Dr. Austin O'Malley: Polymath, poisoning victim and O'Malley genealogist.


O'Malley circa 1915

Austin O'Malley of Philadelphia was by any account a remarkable man. As a writer and lecturer in both the arts and the sciences, he was widely respected. He was a university professor, physician, author of books on a range of subjects, lecturer to learned societies all over the USA, a linguist of note and an authority on the poet Dante. He also researched his descent from the O'Malley Chieftains of Co Mayo, compiling an extensive family tree in the process.

Born in 1858 in Pittston, Pennsylvania to an Irish immigrant from Westport, he entered Fordham University aged only 14 and graduated at the top of his class. He studied philosophy and languages in Rome and then undertook a medical career, studying at Georgetown University, the university of Berlin and medical schools in Paris and Vienna, specialising in bacteriology.

He returned to the US in 1893 and worked initially as a bacteriologist and pathologist in Georgetown. However, his writings led in a different direction and he was appointed Professor of English Literature at Notre Dame University in Indiana in 1895, a position he held until his health forced his resignation in 1902.

In March 1902, he married Ailene Ellis and shortly afterwards became seriously ill with food poisoning, initially attributed to accidental consumption of infected canned goods. His brother Joseph, also a doctor, brought him to Philadelphia for treatment. While there, Joseph became suspicious of Ailene's relationship with a former boyfriend and managed to tip off police who arrested the young couple attempting to catch a train west with several diamond rings stolen from Dr Joseph's wife. This led to speculation that Dr Austin's poisoning was not accidental after all! Austin made a slow recovery during which he divorced his errant wife and never married again.

He began to specialise in the study of the eye at the University of Pennsylvania and became an oculist in Philadelphia, which was his principal occupation for the next thirty years. Nonetheless, he continued writing and lecturing extensively on literary and medical subjects.

It is not clear when he first became interested in his O'Malley ancestry. The papers of Professor Conor O'Malley of Galway, Middleton Moore O'Malley of Ross House, Newport, Co Mayo and Sir Owen O'Malley all contain correspondence with and references to him, from the1890s to his death in 1932. He visited Ireland on several occasions during his research. A slim volume entitled *The O'Malleys of the Owles* by him is available in the National Library in Dublin. An accompanying family tree has been the basis for many other O'Malley genealogical articles and correspondence, leading to several disputed claims relating to the Chieftains of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and their descendants.