



# Irish women in medicine, c.1880s–1920s

Origins, education and careers

Laura Kelly

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*Laura Kelly*

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*To my parents,  
John and Angela*

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*Laura Kelly*



# Abbreviations

## Medical institutions

CU	Catholic University
GMC	General Medical Council
KQCPI	King and Queen's College of Physicians of Ireland (later Royal College of Physicians of Ireland)
LSMW	London School of Medicine for Women
NUI	National University of Ireland
QCB	Queen's College Belfast
QCC	Queen's College Cork
QCG	Queen's College Galway
RCPI	Royal College of Physicians of Ireland
RCSi	Royal College of Science
RCSI	Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland
RUI	Royal University of Ireland
TCD	Trinity College Dublin
UCD	University College Dublin

## Medical degrees

FRCSI	Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland
LRCP LRCS Edin, LFPS Glas	Conjoint Licence of the Scottish Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons in Edinburgh and Glasgow

LRCPI & LM, LRCSI & LM	Conjoint Licence of the Irish Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons
MB BCh BAO	Bachelor of Medicine and Surgery
MD	Doctor of Medicine

### **Commonly cited works**

<i>BMJ</i>	<i>British Medical Journal</i>
<i>DMP</i>	<i>Dublin Medical Press</i>
<i>ODNB</i>	<i>Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i>

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# Introduction

My mother had serious illnesses for nearly a year and I nursed her and when she recovered to some extent (always an invalid) I decided to take up medicine – the school of the College of Surgeons was just opened to women when I began medicine in the autumn of 1887 (Victoria's 50 year Jubilee) at the (mixed) school and the College and qualified in 1891....

Emily Winifred Dickson<sup>1</sup>

**E**MILY WINIFRED DICKSON, from Dungannon, Co. Tyrone, enrolled at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland at the age of twenty-one. With her father's encouragement, she had decided that she wanted to pursue a medical education. She had originally faced discouragement in her pursuit of admission to university. An application to Trinity College Dublin had been accepted with the support of the medical faculty, but was ultimately rejected due to opposition from the theologians of the university. Dickson was one of the earliest of 759 women who matriculated in medicine at Irish institutions between 1885 and 1922. Of these 759 women, 452 went on to qualify with medical degrees or licences. Certainly, Dickson was one of the pioneering women doctors of her generation and exceptional in terms of her ability and university career. However, she was typical of the women medical graduates of her generation and the next, in terms of the challenges she faced. In spite of these challenges, Dickson seems to have found herself readily accepted in the Irish medical profession in her early career and gained support from the medical hierarchy, in a surprising contrast to the received view of the Irish medical profession in the period as depicted by F. O. C. Meenan, in his history of the Catholic University School of Medicine:

There is no reason to suppose that aspiring women doctors found conditions more favourable in Ireland. They met the same determined opposition and prejudice from the medical establishment.<sup>2</sup>



Likewise, more recently, Irene Finn has argued that the Irish medical profession, with the exception of the King and Queen's College of Physicians of Ireland (KQCPI), held a hostile view towards women in medicine.<sup>3</sup> I will argue against these ideas by showing that Irish university authorities and members of the medical hierarchy in Ireland possessed a positive attitude towards women in the medical profession. Moreover, I consider the history of women in the medical profession in Ireland as being crucial to understanding the history of women in the medical profession in Britain. Up until 1886, the KQCPI played a virtually unique role in the qualification of women doctors in Britain and Ireland, with forty-eight of the first fifty women who were registered in Britain as qualified medical practitioners before this year taking their examinations at the KQCPI.<sup>4</sup> It is notable that Irish universities and hospitals opened their doors to women medical students earlier than their British counterparts, which is somewhat surprising considering that Ireland was at this time part of the United Kingdom and one might have expected similar trends.

### **The social, cultural and political context**

THE PERIOD within which this book is set was one of vast social, cultural and political change in Ireland. The beginning of the nineteenth century opened with the Act of Union, passed in 1800 and coming into effect in January 1801. The act united Ireland with Britain under one parliament, with all Irish MPs now sitting in Westminster. Up until 1922, with the passing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty which followed the Irish War of Independence, Ireland was ruled by Britain. The 1840s to 1850s witnessed increasing agitation from Catholics, with the Repeal of the Union movement led by Daniel O'Connell in the 1830s and 1840s, and the establishment of the Irish Republican Brotherhood in 1858, which staged a failed rising in 1867. In 1873 Isaac Butt's Home Rule Party was established to seek the restoration of the Irish parliament. What followed was a politically turbulent fifty years. Charles Stewart Parnell assumed leadership of the Home Rule Party in 1880 and there were two failed attempts to pass Home Rule Bills in 1886 and 1893, under Prime Minister William Gladstone. The year 1886 also saw the establishment of the Unionist Party, which organised itself against Home Rule from the mid-1880s and into the early twentieth century. From the 1880s until 1922, successive British governments implemented a policy of 'constructive Unionism', for instance through the establishment of the Congested Districts Board in 1891, which poured money and expertise into 'congested' and poor areas in the west of Ireland, while the Department