Bonnington's Irish Moss (otherwise known as *Pectoral oxymel of Carrageen*) is a clear, dark brown syrupy cough mixture of vinegar and an extract of seaweed (*carrageen*) sweetened with honey. It’s inventor, Australian-born chemist George Bonnington (1837-1901), concocted the remedy for coughs, cold, asthma, influenza and bronchitis in Nelson, New Zealand, in the mid to late-1850s. It initially proved popular in the town and eventually made him an extremely wealthy man after finding a ready market throughout New Zealand and in Australia.

Bonnington’s knowledge of chemistry had begun at school and was honed in Sydney where he studied during the early 1850s. After returning to Nelson in 1854 he opened his first chemist shop. In 1862 he went into business with Evan Prichard, an established Nelson chemist and druggist who was some ten years his senior. They opened their joint business in Trafalgar Street.

Although the Irish Moss story began in Nelson, its wider success came about as a result of George’s failed attempt to run a second chemist shop in Christchurch from 1872. Located in Colombo Street, Bonnington’s initially sold remedies, soaps, perfumes and infant foods, but later expanded to include photographic materials and equipment, and even fruit wines, which he bought from contacts in his home town. He struggled to make a go of the venture, however, and in 1875 was forced to apply for bankruptcy. The Christchurch business was subsequently put on the market, but when no buyer eventuated it was assigned over to two trustees, his brother Charles and local merchant J. J. Fletcher. Together the three men managed to turn the business around, primarily on the strength of the Irish Moss preparation.

Under the new management structure, the company began placing regular advertisements in the local newspaper, which help increase turnover to the point that they relocated the shop to a larger and more centrally located premises in High Street (near the intersection with Lichfield Street). Another strategy was to sell the Nelson business in order to both raise capital and focus on the Christchurch operations. "By the end of 1876, Bonnington’s Pectoral Oxymel of Carrageen or Irish Moss was being distributed and sold through stores and chemists throughout Canterbury" (Riley, n. pag.). Seven years later Bonnington and Company relocated to a newly constructed, custom designed building, Bonnington House at 199 High Street. In the early 1890s, possibly as early as 1892, Bonnington and Co introduced their Irish Moss preparation to the Australian market, opening a factory in Harris Street, Sydney. It was not the only remedy to be sold by the company, however. Another popular product was Bonnington's Liver Pills and Liver Tonic.

The advertising campaign begun in the mid-1870s continued largely unabated well into the 1950s, with Australian newspapers publishing the company’s advertisements from at least 1893. The policy was to combine a mix of product descriptions and testimonials from satisfied customers, and to reinforce the brand’s equity through constant exposure (often with the name accompanied by minimal text). These appeared in both metropolitan and regional newspapers on a massive scale. The company’s use of celebrity endorsements is one of the earliest examples located to date within the Australasian region.

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1 A search for “Bonnington's Irish Moss” (as a phrase and with publication dates) in Trove, the National Library of Australia’s digitised newspaper service, currently shows more than 47,000 hits between 1893 and 1991. The majority of these were published between 1893 and 1957. Refining the search to “advertisements” still provides a list exceeding 39,000.
Although Bonnington’s advertisements from the late-nineteenth century were not as sophisticated as the type being published in Australia from the 1910s, the company does appear to have adopted strategies that targeted specific consumer demographics. It was commonplace practice between the 1895 and the late-1910s, for example, to promote the brand on the same page as the entertainment advertisements in the major metropolitan papers. This practice was adopted in both New Zealand and Australia. In the 1930s (between 1934 and 1938) the company targeted the female readers of *Australian Women’s Weekly* (but only in the lead-up to winter and during the winter months). It used the same ploy again in the mid-1950s.

The earliest celebrity endorsement for Bonnington’s Irish Moss found to date appears in the *Evening Star* (Dunedin) in October 1889. The testimonial comes from Priscilla Verne, who wrote to thank the company in 1887 while touring with Hugo’s Buffalo Minstrels. It continued to be used in Dominion newspapers for several years. A testimonial from variety artist Myra Carden appeared in Australian newspapers in 1895. Best known for touring regional New South Wales and Queensland with her Magnet Company between 1887 and 1891, Carden wrote to Bonnington’s from Manilla, New South Wales, in November 1894, having by then retired from professional theatre activity. The late-1890s also saw actor/dramatist Bland Holt and singer/actor Ernest Fitts become spokespersons for Bonnington’s Irish Moss.

