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“Objections in Very Strong Terms”

John O’Donnell

One of the dentists who attended the first meeting of the Ontario Dental Association was John O’Donnell, from Peterborough, Ont. O’Donnell’s aggressive personality and determination to succeed proved to be great assets to the fledging organization, although these same not-always-desirable traits would cause his eclipse and withdrawal from the Association.

O’Donnell was typical of the men who steered the Ontario Dental Association through its turbulent early years. He possessed the same rigid opinions and evangelical fervour as many of his associates. He once wrote: “Although others thought diseases of the maxillary sinus due to other causes, in every one, I have been able to trace them to some constitutional vice ... exposure,¹ tampering and filling the system with powerful drugs, loose habits, violence, etc.”²

We know little about O’Donnell’s background, although he was likely of Irish immigrant stock, and it’s possible he may have moved to Peterborough from Kingston, where he would have known Barnabas Day. His professional card in the Peterborough paper, in which he referred to himself as J. O’Donnell, D. S. (Dental Surgeon), would have been considered restrained, since the employment of imaginary academic qualifications were accepted as fair business practice in the mid-1800s.³

O’Donnell’s rise in the ODA began with his attendance at the first meeting, in January 1867, one of the eight dentists to heed Day’s circular to attend a meeting in Toronto for the purpose of forming a dental association. O’Donnell was elected Corresponding Secretary, becoming one of the first officers of the new association, a post he discharged with diligence and efficiency.

“I was always a great advocate of the Ontario Dental Society meetings,”

he wrote, “and as a rule attended, because it is a well-known fact that the flourishing condition and standing of the profession today must be attributed to a little dental association formed at the Queen’s Hotel, Toronto ... and consisting of only nine members. In this case the old rhyme is verified again, ‘Large trees from little acorns grow.’”⁴

