

Cecil William Kidd (1902/3–85)

President of the Ulster Medical Society

1962–63

Presidential Opening Address

Ulster Medical Society
18th October 1962

SIR WILLIAM WHITLA
PROFILE OF A BENEFACTOR

It is written in the Bible that we should take time “to praise famous men and our fathers that begat us.” This year – the centenary year of the Ulster Medical Society – seemed an appropriate point of time for such remembrance and reflection. I chose, therefore, the name of one, William Whitla, a past President and benefactor of our Society, as the subject of my address.

On 11th December, 1933, Sir William Whitla died at his home at Lennoxvale. He was in his eighty-third year and had been confined to his room for some four years following a “stroke.”

From being a dominant figure, in the forefront of medical, university, and civic occasions, he had almost disappeared in the last decade of his long life from the contemporary life and social scene of the city. It was indeed almost with a sense of shock that one realised that this extraordinary figure had passed on. In his latter years, when visited by his medical friends, it was clear to them that, always a religious man, he had become absorbed in theological matters. I am told that he was surrounded by books concerned with Holy Writ – in particular with the prophet Daniel – and with works relating to miracles and Biblical prophecy, and on these, rather than on medical subjects, he was always anxious for discussion.

On 13th December, a miserable winter’s day, he was accorded a civic funeral with much pomp and circumstance, attended en route to the City Cemetery with a service at University Road Methodist Church by representatives of Government, university, the medical profession, and many religious organisations.

So ended the long lifetime of an outstanding personality and a most distinguished member of our medical school in his time.

In what follows I will attempt to present to you an outline or profile of his life: first, and quite briefly, as a continuing theme, following, still briefly, with a few episodic considerations relating

to particular facets of his life, and finally I will venture on some assessment of his personality. In the time available to me on this occasion I will not attempt to touch upon the history, local or social, of the times in which he lived. It will remain for a better man than myself, and one with greater knowledge and literary ability, to provide a more worthy and complete biography.

William Whitla was born on 13th September, 1851, at the family home in the Diamond, Monaghan. He was the fourth son of his parents, Robert and Annie Whitla, and was one of a large family, fashionable in those days, of five sons and seven daughters. His father, a man of some affluence in the town, was a pawnbroker and woollen draper who carried on his business in his home in the Diamond and came of a family with roots of over two hundred years’ residence in that locality. His mother, Annie Whitla, was the daughter of Alexander Williams of Dublin.

Monaghan was then, as now, a rather undistinguished county town of some three thousand inhabitants, with agriculture as its main economy. As a community it was recovering slowly, like the rest of Ireland, from the decimating effects of the famine and associated epidemics of the hungry forties. Here William spent his childhood and early youth. He attended the Model School – still an excellent educational establishment. I had hoped to find that he had had a modest scholastic career, but it is a fact that he was a bright boy, distinguishing himself by being awarded a silver medal by the Intermediate Schools Inspector.

On leaving school in 1866, at the age of 15, he was apprenticed to his eldest brother, James, who was already well established as a pharmaceutical chemist with a shop on the Dublin Road, Monaghan – still a chemist’s shop. Here he served his time, as it is called, and learned the rudiments of his profession. It is said that while at this time he was keen and interested in his work he was also restless and unsettled, evidently conscious of the limited horizon presented by this rather dreary country town. It is not surprising, therefore, that two years later he moved to Belfast, where he continued his apprenticeship with the leading firm of dispensing chemists in the city – Messrs. Wheeler & Whittaker, of 37 High Street.

It is evident that around this time he decided

Cecil William Kidd

to make medicine his career, and in 1870, while still employed by Wheeler & Whittaker, he matriculated and embarked on his medical curriculum at Queen's College, Belfast. This transition from pharmacy to medicine was very common in those days, and indeed it continued to be fashionable until relatively recent times. We have had, and still have, many eminent doctors in Northern Ireland who started their professional lives as pharmaceutical chemists. In William Whitla's case there can be no doubt that the impress of his early training never left him, and indeed it clearly influenced his subsequent medical and literary career.

In 1873 he graduated, obtaining the Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Edinburgh. Obviously the medical curriculum of those days was appreciably shorter than in the present time. Indeed it is of interest that, despite the Medical Act of 1858, it was not until 1886 that it became compulsory for anyone wishing to register as a doctor to pass an examination in all three main subjects – medicine, surgery, and obstetrics.

