

Webb, Isabella ('Ella') Gertrude Amy

by Helen Andrews

Webb, Isabella ('Ella') Gertrude Amy (1877–1946), paediatrician, was born 16 October 1877 in Dublin, elder daughter of the Rev. Charles Thomas Ovenden (1846–1924), dean of St Patrick's cathedral, Dublin, and his wife Isabella Mary Robinson. She was educated at Alexandra College, Dublin; Queen's College, London; and Göttingen, Germany, before entering the Catholic University of Ireland. She won exhibitions when graduating BA (1899), MB, B.Ch., and BAO (1904), becoming the first woman from the medical school to achieve the highest marks in the final medical examinations of RUI; she won a travelling medical scholarship to Vienna (1905) before graduating MD (1906; RUI). She was appointed demonstrator in anatomy in the medical school at TCD; after her marriage (1907), she reared her children, ran a private practice from Hatch St., served as hon. medical officer to St Patrick's Dispensary for Women and Children, and to two baby clinics, lectured in various institutions, and was external examiner to the Department of Agriculture & Technical Instruction.

As lady district superintendent in the Alexandra College St John's Ambulance Brigade, she was on duty during the Easter rising of 1916; in the absence of the commissioner, she took command and within three hours transformed the St John's headquarters at 14 Merrion Square into an emergency hospital ready to treat fifty patients. She cycled frequently through the firing lines and was subsequently made a Lady of Grace of the Order of St John of Jerusalem (1916), and awarded an MBE (1918).

She was appointed assistant physician in the children's department and anaesthetist and lecturer in anaesthetics (1918–27) at the Adelaide Hospital. A pioneer in preventive medicine, her great contribution was to child welfare: she opened a paediatric out-patient clinic (1918) and was one of the first to recognise that many diseases were caused by poverty and malnutrition. Unpaid volunteers were recruited to help with social problems, and the staff increased to five when in 1921 the first professional lady almoner in an Irish hospital was appointed. Their report on the 'Hospital social service' (1922) described the variety of tasks carried out, which included home visits and provision of food, convalescence in the country, and remedial classes for children with speech defects, and gaining the cooperation of outside agencies.

Appreciating that common childhood ailments, such as rickets, could not be permanently cured without adequate food and care after hospital treatment, she founded, with the help of others, the purpose-built Children's Sunshine Home for convalescents, at Stillorgan, Co. Dublin, which opened in 1925, financed by donations and fund-raising activities. The annual report (1925/6) recorded the

discharge of twenty-eight healthy children; the home flourished under her dynamic leadership, and she described her early experiences in 'Ten years work at the Children's Sunshine Home, Stillorgan' (*Ir. Jn. Med. Sc.*, no. 113 (May 1935), 225–9),

Physician (1929–46) to St Ultan's Infant Hospital, she published papers in professional journals, including an important article on 'Maternity and child welfare in Dublin county borough' (*Dubl. Jn. Med. Sc.*, cxliv (August 1917), 86–97), was elected fellow of the Royal Academy of Medicine in Ireland, and was awarded MA (*jure officii*) (1933; *Dubl.*).

Sociable and abounding in vitality, with a great sense of humour and an infectious laugh, she had a great love of sacred music. She lived at 39 St Kevin's Park, Rathgar, Dublin, and died 24 August 1946 in a Dublin hospital. Her funeral service was held in the chapel at TCD, where St John's Ambulance Brigade formed a guard of honour for their former surgeon-in-chief; she was buried at St Fintan's cemetery, Sutton, Co. Dublin. She married (1907) George Randolph Webb (1877–1929), mathematician and fellow of TCD; they had one son, D. A. Webb (qv), professor of botany at TCD, and one daughter.

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*Med. Directory*; J. B. Leslie, *Clogher clergy and parishes* (1929); *Ir. Times*, 27, 28 Aug. 1946; *Brit. Med. Jn.* (7 Sept. 1946), 348; F. O. C. Meenan, *Cecilia Street: the Catholic University School of Medicine 1855–1931* (1987); David Mitchell, *A 'peculiar' place: the Adelaide Hospital, Dublin, its times, places and personalities 1839–1989* [1989] (photo); 'Childrens' [sic] Sunshine Home', *Three Rock Panorama*, xix, no. 1 (Jan. 1993), 6