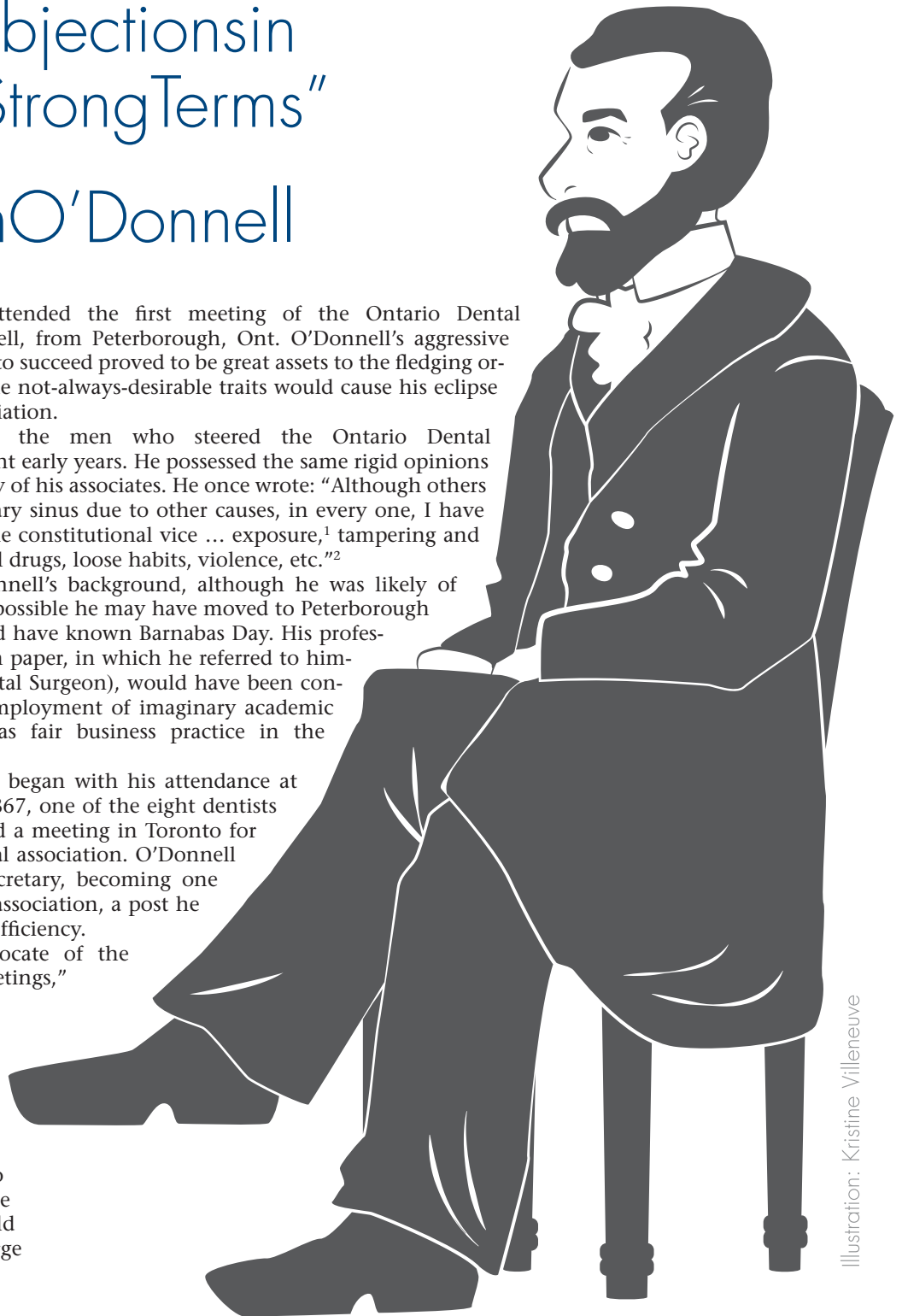


Illustration: Kristine Villeneuve

Despite his praise for the new association, O'Donnell was not one to shrink from criticism of others. "Let me tell you that the great city of Toronto did not contribute a single old and leading dentist to that assembly," he complained later. "Mr. M.E. Snider, a young but enthusiastic dentist, was the only one. This meeting appeared to be beneath the notice of the great men of that day in Toronto."⁵

In 1868, O'Donnell succeeded Barnabas Day and became President of the new association. His presidency was not without turbulence, however. Writing to the *Dominion Dental Journal*, years later, he recalled, "In my day, all wanted office, and if not got, kicked over. In one instance a rival Society was formed. This was the means of dividing the profession into two hostile camps, thereby causing dissension and destroying that harmony that should prevail, as originally intended."⁶

When the school of the Royal College of Dental Surgeons opened in the autumn of 1869, John O'Donnell realized a dream by being appointed professor of mechanical dentistry. Unfortunately, his dream was short-lived. According to an observer, "This arrangement lasted but one session on account of mismanagement in the dental department.... Further, too, a reckless disposition of the funds brought about embarrassment to such an extent that the furnishings had to be realized to meet the demands of the creditors."⁷

In less than six months, the Royal College of Dental Surgeons had a deficit of \$125. The Board was forced to close the school and sell off the furniture and equipment. In the process, the staff of the school, including O'Donnell, lost their appointments.

Further, after two years as Secretary of the Royal College of Dental Surgeons of Ontario, O'Donnell was suddenly replaced by James Branston Willmott. We can only assume that his propensity for bellicose behaviour played a role in his replacement.⁸

For O'Donnell however, the argument that sealed his withdrawal from organized dentistry took place at an RCDSO Board meeting in June 1870. That year the Board decided to petition the Ontario Legislature for a number of amendments to the Act Respecting Dentistry. In preparation, the Board appointed a committee to draw up the amendments. However, according to the minutes of the June meeting, "The late Secretary of the Board, Mr. O'Donnell, objected in very strong terms to its being received, stating that he had prepared a series of changes in the Act, which he was intending to present to the Board, which would meet all requirements and be perfectly



John O'Donnell
Founding Member President, 1868
RCDSO Secretary, 1868-70



Illustration: Kristine Villeneuve

Meerschaum is a soft white clay mineral. Its porous nature naturally filters the nicotine, slowly changing the colour of the pipe to gold, amber and dark brown. No pipe collection would be complete without a meerschaum pipe.