William was now 22 years of age. He had had a successful undergraduate career at Queen's College, being awarded a scholarship in 1872. He was appointed for the year 1873-74 Resident Medical Officer at the Belfast General Hospital, Frederick Street (which received Royal Charter in 1875), and it is said that "he practically revolutionised the work of that Institution." He was apparently at this time attracted to surgery, and for some years assisted Professor Alexander Gordon in his private operations.

It is of interest here to pause briefly to look at the social and hospital situation in Belfast at this period of time.

The town was developing rapidly and the move of population from the land to urban industry had become well established. The population of 87,000 in 1851, the year of Whitla's birth, had more than doubled in twenty years – to 174,412. It is not surprising that the needs of the community for accommodation in the General Hospital were inadequately met with 100 beds, and in 1865 the bed state was increased to 186 by the addition of the Charters and Mulholland Wings. When William Whitla was Resident Medical Officer there were students in attendance and annual admissions of patients were about 1,500. It is of interest too (and it keeps us in perspective) that in this year – 1874 – there is no record of any abdominal surgery.

Indeed the first such record is of two abdominal operations in 1893 with 100 per cent, mortality. The era of Pasteur and, with consequential effects, of Lister was still to come.

Now back to Dr. William Whitla. On completing his year in the General Hospital he apparently sought, like his modern counterparts, to extend his medical education and experience. It would be idle to disguise the fact that there are occasional lacunae in records now available of this part of his life, and his movements in this particular year are shrouded in some mystery. However, I believe he went to England and attended in some capacity St. Thomas' Hospital – then, as now, in the forefront of London medical schools. Here he met Miss Ada Bourne, a daughter of Mr. G. Bourne of Drakenage, Kingsbury, Staffordshire, a well-known farmer of that county. Miss Bourne was herself a remarkable young woman, five years older than William, a friend of Florence Nightingale, and a member – rather to the consternation of her family – of the Salvation Army. She was a Ward Sister in St. Thomas' Hospital and in 1876 she married William Whitla.

They set up house at 41 Great Victoria Street, and commenced general practice. Despite all my efforts I have been unable to obtain a photograph of this house. It was one of a terrace of houses just south of the Great Northern Railway and they were knocked down at the turn of the century to make way for a large factory and a row of shops. However, I *did* find that in his early years in practice he made use of what was called at earlier times Turnpike Cottage and later the Tollhouse, at the end of the Lisburn Road. Here he had a branch surgery, where he saw country folk and others on their way into town. In the following year – 1877 – William obtained his higher qualification – M.D., Queen's University of Ireland, with gold medal and first-class honours and commendation – a veritable M.D. jackpot.

We are told by Dr. Strain that in the same year – 1877 – William was appointed Assistant Physician to the Belfast Charitable Society, which at that time held an important place among the few institutions which provided medical care in the city. This was not a very lucrative appointment, even for those days. He was required to provide all medicines to the house, as well as his medical services, for £40 per annum. He continued to hold this post until 1882, when he became a consultant physician.

About this time he was also appointed to the

Cecil William Kidd

Ulster Hospital for Children and Women, then in premises in Fisherwick Place, where the Ritz Cinema now stands. R. Marshall (1959) writes, "This was William Whitla's first honorary appointment on a hospital staff, for he had not long completed his term of duty as houseman in Frederick Street, and one can imagine the tornado of energy and enthusiasm that swept into Fisherwick Place."

During the next five years he was engaged in a rapidly developing and successful general practice, numbering among his patients many important and influential families, and he soon became an active and dynamic member of the medical community of the city. In this period it became clear to him – and here his pharmaceutical background must have had its influence – that there was no adequate textbook which met the joint needs of medical students, dispensing chemists, and medical practitioners. And so in his spare time he tried his hand at medical authorship and his best selling classic, "Elements of Pharmacy, Materia Medica and Therapeutics," published in 1882, was the result. Of this more anon.

