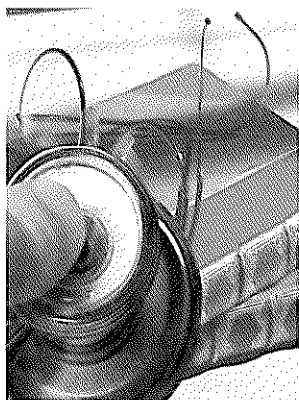


Female pioneers



Book reviewed by Dr Brendan Kelly

Lab Coats and Lace: The Lives and Legacies of Inspiring Irish Women Scientists and Pioneers

Edited by Mary Mulvihill

Dublin: Women in Technology and Science (2009)

Lab Coats and Lace is a unique and remarkable book, devoted to the stories and achievements of women who, over the past 150 years, overcame all kinds of barriers and prejudices to achieve national and international recognition as scientists and pioneers in various different fields. The back cover of this excellent volume suggests that “from 19th century amateurs to 20th century professors, their lives and legacies will inspire you”. This is perfectly true: No thinking reader could possibly remain unimpressed by the stories of brilliance presented here, and only a stone would be unmoved by the tenacity demonstrated by these remarkable scientists who often worked in difficult, unwelcoming circumstances.

Before proceeding further, however, I must declare an interest. The editor of this volume was kind enough to invite me and a colleague to submit a 100-word contribution about a pioneering psychiatrist, Dr Adeline (Ada) English (1873-1944), whose life we are currently researching. Our brief contribution about Dr English duly appears in *Lab Coats and Lace* and, while I was not involved with this book in any other way, I must admit that my modest involvement might have biased me in favour of this book. If so, I apologise in advance.

Diversity of themes and accomplishments

Leaving our contribution to one side, the diversity of themes and accomplishments documented in *Lab Coats and Lace* is truly

astonishing. Dr Patricia Phillips, for example, outlines the life and work of Mrs Anne Jellicoe (1823-1880), a Quaker philanthropist and social campaigner, who established the first vocational training college for women in Ireland or Britain.

Dr Patrick N Wyse Jackson looks at the contributions that various women have made to the study of geology in Ireland, including Sydney Mary Thompson (1847-1923), Mary K Andrews (1852-1914), Doris Livesley Reynolds (1899-1985) and Veronica Conroy Burns (1914-1998), who assembled an important collection of fossil graptolites.

One of the most fascinating chapters is contributed by Prof Des MacHale and Anne MacLellan, and examines the lives and myriad accomplishments of “the fabulous Boole sisters”. These included Alicia Boole Stott (1860-1940), a self-taught mathematician, Lucy Boole (1862-1905), the first female professor of chemistry in Britain, and Ethel Lilian Voynich (1864-1960), a best-selling novelist and revolutionary. This chapter, like the others, is brought further to life by the inclusion of striking photographs of the women concerned and various illustrations of diverse aspects of their lives and work.

Revolutionary doctors

From a medical perspective, the chapter on “Revolutionary doctors” by Anne MacLellan is of particular interest. This chapter focuses on three women doctors who made substantial contributions to public health in Ireland: Dr Kathleen Lynn

(1874-1955), who co-founded Ireland’s first hospital dedicated to infants; Dorothy Stopford Price (1890-1954), who introduced the tuberculosis BCG vaccination to this country; and Brigid Lyons Thornton (1896-1987), who was a specialist in public health medicine. The stories of these remarkable women are all intertwined in various ways with the tumultuous political events of early 20th century Ireland, and this account of their lives and work provides a vivid, engrossing picture of both their achievements and the dramatic political context in which they lived and worked.

There are far too many other fascinating contributions to mention them all individually, but it is worth singling out the chapter by Dr Máire Brück (1925-2008), to whom the book is dedicated. Dr Brück’s contribution focuses on a number of pioneering women astronomers, including Annie Dill Russell (1868-1947), an expert in solar eclipses and sunspots, and Alice Everett (1865-1949), a celebrated physicist who also invented equipment for early television technology.

