

Martha's War

A Woman Doctor in Worcester and Beyond



This booklet tells the story of Dr Martha Jane Moody Stewart's First World War. Martha was one of a generation of women whose intelligence and medical skill had formerly been shunned. Born in Ireland, we follow Martha to university and discover that her appointment at Worcester Infirmary was a stepping stone to a career which crossed cities, war zones and continents.

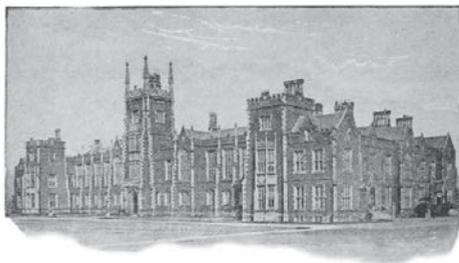
Women Doctors in Britain before 1914

In 1859, Dr Elizabeth Blackwell slipped under the net to become the first female to appear on the British Medical Register, but she did not qualify as a physician in Britain. In fact, women were barred from studying at university in Britain simply because they were women.

The 1860s witnessed a push against prejudice. Elizabeth Garrett Anderson became the second woman listed in the Medical Register after qualifying at Apothecaries Hall, London, which then swiftly closed the loophole that permitted access to women. After Sophia Jex-Blake persuaded the University of Edinburgh to enrol her on a medical degree, she was joined by six other females. So upset were male students about sharing classes with women, that in 1870 they rioted!

An 1876 amendment to the law enabled women with foreign qualifications to be placed on the Register. This weakened the case preventing females from studying medicine at university. Gradually, higher education sites opened their medical degrees to women, with Oxford and Cambridge the last to set aside their objections in 1916 and 1917.

In between, Ireland was at the vanguard. The treatment of female and male medical students by Irish universities was relatively even-handed, which put women trained in Ireland at a distinct advantage to their English counterparts.



Queens University Belfast received its first female medical student in 1888. Classes ran six days a week and took in both university teaching and clinical experience – the latter was in contrast to training in England, where many teaching hospitals refused entry to women medical students.



Q: If a course or qualification was closed to you because of your gender, how would you get the training you needed?

Martha's Background

On 5 February 1884, Martha Jane Moody Stewart was born in County Donegal, in what is now the Republic of Ireland. She was the third daughter of ten children born to Sarah Ann and William John Stewart. William was a Wesleyan Methodist, a landowner-farmer, and an erstwhile magistrate.

Martha went to Victoria High School in Londonderry, which was about half-an-hour away from her home. In 1903 she was undertaking a 'Teachership in Training', and she won a three-year degree scholarship, as part of which she attended the Royal College of Science in Dublin.

In 1908, she enrolled at Queens University Belfast (QUB), where she studied Anatomy, Physiology, Pathology, Hygiene, Pharmacology and Medicine. In 1914,



Marion Braidfoot Andrews went to Kidderminster High School and received her medical qualifications from QUB. After distinguished First World War service, she was Medical Inspector for Schools in Worcestershire, 1922-36.

Martha helped qualified doctors Ella Webb and Marion Braidfoot Andrews run training courses for 'Domestic Economy Instructresses' and district nurses in 'further practical knowledge of the laws of health and home nursing', which they could in turn pass on to others.

The medical journal, *The Lancet* noted on 30 January 1915 that Martha had passed her Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery, and Bachelor of Obstetrics examinations. She was one of the first 100 women ever to have done so in Ireland. On the eve of her 31st birthday, she was a fully-qualified doctor.

Excerpt from 1903/4 student register from Dublin, showing Martha Stewart's entry.



Q: How long and hard would you fight to make it? Do you think thirteen years in-and-out of higher education was worthwhile?

INDEX REGISTER OF PAYMENTS BY STUDENTS,					SCHOOL OF ART, for the Session 1903-1904.																								
Class No.	No. in Register.	NAME	Age of Student.	ADDRESS	OCTOBER.			NOVEMBER.			DECEMBER.			JANUARY.		FEBRUARY.		MARCH.		APRIL.		MAY.		JUNE.		JULY.		Total Months.	
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17	78 06	Smith, William	18	11, St. Columba's Rd. Dublin	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6
23	77 31	William, David Dr.	18	51, St. Dunlop's Square	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6	2 10 6
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Worcester Infirmary and its First Female Doctor

The Infirmary as an institution was around 170 years old when the First World War began in 1914. It had been struggling financially for some time; cuts had been made. In December 1913 alone, four applicants for the now only Resident Medical Officer (RMO) failed to turn up for interview, or else withdrew. Dr J. S. Davidson was eventually appointed, but ten days after hostilities began he requested leave to join the Royal Army Medical Corps. His successor, Dr F. L. Spalding, was in post for only three weeks before he resigned to take up private practice.

