

Obituary of Dr Joyce Delaney



Dr. Joyce Delaney died on December 9th, 2022, following a short illness. Ever herself, ever unbowed, she went out on her own terms. Having been brought into hospital with a fever, she elected to check herself out, preferring to return to her own home, where she passed away peacefully the following day in the company of family.

Born in Dublin in 1925 to Mrs Hannah Delaney and Dr. P.J. Delaney, a former Secretary of the Irish Medical Association, it may seem in retrospect that she was destined for a medical career. But that was not so. An intrepid spirit, she chafed against the strictures of her convent education, and the 'guerilla warfare', as she put it, between her and the nuns. 'You think that life should be spent sitting in an armchair reading a novel, with a box of chocolates at your elbow,' the Reverend Mother told her during one acrimonious encounter. After leaving school, she was somewhat at a loss for what to do. Dentistry was discounted ('the thought of gaping into people's mouths appalled me'), as was the law ('the legal people I had known tended to become as desiccated as their briefs'), which – in the middle-class, professional milieu in which she was raised – left only medicine.

She trained at University College Dublin, graduating in 1944. After a brief stint as an intern at St. Vincent's hospital, she went abroad to England to work, first as a General Practitioner in Liverpool, then to a psychiatric hospital in Wales, a position she took up on the promise that the food was always excellent in mental hospitals. 'It was my stomach that gave me

the incentive to start psychiatry', she would later write. Though this would be the field in which she specialised, her thirst for adventure was such that she left after a year to join the British Merchant Navy, becoming one of the first female ship's doctors, serving as surgeon onboard the SS *Daphne* on its voyage from Liverpool to Hong Kong. She returned to the far East soon after as part of the colonial service, working in a psychiatric hospital in Singapore. It was here that she met her husband. Following a short marriage, she returned to England, where she gave birth to her only son, Donald.

It was during this time that she decided to devote herself fully to psychiatry, studying for the Diploma in Psychiatric Medicine while working at Osbourne Mental Hospital and simultaneously raising her young son. It was the ideal specialism for Joyce, who was always fascinated by people and had a wonderful ability to take them as they were without judgement or condescension. The work had a redemptive quality for her, as she would later write:

When she had gone and the young nurse brought me tea, I ruminated on what had passed between Mrs Spencer and myself. Here was I, a washed-up failure, as I'd thought, and yet by simply sitting and understanding I had helped somebody infinitely more troubled than myself. It was a moment of illumination. I remember looking out of the window at the sudden burst of winter sunshine and feeling a little jet of a very long-forgotten emotion: happiness.

Psychiatry became her passion, but writing was always so. It was something she practised every day of her adult life. Her experience as a doctor furnished her with enough material for five books, as well as many articles for this journal and others. For those she leaves behind, these are a treasure trove to which they will turn for a reminder of her wit and wisdom, and her steadfast refusal to be anything other than herself.

In her retirement, she returned to Ireland, settling in Sandymount, Dublin. Here she lived out the remainder of her years in a manner very like what Mother Aloysius had described, except more often than not with a glass of gin and tonic added into the bargain.

She leaves behind a son, five grandchildren, two siblings, Niall and Miriam, and an extended family of nieces and nephews. She will be missed for her sharp intellect and her forthright nature, which remained undimmed even in her later years.

Obituary by Charlie Galbraith, grandson of Dr Joyce Delaney