In the same year – 1882 – at the age of 31, he achieved the ambition of many young doctors when he was appointed Physician to the Belfast Royal Hospital, Frederick Street. He was to remain a full member of the visiting staff of this hospital, and later of the Royal Victoria Hospital, until 1918 – thirty-six years in all – eighteen years in both nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

He rapidly and deservedly achieved success as a physician in the hospital. He was an excellent if somewhat dramatic clinical teacher and he attracted large classes of students. However, R. J. Johnston (1940) throws some doubt on his popularity with the students when he writes of the choice of clinical teachers with which he was confronted in the nineties. "In the medical wards we encountered Professor Cuming, the high priest of philosophic doubt who had long since lost any faith he may have ever had in any form of therapeutics, medical or surgical, and who seemed to question whether diagnosis was possible and if possible whether it was convenient. Whitla, on the other hand, was absolute, almost infallible, epigrammatic, paradoxical, sometimes oracular, . . . so the earnest student of clinical medicine usually found his way to the bedside where Jimmy Lindsay taught his students how to use their eyes, their ears, and their fingers...."

He also developed a large and superior

consultant practice, and in 1884 he moved from Great Victoria Street to a more appropriate dwelling at 8 College Square North (a short distance from this institute). This locality could be described as the Harley Street of Belfast at this period, and this large Victorian terrace house provided him with an appropriate if gloomy consulting suite, together with suitable rooms for the entertainment of his guests and the essential coach houses and stabling in the rear – greatly improved accommodation and address for a young and ambitious consultant.

The resignation from the Chair of Materia Medica of Professor Seaton Reid paved the way for Whitla's appointment in 1890 as Professor in Queen's College. It is said that he soon breathed new life into the teaching of this hitherto dry and dull subject. His book was naturally an asset to his teaching and his appointment to the Chair did nothing to diminish its increasing circulation.

In the midst of his busy professional life he was involved in many other important issues at this time, of which I briefly mention two: first, he was active and interested in the idea of an independent Ulster university, and he and his fellow-professors in the medical school lost no opportunity of pressing this point; secondly, he was closely involved with his colleagues, from 1896 on, in the movement to plan and build a general hospital of adequate size and modern facilities for the city. It is of interest too that William, in 1897, expressed marked preference for the Grosvenor Road site rather than the portion of surplus ground in Ormeau Park which was suggested. He had strong views against single-story planning and was many years before his time in appreciating the feasibility of multi-storied hospitals.

Professionally and academically, William Whitla was now on the crest of the wave, and the turn of the century and its opening years see him in the forefront of his profession. For him perhaps no distinction award Bentley car, but, socially and financially, he had proceeded to the opulent carriage class of his day. In a few years' time – 1906 – he was to acquire the delightful place at Lennoxvale, still retaining his professional house at College Square North.

In 1902 he was knighted in the Coronation Honours List – rather unexpectedly to some of his colleagues.

He was now 51 years old – active and energetic, and with a wide variety of extra-curricular interests, some of which I will

Cecil William Kidd

refer to later. He bore himself with dignity and aplomb, and indeed he was almost the inevitable selection of the profession for the presidency of the British Medical Association for the Annual Meeting held in Belfast in 1909. His hospitality on this occasion was notable and he presented each member attending with his recent volumes – “The Theory and Practice of Medicine.”

He was extern examiner at Glasgow, National, and Dublin Universities for many years and degrees were conferred – M.A., M.D., LL.D., and D.Sc. – *honoris causa* by these universities and by his alma mater.

In 1919, the year of his retirement from his chair in the university, he was appointed Honorary Physician to the King in Ireland and subsequently Pro-Chancellor of the University. In the previous year – 1918 – he had retired from his wards in the Royal Victoria Hospital, being appointed consulting physician. This severed his active connection with the hospital of thirty-six years – he was now 67 years old – and he retired too from active practice, giving up his house in College Square North.

All that has gone before has been in the nature of a catalogue of the basic activities and achievements in the professional life of this interesting man. In finalising my profile I will content myself with some brief descriptions of special matters lifted, as it were, out of the sequential chronicle of his life.

I must now touch on the personal, social, and domestic life of William Whitla.

In appearance he was impressive. Stoutly built and bearded, he was 5 ft. 8 in. in height, walked with a limp from osteo-arthritis of a hip, and was striking in his habitual appearance in frock coat and top hat, the professional attire of his day: altogether a distinguished figure of a man, as is apparent in the cartoon by Spy.

