

Book reviews

Retired, Except on Demand. The Life of Dr Cicely Williams. By Sally Craddock. Pp 198: £12.50 hardback. Oxford: Green College, 1983.

Cicely Williams was born in 1893 in Jamaica into a family which had lived there for several generations. At 13 she was sent 'home' to be schooled in Bath. At 19 she was awarded a place at Somerville College, Oxford but had to turn it down in order to help her parents in Jamaica after a devastating series of hurricanes and earthquakes. It was not until 1916 when she was 23 that she was able to take up her place at Oxford university with the proviso that she must read medicine in view of the shortage of doctors at that time in the war. She was bored by the preclinical sciences but gate crashed Osler's ward rounds at the Radcliffe Infirmary. She was 31 when she qualified for King's College Hospital. Her house jobs took her to what is now Queen Elizabeth Hospital for Children, Hackney where she eventually stayed for two years working under the redoubtable Helen Mackay, who ran child welfare centres in the East End as well as a continuously busy hospital practice. It was here that Cicely Williams discovered her vocation, with the realisation that to pursue child health work the doctor must have first hand knowledge of the child's environment; that is, an understanding of how the family actually works. Donald Winnicott was also on the staff of 'the Queens' and he became the second of the people who influenced her greatly, although she did have reservations about some of his work.

From 1928 she worked for a year in Salonika with the refugees who had fled there after the Turko-Greek war. A third influential character she met there was Dr Andrija Stampar, a practical visionary in the bringing of medicine to primitive peoples.

In 1929 after taking a course in tropical medicine she joined the Colonial Medical Service and was sent to the Gold Coast (now Ghana), where she worked for the next 7 years. She started her own clinic for mothers and children and learned intimately the way the family functioned within that culture. Here she came to define kwashiorkor—'sickness of the deposed baby'. Her classic paper on the subject was published in the *Archives* in 1933 and was

reproduced 50 years later in 1983. (That paper did not introduce the word kwashiorkor, it first appeared in the title of her *Lancet* article of 1935). Controversy followed as workers in east Africa had earlier described the condition but regarded it as pellagra.

Her work on kwashiorkor came to an abrupt end when as a result of a petty personal conflict she found herself transferred in disgrace to Malaya. Despite this major setback to her personal and professional life she was soon directing her energies to the totally different set of problems she found there, though still pursuing the key issue of maternal and child care. A lecture entitled 'Milk and murder' given in Singapore in 1939 provided the first shots in her campaign to confront commercial interests, responsible for pushing infant foods onto an undeveloped country, with the dire effects of such a policy. Like so many of Cicely Williams's ideas this was years ahead of its time.

In 1941 the Japanese invaded Malaya. After a nightmare trek through jungle she reached Singapore but soon after Singapore fell to the Japanese and she was interred in Changi with 6000 others in a gaol built (ironically by her cousin) for 700. This was where she was to be for the next three and a half years. She became one of the leaders within the chaos of the prison—a fact which ultimately led to her being kept for four months in a tiny cell along with four or five men who were daily taken out to be tortured. These unspeakable conditions make almost unbearable reading. After the war she wrote an objective report on the *Nutritional conditions among women and children in internment in the civilian camp in Singapore* ending with the oft quoted '20 babies born, 20 babies breastfed, 20 babies survived. You can't do better than that'.

She was now 52 with only three more years before retirement age in the Colonial Medical Service. She set about organising a rural health service in Malaya based on a nurses training school. There followed a brief interlude with Professor John Ryle and his Department of Social Medicine in Oxford ('a lot of fatuous investigations', she thought) before she found herself raised to high office in charge of Maternal and Child Welfare with the newly consti-

tuted WHO at Geneva. It seems that she was never happy at a desk bound job and she soon escaped from it, so that from then until she was 71 she was mainly working under the auspices of WHO or UNWRA in a host of different countries, especially with the million Palestinian refugees in the Middle East, and in Ethiopia. To her disappointment her own Jamaica seemed to be the one country that did not want her despite her desire to throw in her lot with its new University of West Indies.

It was during this time that she met James Spence—'certainly one of the greatest prophets of his time', she judged (In 1965 the BPA awarded her the James Spence Medal).

At 71 she officially retired—'Retired except on demand' was her entry in *Who who* but her vitality and unsurpassed personal knowledge of conditions in all parts of the globe assured that her advice and help remained in constant demand. It has continued in that way to the present—she is now over 90.

This review has largely consisted of a summary of Cicely Williams' long life. The common theme running throughout her multifarious activities and the ups and downs in her fortunes has been the idea that in order to help children in the third world effectively you have to get to know, to listen to, and to understand the mothers. Trite as this statement may sound today it was not so in the 1920s when a few pioneers such as Cicely Williams demonstrated its truth.

Any biography written within the person's lifetime runs the danger of providing an unremitting eulogy, undiluted and hence cloying. The author claims that she failed to find any of the 'warts and all' that she dutifully looked for. Happily Cicely Williams' many witty, pithy, and forthright remarks which are quoted in this book do go a long way to bring to life 'the hag in your hagiography' (her words)—this great woman.

DOUGLAS GAIRDNER

Infectious Diseases of the Fetus and Newborn Infant. 2nd ed. Edited by J S Remington and J O Klein. Pp 1148: £93.00 hardback. Philadelphia and London: W B Saunders, 1983.

The first edition of this book was glowing