Dr William Doolin ‘was also noted for his great oratory and sense of humour’

With Ombudsman Emily O’Reilly set to deliver this year’s IMO Doolin Lecture, Aoife Connors takes a timely look at the man remembered each December.

It’s that time of year again… Christmas preparations are under way and the first Saturday in December is just round the corner, which means plans for the annual IMO Doolin Lecture are in full swing.

As revealed in IMT last week, the 2011 Doolin guest lecture will be delivered by Ombudsman and Information Commissioner Emily O’Reilly, who will share her views on the Irish health service. But do many people know who Dr William Doolin was, or why the Irish medical profession remembers him in this way?

Dr Doolin was a former editor of the Journal of the Irish Medical Association and President of the RCSI.

However, his outstanding medical history, knowledge of his profession and pioneering work ensured he left a lasting legacy.

Delivering the Doolin Lecture last year, Prof Cillian Twomey remarked that he had become somewhat apprehensive having read about Dr Doolin, who apart from his “distinguished career as a surgeon and teacher” was also noted for his “great oratory and sense of humour”.

Reflecting on Dr Doolin’s life begins with his birthplace roots at 20 Ely Place, Dublin, where he was born on June 19, 1887. His father, Walter G Doolin, was an architect based in Dublin but he died in March 1902 when William was 15 years old, leaving his mother Marion a widow.

William first attended school at the Marist Fathers’ Catholic University School in Lesson Street before heading to St Mary’s College, Dundalk, where he boarded.

He spent his final two years in secondary school in Clongowes Wood College, Clane, Co Kildare.

At Clongowes, Dr Doolin developed a strong interest in literature and languages. It was here he learned the art of oratory, a skill he developed and excelled at throughout his life. He also devoted great attention to the study of the humanities.

On deciding he wanted to pursue a career in medicine, Dr Doolin entered the University Medical School in Cecilia Street in 1904. He passed the first arts examination, mandatory for medical students, and the first medical examinations in 1905. He completed his second medical exams in 1906 and his final-year medical exams were completed in 1907.

On May 11, 1908, in the Oireachtas, politician Augustine Birrell read the second stage of the Irish Universities Bill, introducing the new National University of Ireland (UCD). Dr Doolin was among the first class of medical students to graduate from the NUI with first-class honours in 1910.

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Following graduation, he placed his name on the medical register on June 22, 1910 and became house surgeon at St Vincent’s Hospital during his 12-month internship.

In 1911, Dr Doolin embarked on a three-year postgraduate tour of medical centres across the UK and Europe. During his travels, he pursued his postgraduate surgical training and worked with many leaders in surgery.

In addition to his medical pursuits, Dr Doolin also progressed his literary interests by advancing his French and German skills in a number of Europe’s cities. On his excursion, he visited the shrines of medicine where medical history was made in Padua and Bologna in northern Italy, Montpellier and Salerno in France, Leiden in the Netherlands and Louvain in Belgium.

Dr Doolin became a fellow of the RCSI in 1912 and returned to Dublin a year later to establish a practice at 9 Upper Fitzwilliam Street, where he practised dental anaesthetics and gave demonstrations in anatomy at the University Medical School in Cecilia Street.

The well-travelled Irishman became an extern surgeon at St Vincent’s Hospital in 1917 and a visiting surgeon in 1928. He also became a Visiting Surgeon at the Children’s University Hospital (CUH), Temple Street, in 1932. Throughout his career, Dr Doolin was devoted to the people of the Liberties.

He joined the RCSI Council in 1932 and became secretary of the College in 1936. Two years later, he took up Presidential office at 123 St Stephen’s Green, which he occupied between 1938 and 1940.

Dr Doolin has been described as a splendid teacher with a certain degree of the actor in his make-up, but he was particularly well regarded for his impeccable surgical skills and acclaimed internationally for his attention to detail in treatment of the cleft palate.

Indeed, his work on the cleft palate — in the pre-antibiotic era and while anaesthesia was in the early days of development — attracted the attention of surgeons internationally, including Parisian surgeon Victor Veux (1871-1949), who adopted some of his techniques.

The Dublin-born surgeon was the first to describe the treatment of acute dilatation of the stomach and intestinal obstruction using a suction tube; he was also the first to successfully perform and pioneer the Smith-Peterson operation on a fractured hip. In addition to his innovative medical procedures and knowledge of surgery, Dr Doolin demonstrated athletic competence as a powerful swimmer and golfer. He was a regular umpire at Dublin’s Fitzwilliam Lawn Tennis Club for international matches.

In love and marriage, an Inchicore woman, Clare Kennedy, caught the surgeon’s eye and in July 1915, Dr Doolin married Kennedy. The couple resided at a large house, 50 Fitzwilliam Square, where they brought up five children and employed a cook, housemaid and parlour maid. However, after 22 years of marriage, Kennedy passed away, leaving Dr Doolin isolated.

Five years later, Dr Doolin re-married Maureen Clinton, a theatre-sister at CUH Temple Street. Following their wedding in 1942, they had two sons together.

As the years progressed, Dr Doolin continued to pursue his interest in history and his appreciation of literature grew, along with his lifelong pursuit of surgical excellence. He used his knowledge to effect when he became actively involved on the editorial board of the Irish Journal of Medical Science in 1925 and later became editor of the Journal of the Irish Medical Association in 1952.

Dr Doolin’s editorials were widely read and admired on both a national and international scale. His insightful editorials were reproduced in a separate publication, Wayfarers in Medicine. It has been said that his love of the medical profession led him to use his pen as a surgeon might use his knife in the eradication of cancer.

During the latter years of his life, Dr Doolin was bestowed with various medical and non-medical
honours from medical universities for his work. These awards and titles included becoming an Honorary Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of England, President of the RCSI, receiving doctorates in literature in Dublin universities and being appointed Professor of History of Medicine in University College Dublin.

On April 14, 1962, Dr Doolin passed away at the age of 75. However, his outgoing life and extraordinary achievements have left a lasting legacy that continues to inspire medical students both in Ireland and beyond.

This year’s IMO Doolin Memorial Lecture takes place at 11.45am on December 3 at the RCSI, lunch served. For information contact Louise Canavan, IMO, at Tel: 01 676 7273.