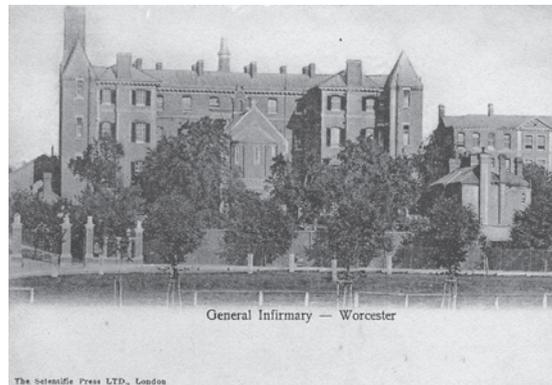
The position of RMO was advertised for over three months without success. *'Unavailing efforts were made'* by the hospital authorities to find a man for the RMO job. Finally, they *'decided to throw the post open to women doctors'*. Newly-qualified Martha Stewart applied, was offered an interview, and was appointed on the spot on 1 February 1915.

The post of RMO was difficult. Martha carried out the orders of senior staff, managed the humdrum medical work, and did morning ward rounds. She was also on-call 24 hours a day at a hospital where patient numbers had increased to over 100, as 50 beds had been offered for

the use of the War Office. Moreover, when Dispenser and Clinical Assistant Mr James Allport went on holiday in April, Martha also had to cover for him.

Shortly after Allport returned, the senior medical staff felt that Martha should not stay. It is not clear what had happened, but within two weeks she resigned and then left in June 1915. Nevertheless, Martha had opened the door for other women; Infirmary officials decided her successor could be male or female.

However, the war was offering so-called 'lady doctors' more opportunities. After yet another round of applications, and interview non-attendances and withdrawals, Allport – who had resigned to join the army, been refused on fitness grounds, and then asked to return to his old job – was offered and took the position of Acting RMO until the end of the war.



Worcester Infirmary from Pitchcroft Racecourse, c1900.

The Serbian Relief Fund (SRF): Martha in the Balkans

The Balkans region was already destabilised by violence, when in June 1914 Archduke Ferdinand's assassination by Serb nationalists sparked war in Europe, in which Serbia became a British ally. The SRF was founded in September 1914 to provide medical aid to Serb forces, swiftly expanding to civilians and prisoners of war. Under its auspices operated several female-staffed units, including that headed by Mabel St Clair Stobart.

Stobart had earlier pioneered women-only overseas medical aid units. In April 1915, she established a tented hospital at Kragujevatz city, Serbia. Alongside other measures to stem the spread of a savage typhus epidemic, from which many foreign medical staff had already died, Stobart set up a string of roadside dispensaries outside urban centres.

Stobart's unit had just lost two female associates to typhus, when in August Dr Martha Stewart left England with its final contingent of staff. On 4 September,

Martha established a dispensary at Rekovatz. 'Dr Stewart was the ideal woman for the work', Stobart later wrote, with her 'professional skill... sense of humour, patience and enthusiasm'.

That first evening, Martha was called out to a woman with double pneumonia. The relatives 'in chorus promised that' if the woman recovered 'they would give the doctor... a fat pig. The fat pig was earned... and presents of all kinds were received... from grateful patients'!

Serbia was invaded in mid-October. With winter coming, Serb forces fled, accompanied by civilians and many SRF staff, including Stobart's unit. In atrocious conditions, Martha and her comrades – including her sister, Isabella Maud Ross Stewart, who had joined the SRF in September 1915 – made their escape across the Albanian mountains. Around them, thousands of Serbs perished. Martha was lucky. She arrived home just in time for Christmas.





Dr Martha Stewart (furthest right) in uniform and on her journey between Britain and Serbia

'Mrs St Clair Stobart leading her column of medical staff [including Martha] through the snow near Roshai during the Serbian Army's retreat through the Albanian mountains on 7 December 1915.'



Birmingham Maternity Hospital: Martha in the Midlands

Birmingham Lying-In Charity was established in 1842. Its progress reflected the character of the city as a whole. Birmingham had a tradition of innovation. It was Liberal in its politics, and often Nonconformist in its religions. By the twentieth century, Birmingham was being transformed by municipal reform, and in 1907 the Charity's new Maternity Hospital opened with 2 labour wards and 24 longer-stay beds.

How Dr Martha Stewart came to be appointed as House Surgeon to the Maternity Hospital is unclear, though perhaps she had made connections through the Serbian Relief Fund's Birmingham group, which included senior medics. However Martha came to be at the facility, she arrived soon after 4 April 1916.

