



Sir Wilfred Grenfell, MD

When Dr. Wilfred Grenfell first arrived on the coast of Labrador in 1892, he was astonished by what he found in the remote fisherman community; with a population of 30,000 there was not a single medical doctor. He quickly became passionate about establishing and providing medical care for the underserved population and would change the lives of many who lived along the isolated coast. Eventually, he would build the region's first hospital and ultimately improve the social, health and economic status of those who populated the area.

Dr. Wilfred Thomason Grenfell received his medical training at the London Hospital and MD from Oxford University in 1889. He was an unmotivated medical student until inspired by a tent evangelist to devote his restless energies to helping the less fortunate.

He was further guided by the great surgeon, Sir Frederick Treves, who persuaded him to join the National Mission to Deep Sea Fisherman in the North Sea. Dr. Grenfell grew up living for adventure; the challenge of the Mission appealed to him so much that in 1890 he became its superintendent.

In 1892, Dr. Grenfell first visited Newfoundland and Labrador and found himself drawn to the serious medical, as well as economic, social and spiritual needs of the fishermen of the area, especially among the "livviers" who stayed year-round. They lived in the most terrible conditions imaginable, ignored by government and exploited by fish merchants. They had never seen a doctor before and in their eyes Dr. Grenfell was an angel from another world. From the deck of his ship he gave out pills, clothes, friendship, and God's word. By 1900 he had built a hospital in the town of St. Anthony on the tip of Newfoundland's Northern peninsula.

He was as much a fund raiser as a physician, incurring significant support from British and North American philanthropists by publicizing the plight of the fishermen in his many books and speaking tours. He also created cottage industries and built orphanages, churches, a dry dock and Newfoundland's first cooperative building. He treated the sick with one of the first hospital ships, the "Strathcona", donated by Sir Donald Smith of Montreal, and inspired many others to work with him.

In 1913 he parted company with the Mission and established the International Grenfell Association, which still exists today. Knighted in 1927, Sir Wilfred Grenfell died in 1940 in Vermont. He had exceptional empathy for his patients, and left a dramatic and indelible imprint on the medical and social history of Newfoundland and Canada. His name also lives on in the Grenfell Regional Health Services, which is based at Dr. Grenfell's original St. Anthony headquarters.