

## Whitla, Sir William

by Patrick Maume

Whitla, Sir William (1851–1933), physician, was born 15 September 1851 at The Diamond, Monaghan town, fourth son of Robert Whitla, a presbyterian pawnbroker and draper, and his wife Anne (née Williams). Whitla's parents had five sons and seven daughters. In 1928 Whitla presented a harmonium to Tyholland Parish Church (Co. Monaghan) in honour of his family's connection with the area; a brother and nephew practised medicine in Monaghan. Whitla was educated at the local model school, where he was awarded a silver medal by the intermediate examiner. In 1866 he was apprenticed to his brother James, a pharmacist who kept a shop in Monaghan. In 1868 he moved to Belfast, where he continued his apprenticeship with the pharmaceutical firm of Wheeler & Whitaker. After taking his Apothecaries' Hall examinations he matriculated at QUB in 1870; he was awarded a scholarship in 1872 and graduated in 1873 as a licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons at Edinburgh (1873). In 1873–4 he was resident medical officer at the Belfast General Hospital in Frederick Street. He then spent some time at St Thomas's Hospital, London, where he met Ada Bourne from Staffordshire, a ward sister, friend of Florence Nightingale, and member of the Salvation Army; they married in 1876. (The marriage was childless.) The Whitlas returned to Belfast, where William established himself in general practice.

In 1877 Whitla graduated MD from QCB taking the highest marks ever secured by a medical student in the Queen's University in Ireland and gaining first-class honours with a commendation and gold medal. In 1882 he became physician to the Royal Hospital in Frederick Street; he later became senior physician to its successor, the Royal Victoria Hospital, as well as consultant at the Ulster Hospital for Women and Children and the Belfast Ophthalmic Hospital (retiring from these positions in 1919). In the year of his appointment to the Belfast post Whitla published *Elements of pharmacy, materia medica and therapeutics*. This had an enormous sale, was translated into several languages, and went into twelve editions (the last, revised by a colleague, appeared in 1939). *A dictionary of treatment* (1892) was equally successful, going through seven editions in Whitla's lifetime (the last in 1922), and even being translated into Chinese; the fourth and succeeding editions were revised by several collaborators, and further multi-authored revisions appeared in 1938 and 1957.

Although *The theory and practice of medicine* (1908) was less successful, Whitla's books brought him international fame and considerable wealth. This was augmented by shrewd investments (notably an early interest in oil shares), enabling the Whitlas to engage in extensive travel, art collecting, and philanthropy. He had a fine collection of Waterford glass and eighteenth-century prints, and donated many artworks acquired on his travels to the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery, QUB, and

the Ulster Medical Institute. He also commissioned original artworks, including a stained-glass window of the Good Samaritan (which ended up at the Royal Victoria Hospital) and another for his house, showing him as Shakespeare's Corin.

In 1886 Whitla was elected to the senate of the RUI (which later awarded him an honorary MA). In 1887 he became examiner to the University of Glasgow (which later awarded him a LLD *honoris causa*), and in 1889 he was an examiner in the Victoria University of Manchester. (He also examined at Leeds and Cambridge.) He campaigned actively for the creation of an independent university in Belfast and the establishment of a full-scale general hospital in the city. Whitla took a prominent role in opposing as sectarian the establishment of a chair of scholastic philosophy at QUB.

Whitla was professor of materia medica and therapeutics at Queens University Belfast, 1890–1919. His students were startled by his fascination with his subject, widely regarded as supremely boring: 'He talked of his roots and his extracts and his liqueurs and his pills as might Keats of the children of his fancy'; this enthusiasm was a legacy of his pharmaceutical experience – in later life he received honorary membership of the Pharmaceutical Society. He was admired for the ability to relate theory to practice visible in his gift for speedy and accurate diagnosis (important at a time when the absence of many modern diagnostic tools forced doctors to consider patients' physical symptoms with the minute attention of a Sherlock Holmes); on one occasion he correctly detected a heart murmur in a patient four beds from where he was standing. His air of certainty (reinforced by his physical robustness and massive build) and his commitment to his craft greatly reinforced his patients' confidence.