Many say he was a simple, kindly man with a saving sense of humour. Others have described him to me as pompous – certainly he had a high opinion of his capabilities. He was skilled in dramatic narrative and had a florid manner of delivery, qualities which he used to great advantage in his clinical teaching, and in addressing meetings, religious, social or political. If he had not taken up medicine he would probably have gone into the Church or on to the dramatic stage. His family were Presbyterians, but early in his married life he and his wife were attracted to the evangelism of the Methodist Church. He was indeed a pillar of Methodism, often preaching in

their churches. For many years he was President of the Y.M.C.A. and he was also closely interested in Jewry, numbering rabbis among his friends.

He and Lady Whitla were essentially hospitable, public-spirited, and philanthropic. They were close friends of General Booth, who frequently stayed with them on visits to Belfast. Both were ardent Shakespearians and were personal friends of Sir Frank and Lady Benson, who on many occasions were their guests at College Square North or Lennoxvale when appearing in Belfast.

I referred earlier to his wife, Ada, who also lived to a ripe old age, predeceasing her husband by eighteen months. All her life she was intensely religious, holding strong evangelical views, and she was a writer of versatility and distinction. I am told by her family (who speak of her as eccentric) that her allegiance to the Salvation Army was such that she wore a scarlet nightgown throughout her life. On the occasion of her attendance with her recently knighted husband at a garden party at Buckingham Palace she resurrected for the occasion her Salvation Army uniform – an implied rebuke or admonition to the reigning sovereign, Edward VII.

Whitla the Traveller.

For his time – in days before study leave, with or without pay and whole or half travelling expenses, had descended on the profession – he was a great traveller. The World Fair at Niztitz-Novgorod (no iron curtain), Palestine, Italy, Sicily, France, and Canada were among the visits he made, and on his adventures he took much pleasure in lecturing to both medical and lay audiences.

In the course of his travels he was an inveterate collector of bric-a-brac and objets d'art, as was the fashion of his day. He filled his houses with pictures, some good and some not so good, and some very ornate statuary. A number of these pieces were over-large to be housed either in his home or in the Medical Institute, and we find an example in the foyer of the Museum and Art Gallery, Stranmillis. This large representation of Galileo in white marble by Pio Fedi shows him seated in contemplation. It is a beautiful piece of statuary, and it was given by Whitla to the Ulster Medical Society. Finding it over-large and weighty to accommodate in the institute, they presented it to the Museum and Art Gallery.

His Political Life.

From early times Whitla was obviously a useful

Cecil William Kidd

addition to any political platform. He was surprisingly a strong Unionist. One might have imagined him as a Liberal Home Ruler, but no. He signed covenants and he was a member of the abortive Irish Convention of 1917-18.

In December, 1918, he was elected as the first representative of Queen's University in the Imperial Parliament, Westminster, with a large majority. His re-election in November, 1922, was unopposed and he retired in 1923.

His family say that his contributions from the floor of the House were rare and infrequent – indeed some doubt if he made his maiden speech. In his defence one could say that then, as now, the opportunities for useful intervention by Northern Ireland representatives in that House are few. However, it is said that he attended well and was often to be seen in the smoke-room, surrounded by his friends.

Whitla the Medical Author.

I made mention earlier of Whitla's proverbial energy and the wide variety of interests in his busy professional life. It is said by colleagues that when engaged in writing his books he often worked eighteen hours per day for long periods.

In 1882 his "Elements of Pharmacy, Materia Medica, and Therapeutics" was published, and it rapidly became a best seller. It was indeed a classic, one of a select group of medical text books, and it had a readymade public – doctors, pharmacists, and medical students. The style now appears to us old fashioned – even the illustrations of the pharmacist's tools, pestle and mortar and the like – and the writing seems florid and pompous, but it was in tune with its period.

This book had a considerable and continuing sale, went to twelve editions, and appeared in several languages. The last edition appeared in 1939, revised by Whitla's old friend, Professor Gunn. It was a notable financial success among medical books of this or any other time.

Next, in 1891, was published the "Dictionary of Treatment," which too became one of the outstanding medical text books of its time. It was an immediate success – another best seller – and was published in many languages; and it had an American and a Chinese edition. In a way this dictionary type of a book was a natural sequel to Whitla's first book, and he often said he was pressed into writing it by his friends and colleagues.