Her position corresponded to that of Worcester's Resident Medical Officer. Martha lived on-site, ensured the orders of higher-ranking staff were carried out, and kept patient notes, the hospital inventory and all paperwork up-to-date. She also personally reported to meetings of the House Committee, which was comprised of senior employees, and women from important Birmingham families – such as the Chamberlains and Cadburys – who freely lent their time and support to the running of the Hospital.



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Contemporary image of maternity ward corridor.

Martha also visited in-patients every morning, new arrivals in the evenings, and serious cases as and when required. Even a maternity hospital was not left untouched by war. Some of her patients may have been from the small but significant Birmingham community of Belgian refugees.

Martha was only supposed to work at the Hospital for a short time, but she was asked to stay until August 1916, when a longer-term appointment was due to begin. Presumably, Birmingham was supposed to be a stopgap before her next adventure began...



Q: How would you have felt starting work in a new place, far from home, and only three months after you were fleeing for your life?

The Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC): Martha on Malta and in Salonika

The British War Office refused to accept women doctors – at least until several female-staffed initiatives (including the Serbian Relief Fund) had proved successful and the armed forces needed more physicians.

Dr Louisa Aldrich-Blake, one of Britain's most senior women surgeons and medical educators, issued an appeal on behalf of the War Office to female physicians. On 8 August 1916, 22 lady doctors left for Malta. The island was nicknamed the 'Nurse of the Mediterranean': At its peak that year, Malta was caring for soldiers on new battlefronts (including in support of Serbia) in 27 hospitals!

When sixteen more women set sail from Southampton on 12 August to join the Women's Medical Unit RAMC, Dr Martha Stewart was among them. There seems to be some suggestion that Martha was stationed at the thousand-bed Spinola Hospital, a three-storey seventeenth-century building (and former palace) with gardens.

Once the threat of submarine attacks on Malta-bound ships became too great, much medical care moved to Salonika, Greece, as did Martha, who arrived there on 1 June 1917.

While the War Office had permitted lady doctors, that did not mean they were accepted. Unlike men, they were

considered civilians attached to and not part of the RAMC. This meant that women physicians like Martha were not permitted a rank, uniform, or the same supplementary perks as their male equivalents, and therefore were often given less respect by staff and patients. The unequal treatment of female doctors was an increasing source of tension. Even so, Martha stayed working in Salonika until 31 August 1918.



A woman, perhaps a 'lady doctor', with 'British stretcher cases on a motor lighter in Salonika harbour awaiting transfer to a hospital ship, 1916.'

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Ministry of Information First World War Official Collection, Ariel Vargas



Q: Imagine if you had been through all this – years of medical training, difficult posts, and harsh wartime experiences – and answered the call to help the nation, only to find you were not treated as equal; what would you have done in Martha's position?

Life after War: Martha in South Africa

The guns of the First World War fell silent on 11 November 1918. As most other Britons who served, Dr Martha Stewart received the Victory and British War Medals – but she was also awarded The Order of St Sava by the King of Serbia, and received the Albanian Commemorative Medal to mark the 1915 mountain escape.

Numerous doctors, male and female, returned home looking for work. Women physicians again found themselves sidelined, with employers privileging men. Martha briefly set up a private practice in London, and in 1919 married 25-year-old Brighton bank clerk (later manager) Clement Campbell Webb. While Martha's address was listed as Donegal in the 1923 Medical Register, the pair emigrated to South Africa. The couple made a good life in Pretoria and Johannesburg and had two daughters.

Dr Martha Jane Moody Stewart-Webb continued to practise medicine and was Chair of the Nutrition Voluntary Council. Her work carried with it echoes of her past. On the eve of apartheid, which would scar the second half of South Africa's twentieth century, she offered nutrition classes to black residents and she

lobbied for affordable supplements, as well as for vitamin additions to the Red Cross parcels sent to Prisoners of War during the Second World War.

Martha died aged 82 on 20 October 1965. Her *British Medical Journal* obituary remarked that she 'was a skilful and sympathetic doctor and a highly respected citizen of Johannesburg. She will be missed by many friends and patients'.



© Family of Martha Jane Moody Stewart-Webb

Martha and her husband (on the right) at a family event in 1950



Acknowledgements and Key References

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Websites: Ancestry.co.uk; British Army Medical Services and the Malta Garrison, 1799–1979 <http://www.maltaramc.com/index.html>. Sincere thanks to its author, Walter Bonnici; Historical Papers Research Archive, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg <http://www.historicalpapers.wits.ac.za/?digital/U/>; Imperial War Museum Online Collections <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections>.

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