The chapter by Seán Duke (joint editor and co-founder of *Science Spin*) is similarly memorable, looking at the life and work of Prof Carmel Humphries (1909-1986), the first woman professor of zoology at University College Dublin and an inspiration for a generation of zoologists. The story of this outstanding scientist, as with so many others discussed in this book, is truly fascinating, and, like the others, her achievements remain quite remarkable today.

Women in Technology and Science (WITS)

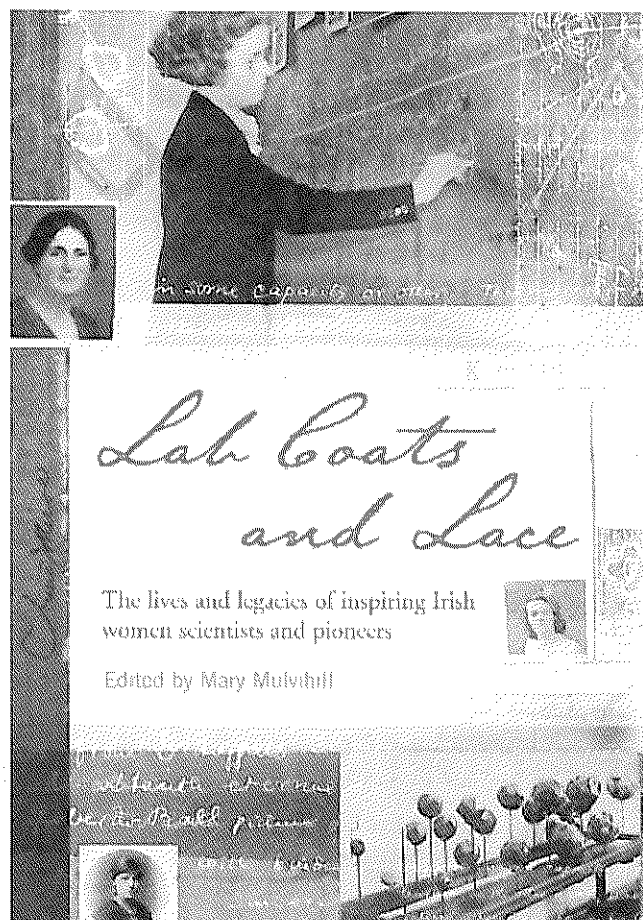
Lab Coats and Lace is published by WITS (Women in Technology and Science), which is an association inaugurated in 1990 with the aim of actively promoting women in technology and science in Ireland. The association’s patron is the current President of Ireland, Mary McAleese, and the association’s current major project is Re-Enter – an all-Ireland initiative to support women going back to careers in science, engineering and technology, in association with both the Open University and InterTrade-Ireland (www.witsireland.com). *Lab Coats and Lace* is edited by Mary Mulvihill, an award-winning science writer and broadcaster, who has previously edited a companion volume, entitled *Stars, Shells and Bluebells* (WITS, 1997). Mary Mulvihill’s own books include *Ingenious Ireland* (2002) and *Drive like a Woman, Shop like a Man* (2009), which is a guide to green living.

The publication of *Lab Coats and Lace* was sponsored by the Department of Education and

Science, and by Discover Science & Engineering (DSE), with additional support from the Institute of Physics in Ireland and Biotrin. It is particularly gratifying to read in the preface that the support of the Department of Education and Science has ensured that a copy of this excellent book will be sent to every second level school in Ireland.

In these turbulent times of public sector spending cuts and growing economic difficulty, it is more important than ever that the Government takes a long-term view of investment in education: The dissemination of books such as *Lab Coats and Lace* throughout our education system cannot fail to inspire a steady stream of extraordinary individuals, such as those discussed in this book, who will surely help to secure the future of Irish science and technology for many decades to come.

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