The first three editions were entirely the product of his fluent pen, and for the next four he

obtained the direct collaboration of a variety of his colleagues, including A. B. Mitchell, Cecil Shaw, and R. J. Johnston.

In 1923 was published the seventh edition, – Whitla's last – and happily this work has remained with our medical school. Before his death Sir William sought out Dr. Sydney Allison and entrusted him with the task of continuing the book, and so, in 1938, five years after his death, the eighth edition was published. In the formidable task of rewriting and rearranging the text, Dr. Allison had Mr. Cecil Calvert as surgical author, and they had ten colleagues as special contributors.

In the ninth edition, published in 1957, Dr. Allison was joined by Dr. Howard Crozier and they enlisted some twenty-six contributors, all members of the Belfast Medical School.

Whitla used to tell the story of how he put the first manuscript of this book aside during a busy period in his practice; when later he looked over it he thought so badly of both style and material that he instructed his servant to burn the lot in the furnace of a factory behind his house. By chance the factory happened to be closed on that day, so the papers were stacked in the coach house where Whitla later found them. He re-read his script, felt this time that it was good, and so resumed his labours with enthusiasm.

Finally, in the medical field, Whitla published, in 1908, "The Theory and Practice of Medicine," in two volumes. This text book of medicine was an early example of the synopsis type, providing in condensed form a series of independent articles on a wide variety of medical conditions. Reviewers considered it to be a valuable source of reference, though it was noted that there was a certain amount of repetition from his other two text books.

It is sad to relate that, by comparison with his earlier successes, this book was a flop. However, two best sellers in the lifetime of one man is a great achievement. While he cannot, as some people over the years have surmised, have made a fortune from his books, he certainly laid the foundations to his undoubted wealth by the steady, virtually untaxed income from this source from 1882 onwards.

This note on his writings would be incomplete without mention of his excursion into another field. In 1922 he published the result of many years' Biblical study – a volume on Sir Isaac Newton's "Daniel and the Apocalypse." Biblical prophecy and miracles held a great fascination for

Cecil William Kidd

him, and in this volume he contributed much original thought and even translated Newton's Latin quotations into English.

Whitla the Benefactor.

First we must accept that for a doctor living in his times he was a wealthy man. From his early days he displayed shrewdness and business acumen uncommon in members of our profession. The income from his books, his practice, and from private sources made him probably the wealthiest professor at Queen's, and much of his wealth ultimately came to the University. His stockbroker was quick to appreciate that he had almost uncanny foresight in his Stock Exchange activities. Many are the stories of the "killing" he made in oil shares when most of his contemporaries were cautiously buying Consuls or Co. Down Railway shares. In his case success led to success, and by the turn of the century he was comfortably off; by the time of his retirement he was wealthy by any standards.

On his death he bequeathed his pleasant house at Lennoxvale and its extensive grounds to the University as an official residence for the Vice-Chancellor. After many personal and private bequests he made the University his residuary legatee and in his will suggested that about £35,000 should be used to provide either an assembly hall or a men's hostel. After much delay the Senate decided in 1935 to build an assembly hall in the south-west corner of the grounds. It was not until 1939 that the foundation stone was laid by the Marquis of Londonderry, then Chancellor of the University. In 1942 the building was completed except for internal fittings, and it was immediately requisitioned by the Ministry of Commerce. At length, in 1949, the Sir William Whitla Hall, finally completed and furnished, was opened by Sir Henry Dale. It is of passing interest to note how well this simple functional style building blends with Lanyon's Tudor Gothic, and how well and surprisingly the new physics building integrates into the red brick picture. This is William Whitla's outstanding monument. It is worth noting that financial help in the form of private benefactions has never been forthcoming on any large scale in the history of the college or University. The Musgrave and White bequests are outstanding exceptions – the only other bequest on a similar scale is William Whitla's. The landed gentry and industrialists of our Province, unlike their counterparts in Great Britain, have done little for the University.

Next, the Whitla Hall at Methodist College, Belfast. This fine building was built as an assembly hall and was opened by Lord Craigavon in December, 1935. Sir William had been a governor of the college for twenty-seven years at the time of his death and he bequeathed £10,000, free of duty, for this specific purpose.

