

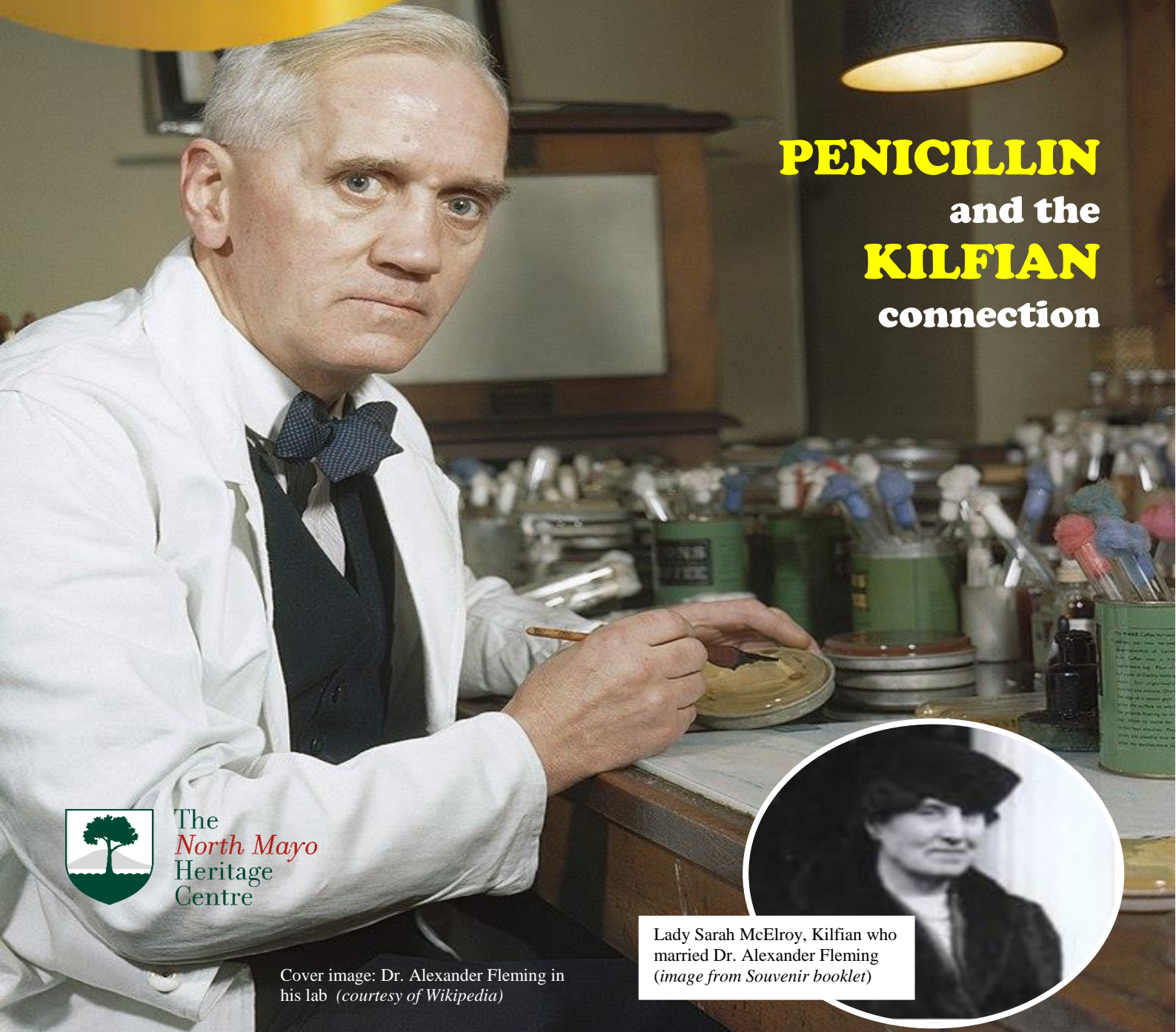
Mayo Heritage

Newsletter



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YouTube



PENICILLIN and the **KILFIAN** connection



The
North Mayo
Heritage
Centre

Cover image: Dr. Alexander Fleming in
his lab (courtesy of Wikipedia)



Lady Sarah McElroy, Kilfian who
married Dr. Alexander Fleming
(image from Souvenir booklet)

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Penicillin and the Kilfian Connection

“Few people can say that their lives have not been affected by the discovery of penicillin,” such were the remarks at the unveiling of a monument to honour Dr. Alexander Fleming and his Kilfian-born wife Sarah in Kincon in 2001.



