

# Doctor Attracta Genevieve Rewcastle OBE

## CWL National President 1936-1939

**In the almost 110 years of the history of the Catholic Women's League there have been many dynamic National Presidents, some of whom held the office for many years. One such President was Doctor Genevieve Rewcastle.**

On Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1938 an estimated 10,000 Catholic women from Canada, Australia, South Africa, New Zealand, Ceylon and Malta filled the Albert Hall, attending a rally organised by the Catholic Women's League of England and Wales. In the presence of Cardinal Hinsley, the Archbishop of Liverpool, the Bishop of Achonry in Ireland and other members of the Hierarchy, they heard the National President of the CWL, Doctor Genevieve Rewcastle, explain that the object of the rally was to profess publicly their interest in the physical, mental and moral needs of their peoples and to hold up the traditional Christian ideals of British manhood and womanhood to the younger generation. Attracta Genevieve nee Candon was born in 1897 in the county of Roscommon in Ireland, in the small town of Ballaghedeeren. She was the third of six daughters and one son of Bartholomew and Winifred Condon, who lived at 10 Main Street, at the time of the 1911 census. Her upbringing was decidedly very Catholic. In 1860 the large Church with a clock and very tall steeple, in this small town, was dedicated as the Cathedral for the Diocese of Achonry. There were Catholic schools aplenty in the area, many run by teaching orders of nuns who fostered a sense of vocation in young women and also encouraged them to pursue educational goals and university education. At this time Southern Ireland was still part of the United Kingdom; the United Kingdom Enabling Act of 1876 allowed women to become medical students. However, the Irish Medical Institutions of the 1880s to the 1920s were more open to the idea of women studying medicine. As a result Genevieve decided to study at Queen's College Galway where she matriculated in 1915-16 and later graduated M.B. BCh.

BAO (Bachelor of Obstetrics,) from the National University, Dublin, in 1921. After being House Physician at St. Ultan's hospital in Dublin she applied for and was appointed Assistant School Medical Officer in Sheffield. In 1926 she married Cuthbert S. Rewcastle KC and they had three children. By 1931 Dr. Genevieve was in private practice but also working part time in the Great Ormond Street Hospital for Sick Children as personal clinical assistant to Doctor Donald Paterson. He was Canadian and something of a pioneer in treating children suffering from coeliac disease. At the Annual Council and Conference of the Catholic Women's League, held in Liverpool from 21<sup>st</sup> – 24<sup>th</sup> October 1936, the Archbishop of Liverpool opened the Conference speaking on Phases of Catholic Citizenship. Dr. Rewcastle in her Presidential address stressed the two points – 'the need for a strong well-informed Catholic public opinion and the duty of Catholics to take their full share in the responsibility of administration by standing for election to municipal bodies'.

In WWI a 1916 recruitment poster urged women to volunteer to "Free a man for sea service" as they were needed to take on the jobs previously done by men. Women certainly proved their worth in munition factories, machine shops, building the airplanes and even domestic postal and delivery services. In 1939 when war broke out this poster was used again. Doctor Genevieve volunteered and was appointed Medical Superintendent for the Women's Royal Naval Service, the WRNS, which was rapidly re-established, to replace men in supporting roles on shore but also to fill new roles previously open to men only. In 1940 she was commissioned in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (RNVR) and so had the distinction of being the first woman doctor to be appointed to the Royal Navy. This fact was reported overseas in major newspapers and eventually in such as the Deseret News, of Salt Lake City, Utah the edition of January 1941 under the heading, "British Women Work well in Emergencies.



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War Makes places for patriot women never dreamed of in peace times." She was appointed to the Staff of the medical director of the Royal Navy as his assistant. In 1945 she was promoted to the rank of Surgeon Lieutenant Commander and at that time was the only woman to hold that rank. Her professional skills and experience enabled her to play an important part in maintaining an efficient medical service for women in the Navy and she was awarded the OBE in recognition of her wartime services. War, once again, had given women the opportunity to show what they could achieve; there were 460000 women in the armed forces, 74000 of whom were in the WRNS and a further 6.5 million in civilian war work. Without their contribution, our war effort would have been severely weakened. Even so it wasn't until 1990, that women first became integrated into the Royal Navy and actually went to sea, the WRNS subsequently being abolished in 1993. Women have continued to achieve

success in many fields in the RN since. From 2013 it was announced that women would join their male counterparts in submarines and women have also been given Command of Frigates and recently a fleet of 17 Fast Patrol Boats. In 1945, released from the Royal Navy, Dr. Rewcastle returned to Great Ormond Street where she took the Diploma in Child Health (DCH) but still found time for her Catholic aspirations and served as President of the National Board of Catholic Women, from 1945 to 1947. After the war the health of children was generally better than at any other time in history. Vaccines against polio, measles and rubella were developed in the 1950's. The 1948 National Health Service was one of the major achievements of Atlee's Labour government which in turn gave rise to many agencies and Dr. Genevieve went to work as a maternity and child welfare officer in South-East London. In 1950, perhaps recalling her address at the Catholic Women's League Annual Meeting and Conference in Liverpool in 1936, "that the duty of Catholics was to take their full share in the responsibility of administration by standing for election to municipal bodies," she stood as the Conservative candidate in the 1950 General Election for Willesden West but was defeated by the Labour candidate. In 1951 tragedy struck the family. On 16<sup>th</sup> April the submarine HMS Affray set out on a simulated war mission, for training. She and her entire ships company were declared missing on 17<sup>th</sup> April having vanished in the English Channel in an area called Hurds Deep. On board was Sub Lieutenant A.G.C. Rewcastle, Genevieve's son. Despite extensive searching the submarine was not found until almost 50 years later. HMS Affray is a war grave and the final resting place of 75 naval personnel. A dedicated professional woman committed to using her talents for the benefit of others, especially women and children- Doctor Attracta Genevieve Rewcastle, died on the 18<sup>th</sup> February 1954.

**Barbara Stitt,  
Leeds Branch President**



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