth Riley

Research taken from www.northerncemetery.org.nz/northerncemetery, the website of Southern Heritage Trust, and information supplied by Elizabeth Riley.