In 1902 Whitla received a knighthood in Edward VII's coronation honours list. He was president of the British Medical Association (BMA) in 1909–10, and at different times also held the presidencies of the Irish Medical Schools and Graduates' Association, the Irish Medical Association, the Ulster Medical Society, and the North of Ireland branch of the BMA. In 1887 he was honorary president of the therapeutic section of the BMA, and in 1894 presided over the therapeutic section of the International Medical Council, Rome.

Whitla was driven by a lifelong sense of vocation based on a strong evangelical faith. Although he and his wife embraced methodism soon after their marriage, they cooperated with a wide range of other religious groups. Lady Whitla retained her membership of the Salvation Army; the couple were friends of General William Booth (who stayed with them on visits to Belfast) and Whitla sometimes chaired Booth's meetings. Whitla also befriended Alexander Irvine (qv), author of *My lady of the chimney corner*, and helped to erect a stone to the memory of Irvine's mother in Antrim churchyard (he presided at the unveiling in October 1927). Whitla's puritanism did not keep him from a love of the stage – he was president of the Belfast Shakespearian Society, and the actor Sir Frank Benson was a regular house guest – or from appreciating wine and pipe tobacco.

Whitla took an interest in biblical prophecy, publishing an edition (1922) of Sir Isaac Newton's commentary on the book of Daniel, which displayed 'a great deal of original thought'. This led him to take a benevolent interest in Judaism and develop a strong commitment to Zionism; tributes at his death included one from the chairman of the Belfast Zionist Council, who spoke of his pleasure in honouring Whitla's philosemitism 'when Israel is again invaded by a horde of despots [the Nazis] for whom justice is merely a word of mockery'. In later life he was strongly critical of theological modernists who doubted the efficacy of instantaneous conversion and the value of missionary activity in China. (Whitla donated hundreds of copies of his *Dictionary of treatment* to medical missionaries.) His belief in social work based on muscular Christianity ('Christianity neither could nor would make any man an effeminate milksop') found expression in his work for the Belfast YMCA, which elected him president in 1922, in succession to his fellow believer in prophecies Sir Robert Anderson (qv); he retained the honour until his death.

Whitla was a stalwart unionist, who signed the Ulster covenant, served in the 1917–18 Irish Convention, and represented QUB in the Westminster parliament in 1918–23. In 1919 he was appointed honorary physician in Ireland to George V. In 1924 he was appointed pro-chancellor of QUB. After suffering a stroke in 1929 he was confined to his home at Lennoxvale, Belfast, where he died 11 December 1933; he was buried on the 13th at Belfast city cemetery. His wife predeceased him in 1932. He left Lennoxvale to QUB as a residence for the vice-chancellor.

Whitla's numerous benefactions during his lifetime included the construction of the Ulster Medical Institute as a headquarters for the Ulster Medical Association and the endowment of a chair of pharmacology at QUB; his legacies included £10,000 for the construction of the Whitla Hall at Methodist College, Belfast, and £35,000 which QUB used to build its principal assembly hall, the Sir William Whitla Memorial Hall (a bust of Whitla is on the outer wall facing University Street in tribute to one of the university's most munificent benefactors). In his manners, his world view, his philanthropy (and his relative freedom from taxation) he was a recognisably late Victorian medical grandee.

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*Belfast Newsletter*, 12, 14 Dec. 1933; *Belfast Telegraph*, 11, 14 Dec. 1933; *Northern Whig*, 12, 14 Dec. 1933; *Ir. Times*, 12 Dec. 1933; *Irish Independent*, 12 Dec. 1933; *ODNB*; <http://www.qub.ac.uk/home/Alumni/CampaignforQueens/DonorRoll/EarlyBenefactorProfiles/SirWilliamWhitla/>; <http://www.ums.ac.uk/whitla> (websites accessed 7 Dec. 2005)