While the remarkable story of Dr. Alexander Fleming and his discovery of penicillin is well documented in history, the fact that he married a Kilfian woman is sometimes overlooked.

What do we know about this Kilfian lady who married Dr. Alexander Fleming?

Sarah Marion McElroy, (also known as Sareen) daughter of Bernard McElroy (a farmer) and Maria Flynn, of Leigherntain, Kilfian was born on the 28th of May 1881. Her father, Bernard, owned one of the largest farms in the neighbourhood.

After leaving school, Sarah and her twin sister Elizabeth travelled to Australia where they studied nursing. On returning to Ireland, Sarah worked in a nursing home in Dublin before moving to London where she established her own nursing home. Quite an achievement at the time! While in London and managing the nursing home in York Place, Baker Street, Sarah met a Scottish doctor named Alexander Fleming.



Monument in Kincon in honour of Dr. Alexander Fleming and his Kilfian-born wife. (image from Kincon social media)

Alexander Fleming, son of Hugh Fleming (a farmer) and Grace Stirling Morton, Lochfield Farm, Ayrshire, Scotland, was born on the 6th of August 1881.

After working in a shipping office for four years, twenty-year-old Alexander Fleming inherited some money from his uncle, which enabled him to enroll at St. Mary's Hospital Medical school in Paddington in 1903. He subsequently qualified with an MBBS degree from the school in 1906.

On December 23rd 1915 Alexander married Sarah McElroy in the Church of Saint Charles Borromeo, Ogle Street, London.

In order to assist Alexander financially with his research, Sarah sold her London nursing home. This showed great unselfishness on her part and facilitated his continued research into what would ultimately lead to the discovery of penicillin, as we know it today.

One can surmise that without the support of his Co. Mayo born wife, Dr. Alexander Fleming's research could have taken a different path.

Ultimately, the simple discovery and the use of the antibiotic agent has led to millions of lives being saved, and earned Fleming, together with two colleagues, the 1945 Nobel Prize in Physiology/Medicine.

After nine years of marriage, in 1924, Alexander and Sarah welcomed a son Robert, who later followed in his father's footsteps into medicine. Sarah and Alexander held a deep respect for one another and she was not only his wife but his advisor, travel companion and assistant.

She never forgot her Co. Mayo roots and holidayed here regularly. Their son Robert recalled visiting Kilfian with his parents in the 1930s, playing on Lacken Strand and fishing with the Cosgroves in Ballina. Sarah Fleming's health began to deteriorate and by 1948 she was unable to accompany her husband on official visits. Parkinson's disease and a suspected brain tumour were untreatable. She died on the 28th October 1949 and is buried in Hillingdon Cemetery, London.

Alexander remarried a colleague of his, Dr Amalia Koutsouri-Vourekas in London in 1953. He died on the 11th March 1955 after suffering from coronary thrombosis at his home in London. Their son Robert died in 2015.

An extraordinary story and what a legacy left behind by two remarkable people.

Sources:
The Western People
www.electricscoland.com
Northmayo.ie
Ektalks.blogspot

Extract from Ordnance Survey Letters of 1838

Brief history of the townland of **KINCON**

(*Cionn Con*, meaning head or hill of the hound).

Located in the east of the parish of Kilfian. Bounded on the north and east by Rathreagh parish; south by Rathreagh parish and the townlands of Cloonaleedin and Dringaghan; and west by Belladooan townland.

It contains 498 acres, 0 roods, 9 perches, including about 90 acres of bog. The property of Lord Arran, and held by tenants at will at 12 shillings per acre. Soil, in some parts good heavy clay, in other parts of indifferent quality. General produce, oats, flax and potatoes. Houses are of stone, and the inhabitants are in middling circumstances. In the south-east part of the parish, bordering on Rathreagh parish is Kilcon village, with a Roman Catholic Chapel and a Police Station.

