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Book Review: Ada English: Patriot and Psychiatrist

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Ada English: Patriot and Psychiatrist
Brendan Kelly, 2014. Irish Academic Press: Kildare. 170 pages. Photographs, appendix, index included.

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For decades, and even centuries, men have dominated the field of medicine in the country of Ireland. The underrepresentation of females in the medical sciences has been a topic of several research studies, debates, and political conversations. Despite the overpopulation of men in the many branches of medical science, throughout the pages of Ireland's history, several women have populated pursued the profession, impacting medical advancements and etching a permanent place in Ireland's history of medicine. Dr. Ada English, patriot and psychiatrist, is just one of Ireland's many remarkable women who contributed to the advancement of medicine, most notably in the branch of psychiatry, during an exceptionally challenging period in Ireland's history. In his work, *Ada English: Patriot and Psychiatrist*, Brendan Kelly, associate clinical professor of psychiatry at University College Dublin, highlights the accomplishments of Dr. English, bringing to light her contributions, politically and socially, to the field of psychiatry and asylum work. Her history, as told by Kelly, is intertwined with Ireland's political history, social history, and public health history.

One of the first generation of female medical students in Ireland, Ada English completed her medical training in Dublin, and graduated a doctor from Royal University 1903.¹ English spent the beginning of her career deeply engaged in revolutionary politics, becoming a senior member Cumann na mBan a Republican women's paramilitary organization founded in 1914.² She also became involved politically in Ireland's revolutionary war, and dedicated herself to the cause of Irish nationalism to the point of court-martial and imprisonment in the Galway jail during the civil war.³ Kelly notes that alongside her political involvement, and for the bulk of her medical career, English worked first as an assistant medical officer (and eventually resident medical superintendent) for the Ballinsloe District Asylum, where in addition to caring for her patients, she advocated for better mental health services and care of asylum patients.

Kelly details English's accomplishments in asylum work in the later portions of *Ada English*. Utilizing numerous historical sources, he describes English's remarkable ability to care for asylum patients and her efforts to reform the treatment of patients in this field. Alongside her contributions, Kelly also provides readers with a brief, but detailed history of treatments used in Ireland's asylums during the end of the eighteenth century through the first half of the twentieth century. He also describes how English championed the movement for occupational therapy, as Ballinasloe, the asylum in which she worked for four decades, adopted this type of therapy during her time there. Kelly notes that English "was especially concerned that asylum patients should be gainfully occupied" and worked to incorporate many activities, among them farming,

¹ Brendan Kelly, *Ada English: Patriot and Psychiatrist* (Kildare, Irish Academic Press, 2014), 9.

² Kelly, *Ada English*, 10.

³ Kelly, *Ada English*, 40.

to fulfill this need.⁴ According to Kelly, Ada English “developed occupational therapy to a high degree promoted sports, entertainment, and interaction for patients “.⁵ Through his exhaustive study, Kelly’s work in *Ada English Patriot and Psychiatrist* demonstrates that English recognized Ireland’s “monolithic asylum system” and worked tirelessly to reform it over the course of her lifetime.⁶ English also became associated with infant healthcare, and public health, though Kelly only mentions her involvement briefly during his biography.⁷

Ada English: Patriot and Psychiatrist is not only a comprehensive examination of one woman’s contributions to field of psychiatry, but also serves as a brief history of the social and political events surrounding English’s life, chief among them Ireland’s War of Independence. According to Kelly, throughout the war, and for most of the remainder of her life, English was very active on the political arena. She believed firmly in the establishment of an independent Irish republic and was politically active in the Irish Volunteers, the Cumann na mBan, and became deeply involved in the War of Independence, Second Dáil, and Civil War.⁸

In a later portion of his text, Kelly devotes a chapter detailing the lives of a few other prominent women during the same time period who were active politically; and, contributed to the betterment of social health and to the medical profession in general. Dr. Kathleen Lynn, alongside Ada English, attended the Catholic University School of Medicine in Dublin.⁹ During her time as a medical student, she distinguished herself by winning the Barker Anatomical Prize, the Hudson Prize, and the silver medal on graduating in June of 1899.¹⁰ She quickly put her education and leadership skills to use becoming involved in the women’s suffrage movement and remaining politically active for most of her life. During the war, Lynn, used her medical skills to work on the sick and injured in Dublin’s city center.¹¹ Over the course of her medical career, she worked to promote children’s health and the reduction of the infant mortality rate.¹²

Dr. Dorothy Price, like the other two women, also combined her medical expertise with the political movements in the early twentieth century. After receiving her medical license, she served as a medical officer to a Cork brigade of the Irish Republican Army.¹³ Price grew passionate about public health, especially tuberculosis as it continued to affect large portions of the population. She worked to improve the treatment of tuberculosis in Ireland. She corresponded with many experts on effective treatments and worked to eradicate TB, “the greatest public health and social problem in early twentieth century Ireland.”¹⁴

Dr. Brigid Lyons Thornton, also mentioned, became the first woman commissioned in the Irish Free State Army when she entered the Army Medical Service as a First Lieutenant.¹⁵ During her duties as Lieutenant, she tended to female political prisoners. She also worked in St. Brigid’s Military Hospital where she contracted tuberculosis. Through her experience with the disease, she became passionate about public health and treatment of TB, and began working in

⁴ Kelly, *Ada English*, 56.

⁵ Kelly, *Ada English*, xii.

⁶ Kelly, *Ada English*, 130.

⁷ Kelly, *Ada English*, 48.

⁸ Kelly, *Ada English*, 19.

⁹ Kelly, *Ada English*, 96.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Kelly, *Ada English*, 97.

¹² Kelly, *Ada English*, 98.

¹³ Kelly, *Ada English*, 100.

¹⁴ Kelly, *Ada English*, 102.

¹⁵ Kelly, *Ada English*, 105.

the tuberculosis service in Kildare.¹⁶ She grew increasingly concerned about children's health, and spent the remainder of her career as a child welfare pediatrician for Dublin Corporation at the Carnegie Centre in Lord Edward Street.¹⁷

Dr. Eleonora Fleury, another female Irish medical professional, not only used her medical knowledge to treat patients, but she also taught nurses and attendants seeking certification in mental nursing.¹⁸ Her chief medical concerns included population health and well-being and the spread of venereal disease especially in the early portions of the 1900s.¹⁹ She became the first female member of the Medico-Psychological Association in 1894.²⁰ According to Kelly, Fleury "paved the way for future female psychiatrists" and their involvement in the Medico-Psychological Association.²¹

Taken together, Kelly's work illustrates the remarkable achievements of a handful of women, particularly Ada English, who were able to, despite social barriers and resistance placed on them by societal stereotypes, make significant contributions to in their medical disciplines. Most notably, according to Kelly, each woman contributed to significant advancements not only in the study and practice of psychiatry, but also social health and politics as well. Collectively, Kelly's five chapters illuminate the contributions of women, and one in particular, who successfully worked in a "male dominated environment often hostile to female in dependence".²² His work contributes to the history of women in a remarkable way by uncovering the story of a female pioneer in the field of medicine; particularly psychiatry and asylum work. He does a remarkable job of this by utilizing the various historical sources in a unique way to piece together the story of Ada English. Women's history enthusiasts, historians, and medical practitioners interested in the history of their profession will all find this work to be an engaging, informative, narrative of one of the first female doctor's in Ireland's history.

¹⁶ Kelly, *Ada English*, 106.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Kelly, *Ada English*, 110.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Kelly, *Ada English*, 112.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Kelly, *Ada English*, xiii.