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psychiatry
100 years ago

Dr Ada English (1875–1944): doctor, patriot, politician

Brendan D. Kelly



Staff at Ballinasloe District Asylum with Dr Ada English at the front centre (circa 1917). Image courtesy of Mr Mattie Ganly.

Dr Adeline (Ada) English was a pioneering asylum doctor, patriot and nationalist politician who lived one of the most remarkable lives of any doctor in 20th-century Ireland.

English was born in 1875 and grew up in Mullingar, County Westmeath, where her father was a pharmacist and town commissioner. English attended the Catholic University School of Medicine in Dublin and graduated from the Royal University in 1903 as part of the first generation of female medical graduates in Ireland.

She worked for short periods at the Mater Misericordiae Hospital, Richmond Asylum and Temple Street Hospital in Dublin, before becoming assistant resident medical superintendent at Connaught District Lunatic Asylum in Ballinasloe, County Galway. This vast institution in the west of Ireland had 1293 patients when English arrived in September 1904. Over the following decades, this number increased to almost two thousand.

English had strongly nationalist political views, and on arrival in Ballinasloe had the image of Queen Victoria replaced by the Galway Arms on the buttons of staff uniforms. Over four subsequent decades, English oversaw early forms of occupational therapy, including horticulture and farming, and was particularly keen that patients have weekly trips to the cinema in Ballinasloe (when the hospital's own cinema projector was broken). This period also saw one of the first recorded uses of convulsive therapy in Ireland, with the introduction of cardiazol in Ballinasloe in December 1939.

During this period, Ireland was still part of the UK, and English was an active member of the Irish Volunteers and Cumann na mBan, two nationalist organisations. She was tutored in Irish by Pádraig Pearse, an Irish poet, patriot and one of the leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising.

During the War of Independence (1919–1921), English was arrested by the British at the Ballinasloe asylum, tried by court martial and sentenced to 9 months' imprisonment without hard labour for possession of nationalist literature. She was released from Galway gaol after 6 months, owing to ptomaine poisoning (food poisoning). While in prison, English was elected to Dáil Éireann (Irish parliament, 1921–1922) in which she opposed the Anglo-Irish Treaty (1921), a negotiated settlement intended to create an Irish 'Free State' as a self-governing dominion within the Commonwealth (i.e. still requiring that members of parliament take an oath to the British monarch) and remove British forces from Ireland (with the exception of Northern Ireland). English saw the Treaty as a complete 'moral surrender'.

Like many anti-Treaty figures, English lost her seat in parliament in June 1922 and supported the anti-Treaty side in the Irish Civil War (1922–1923). Following defeat, English devoted most of her attention to medical work rather than politics. She died in Ballinasloe in January 1944.

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