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**Ilavarra Mercury**
(Wollongong, NSW)

**Evening Star** 19 Oct. (1889), 1.

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**For Winter Coughs and Bronchitis.**

*The Marvellous Cure for Coughs, Colds, Sore Throats, Asthma, Influenza, Bronchitis, and all Chest Affections.*

*Irish Moss.*

*Sold Everywhere.*

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**Bonnington’s Irish Moss.**

Ununequalled as a Specific for Coughs, Colds, Influenza, Soreness and Tightness of the Chest, Asthma, Bronchitis, Croup, Whooping Cough, Difficulty of Breathing, and all other Lung Complaints tending to Consumption.

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**Freeman’s Journal** (Sydney) 6 Aug. (1898), 12.

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See also: *New Zealand Tablet* (Dunedin) 8 Jan. (1892), 32; *Timaru Herald* 29 Sept. (1994), 4; and 21 Mar. (1895), 4.
It remains unclear how many entertainers provided testimonials for Bonnington’s between the 1880s and the mid-1950s, at which time the company was paying for regular half page blocks in the Australian Woman’s Weekly. In the early 1900s the company simply claimed that its Irish Moss preparation was being "endorsed by public speakers and singers."

Sometime around 1912 Bonnington’s began producing a jube version of the remedy, promoting it as the most convenient and effective “throat pastille” available. Sold in an unbreakable tin container, the jubes were seen as an ideal solution for travelling entertainers, and as a result advertising, including celebrity endorsements, increased during the early years of marketing. One of the key testimonials came from Gladys Moncrieff [see right].

Although the use of celebrity endorsements appears to have gradually declined during the late-1910s and 1920s, Bonnington’s continued to utilise testimonials from everyday users. Interestingly, in the 1940s the company undertook a high profile association with radio when it became the major sponsor of Dan Agar’s Mrs Obb’s comedy series. Mrs ‘Obbs, which was broadcast on relay from 2GB, Sydney, between 1941 and 1951, starred Agar as Mrs ‘Obbs and Owen Ainley as Alfie ‘Obbs. The running gag in the show revolved around Alfie’s determination to stay unemployed despite his wife doing everything in her power to help. Others to feature in the show were Yvonne “Fifi” Banvard (Mrs Jupley), Rita Pounceforth (Mrs Bottomley), Bebe Scott (her niece, Blossom), Bert Barton (Dickie Bart) and Reg Collins (Mr Bundle).  

5 Brian Jeffrey reports in the Canberra Times in 1977 that the original recording transcriptions for the Mrs ‘Obbs series were almost destroyed because they were considered outdated and had outlived their commercial usefulness. The person responsible for both saving the tapes and donating them to the National Library of Australia was Gordon Bonnington (“Sounds from Our Past.” Canberra Times 5 Mar. (1977), 9.)
VARIETY PRACTITIONERS IDENTIFIED IN THIS ARTICLE

- Dan Agar
- Yvonne "Fifi" Banvard
- Myra Carden
- Ernest Fitts
- Gladys Moncrieff
- Bebe Scott
- Priscilla Verne

HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. Wendy Riley notes in her *Canterbury Heritage* article on George Bonnington that the early Irish Moss preparations included (undisclosed) traces of opium and morphine. "These "provided a pleasant after taste and effect." The inclusion of morphia led to a Victorian grocer being fined in 1907 for selling a product (Bonnington's Carrageen Irish Moss) contrary to the Pure Food Act. This helped bring about the drugs removal from the remedy.

2. **George Bonnington**: Like his brothers Charles and Henry, George Bonnington was a keen musician. With all his children educated on at least one instrument, the family regularly practised together on the top floor of Bonnington House. He was also active in both local affairs and within the New Zealand pharmaceutical industry. His administrative roles included six years as a City Councillor (representing the South-East Ward) and as a founding member of the Pharmaceutical Society of New Zealand (including positions as treasurer and secretary). In addition to these positions he assisted in examinations held under the authority of the Pharmacy Board, and helped establish the Christchurch Orchestral Society. Bonnington died on 18 December 1901, leaving behind his wife, Isabella, and seven sons and two daughters.

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3. **Charles Joseph Bonnington**: The oldest of the Bonnington boys, Charles was 20 years of age when he came to New Zealand in 1849. A talented musician and composer, he played the violin and piano, and had his first song "Emmeline Polkas," published when he was 16. Charles initially earned a living teaching music and dancing while still a young man became the first professor of Music in Nelson, and later established the Nelson Amateur Musical Society. His brothers Henry and George were also involved in the society, primarily as pianists.
"Bonnington House Restoration." Canterbury Heritage. [sighted 19/10/2015]

Bonnington's Irish Moss today
Source: Product Review