satisfactory to all; and after a good deal of loud talking on the part of several, it was decided that the report should not be received."^{9,10}

Following his troubling experiences with the dental school and the Board of the RCDSO, O'Donnell returned to his practice in Peterborough. In future years, he was active with the local volunteer fire brigade, the literary society and the Masonic lodge. He ran for election as the "people's candidate" in the municipal election of 1871, but was not elected.¹¹

John O'Donnell died in 1898. There is no record of official recognition for his services by either the Ontario Dental Association or the Royal College of Dental Surgeons of Ontario. However, he must have had a few supporters. *The Canada Journal of Dental Science* records, "After the adjournment [of the annual meeting of the Ontario Dental Society] a few friends of Mr. O'Donnell presented him a handsome meerschaum pipe, as a mark of the esteem in which he is held by them. The presentation was made by Mr. Lennox in a very pleasing speech. Mr. O'Donnell, on receiving the gift, made a suitable reply."¹²

While O'Donnell's aggressive personality may have made him unpopular with his colleagues, his conscientious and efficient services as President of the Ontario Dental Association, Secretary of the Royal College of Dental Surgeons of Ontario and as a teacher at the RCDS¹³ school have earned him a rightful place in the early history of dentistry in Ontario. ■

REFERENCES

1. By “exposure” O’Donnell means exposure to infectious diseases.
2. O’Donnell, J. “Diseases of the Maxillary Sinus.” *Canada Journal of Dental Science*, Vol. 1, No. 1, June 1868, 6.
3. “Dr. John O’Donnell: The Conscientious and Efficient First Secretary of the Ontario Dental Association, 1867.” *Ontario Dentist*, Vol. 44, No. 8, 1967, 22.
4. Proceedings of Dental Societies. “The Ontario Dental Society — Letters From Old Practitioners on the 30th Anniversary of the Incorporation of the Dental Profession in Ontario.” *Dominion Dental Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 10, October 1898, 351.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Marshall, J.A. “Development of Dentistry from 1868 to 1898.” *Dominion Dental Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 8, August 1898, 277.
8. According to Dr. Joseph H. Johnson, “There [were] several letters written by Dr. Willmott complaining that he had been unable to get the printed forms of the RCDS and the Treasurer’s report transferred to him by Dr. O’Donnell.” (Source: Johnson, J.H. “A Perspective of the Development of Dentistry in Ontario.” *Oral Health*, May 1967, 337.)
9. Meeting of the Dental Board of Ontario. *Canada Journal of Dental Science*, Vol. 3, No. 5, March 1871, 54.
10. In any case, the petition never reached the government. Dr.G.W. Boulton, MPP, who was the major advocate for organized dentistry, refused to present it on the grounds that it failed to have the support of a majority of dentists.
11. From a scrapbook owned by O’Donnell. Peterborough Museum and Archives.
12. Annual Meeting of the Ontario Dental Society, *Canada Journal of Dental Science*, June 1870, p. 338.
13. The Royal College of Dental Surgeons (RCDS) and the Royal College of Dental Surgeons of Ontario (RCDSO) are different organizations. The Royal College of Dental Surgeons (RCDS) was the name of the school where Ontario’s dentists were trained. The Royal College of Dental Surgeons of Ontario (RCDSO) was, and is, the licensing body for dentists in Ontario. The similarity in the names of the two organizations has caused endless confusion. The RCDS was fully owned, operated and funded by the RCDSO from its founding in 1875 until 1925 when, after an affirmative vote by the members of the RCDSO — more than 850 Ontario dentists — the building, fittings and equipment were transferred to what is now the Faculty of Dentistry at the University of Toronto.

Dr. James Shosenberg is a former Editor of Ontario Dentist and author of The Rise of the Ontario Dental Association — 125 Years of Organized Dentistry (1992). In honour of our 150th Anniversary in 2017, Dr. Shosenberg is authoring The Rise of the ODA — 150 Years of Organized Dentistry, which will be available for ODA members in 2017.