

Baird, Mary (Frances Josephine)

by Linde Lunney

Baird, Mary (Frances Josephine) (1907–2009), nurse and health service administrator, was born 22 May 1907 in Belfast, the sixth of nine children (four boys and five girls) of Robert Baird, originally from Donegal, an RIC constable, and his wife Frances Harriet (née Hogan), from Westmeath. Robert Baird later won an award for bravery while serving as acting sergeant in Derry in 1911, and became a station commandant in Co. Cavan with An Garda Síochána in 1924. The family moved with him round various postings, but had settled in Belfast by the mid 1920s. Mary's early education was thus somewhat peripatetic. She was known in her family as 'Maisie', but when her godchild called her 'Mousie' instead, the latter nickname proved popular with family and friends. After leaving school, she was apprenticed to a Belfast milliner, but had to care for her mother, disabled by arthritis, and decided to train as a nurse.

Her family was able to pay for her training in Belfast's Royal Victoria Hospital (BVH) from 1927, and, after she qualified as a registered nurse, she got further training in midwifery by working unpaid in Dublin's Rotunda hospital. Her first paid job was as a private nurse in the Belfast household of Sir William Whitla (qv), who had been senior physician to the Royal Victoria until incapacitated by a stroke in 1929. In 1931 Mary Baird took up a post in the city's public health department, as one of the first health visitors appointed in Northern Ireland after the passing of the Local Government Act 1929. Alongside maternity and child care in the community, she organised clubs for young mothers and their babies, in which Belfast Corporation provided food for those in need.

As a student nurse, Baird had joined the Territorial Army Nursing Service, and in 1941, during the second world war, was called up to join Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service. She was a sister for a time in Bangor hospital, nursing local military personnel, but in early 1944 was posted to southern England as preparations for the D-Day landings got underway. She was one of the first nurses to be landed in France, at the Mulberry temporary harbour at Arromanches in Normandy, and stayed with the army as it advanced to Germany, dealing with casualties in field hospitals. Although she would afterwards never talk about her wartime experiences, her 'outstanding devotion to duty in north-west Europe' was cited on a certificate signed by Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, and she was awarded the France and Germany Star.

Mary Baird returned to civilian life in 1946, to Belfast Corporation's public health department, where she was put in charge of all the community nursing services – health visitors, Queen's district nurses, and domiciliary midwives – and was involved with the huge changes brought about by the establishment of the National Health

Service in 1948. Baird, who had been employed by Belfast Corporation, unlike most local nurses, who were thenceforward employees of the new service, was eligible for appointment to the Northern Ireland Hospitals Authority board, and performed a valuable service to her profession in representing, almost singlehandedly, nurses' concerns for many years (until 1964) on that body. She was also chairman of the Northern Ireland branch of the Royal College of Nursing (1959–61, and briefly in 1963), and was involved in many public bodies dealing with public and social health matters. She served *inter alia* on the local government superannuation committee and on Ministry of Labour tribunals, and was active in the local British Legion. Baird also helped establish and administer a home for retired nurses in north Belfast. She retired in 1970, but remained active in public life and in voluntary associations. She was awarded the MBE in 1964.

Her connection with the RVH, where she had trained, was important to Baird throughout her life, and she was involved in the RVH League of Nurses. In 2000, to celebrate the millennium and to replace the ugly perimeter security barriers that had been necessary in the NI troubles, the RVH commissioned an artist, Avril Wilson, to design steel railings. Eleven photographic portraits were chosen to feature, representing the stages of human life, with Mary Baird's contribution to nursing in Belfast marked by her inclusion. By then she was in her 90s, and protested that the photograph showed her with too many wrinkles. She died in a nursing home in Belfast on 25 June 2009, aged 102. She never married.

Census of Ireland, 1911, www.census.nationalarchives.ie; *Ir. Times*, *passim*; Audrey Leathard, *Health care provision: past, present and into the 21st century* (2000); *Belfast Telegraph*, 18 Aug. 2009 (obit., by Matthew McCreary); *Nursing Standard*, 23 Sept. 2009 (obit., by Laurence Dopson); *Independent* (London), 27 Sept. 2009 (obit., by Laurence Dopson); Caroline Skehill, *History of social work in Northern Ireland* (2011), Oxford Bibliographies online research guide, online at Google Books; information from library and archives of the Royal College of Nursing, provided by Pauline Moore (Belfast) and Neasa Roughan (Edinburgh)