Finally, we come nearer home and look briefly at his benefactions to our profession.

The earliest gift I can find is his presentation of the Good Samaritan stained-glass window to the old Royal Hospital, Frederick Street, in 1887. This beautiful window was removed to the out-patients' waiting hall of the Royal Victoria Hospital of 1903, and much more recently was transferred to its present site at the end of the hospital corridor.

Next I must refer to the Ulster Medical Society, whose story, in this century, is so closely linked to this building. It was formed one hundred years ago – in April, 1862 – by the amalgamation of two earlier bodies: the Belfast Medical Society and the Belfast Clinical and Pathological Society; and the first president was Professor J. C. Ferguson, who held the Chair of Medicine in Queen's College. Meetings were held in a variety of suitable and unsuitable places – rented rooms in High Street and Lombard Street, the General Hospital and the Museum in College Square North, next door to Whitla's house. I may say that Whitla was an enthusiastic member of the Society from his early days in the profession and he was Honorary Secretary in 1876, Honorary Treasurer in 1883, and President first in 1886 and later in 1901. It was clear to him that if the Ulster Medical Society was to prosper it must have a permanent home. And so, on a site of fifty feet frontage, at an annual ground rent of £60 from the Royal Belfast Academical Institution, this building was erected. The foundation stone was laid by Dr. Peter Redfern in April, 1902, and the building was declared open by the Earl of Dudley, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, on 26th November, 1902. It was handed over by the donor, furnished and equipped, including billiards table, to seven Fellows of the Society as trustees. The cost was in excess of £6,000 (some say £8,000), which was high in those days when the Samaritan and Benn Hospitals had been built for around £3,000 each.

This building was not unnaturally William Whitla's pride and joy – his busts, oil paintings, well-carved heads representing Redfern, Gordon, Andrews, and McCormick, the stained-glass window in the library commemorating the bravery

Cecil William Kidd

of Dr. William Smyth and Brendan McCarthy, and the staircase window from his own home in College Square North, representing a scene from "As You Like It," in which William himself appears as Corin – all this is part of the history of our profession and perhaps a last bastion of Victorian medicine.

It would be idle to disguise the fact that the Society, in relation to its home – this institute, has not been without its financial crises. Indeed I may say we are involved in one at the present time. For my part – and I am sure I must speak for many of my age – I regard this building as part of our professional heritage. Nevertheless, realism and common sense and an appreciation of the changing scene must be our guide and our responsibility to those who succeed us.

Lastly, as I said earlier, Sir William was President of the British Medical Association for the year of its visit to Belfast in 1909. For this occasion he was presented by his friends with a Presidential Badge and chain of office in gold and enamel. This he subsequently entrusted to the annual care of the President of your Society.

And so as we started with this chain of office so do I end this inadequate and incomplete chronicle of William Whitla, but not before I have attempted to make some assessment of his personality.

Robert Louis Stevenson writes – "There are men and classes of men who stand above the common herd" – certainly William Whitla did. I think he was a product of his day and age – a successful Victorian physician, pompous and self-opinionated with a good conceit of himself, dramatic, eloquent, of considerable histrionic ability and power, an opportunist, a very able business man, and a truly prolific worker. He denounced tobacco and alcohol in his writings, but enjoyed his pipe and his wines, and was an excellent host. All these are impressions I have gained from his friends still alive. Truth to tell, I have literally lived with him for some months past.

I am dismayed to find that, even now, I am unable to offer a definitive opinion, but then my target was a profile of the man.

Dr. Robert Marshall was asked – and with his great gifts he is so often turned to on such occasions – to suggest a suitable and adequate inscription for a memorial tablet to Sir William in his old wards in the Royal Victoria Hospital. He suggested words from the fourth verse of the first chapter of the Book of Daniel, and they are to be

found on the tablet in the entrance to Ward 2:

"Skilful in all wisdom, cunning in knowledge and understanding science."

I am convinced now, at the end of my journey, that William Whitla, the apothecary's apprentice from Monaghan, who achieved fame and fortune in our medical community, watching from the shades as he has indeed watched over my shoulder all evening, would have accepted this quotation with his benign approval.