

Allan, Robert Marshall (1886-1946)

Robert Marshall Allan (1886-1946), physician and professor of obstetrics, was born on 24 February 1886 at South Brisbane, twin son of James Allan, Scottish-born merchant, and his wife Elizabeth Balloch, née Stark. He was educated at Scots College, Sydney, and Brisbane Grammar School, matriculating in 1904. He went on to study medicine at the University of Edinburgh (M.B., Ch.B. Hons, 1910). Attracted to obstetrics and gynaecology, he furthered his experience by working as a resident for six months at the Rotunda Hospital, Dublin, obtaining there the diploma of licentiate of midwifery. He then toured the major European teaching centres, becoming proficient in French and German. He was assistant master of the Rotunda Hospital from November 1911 until August 1914 when he enlisted as a temporary lieutenant in the Royal Army Medical Corps. In December the degree of M.D., with honours, was conferred on him *in absentia* by the University of Edinburgh for a thesis on the action of pituitary extract during labour.

Allan had a distinguished war record. He served in France from October 1914 for fourteen months, was mentioned in dispatches, and then was posted to Mesopotamia where he won the Military Cross. As a captain he was invalided to India with dysentery and then to Queensland, arriving there late in 1916. His letters to his father were published anonymously in Brisbane: *Letters From a Young Queenslander* (1915) and *Mesopotamia and India* (1916). In 1917 he was medical superintendent of Brisbane General Hospital and in April 1918 enlisted as a captain in the Australian Imperial Force. *En route* to England he served at Sierra Leone and arrived in London in October. After the Armistice, he gained his F.R.C.S. (Edinburgh), returned to Brisbane late in 1919, and practised there as a specialist in obstetrics and gynaecology until 1925. He was appointed honorary obstetrician to the Lady Bowen Hospital and assistant gynaecologist to the Brisbane General Hospital. He was honorary secretary of the Queensland branch of the British Medical Association, and was a vigorous and efficient honorary coadjutor secretary of the Australasia Medical Congress held in Brisbane in 1920. In July 1923 he was promoted major in the Australian Military Forces. At St Augustine's Church, Hamilton, on 9 November 1920 he had married Maryanne Eleanor Dines Bracker, daughter of a grazier.

In November 1925 Allan took up a two-year post in Melbourne as director of the Obstetrical Research Committee, set up after an inquiry into the conditions of midwifery in Victoria. He investigated maternal mortality and morbidity, the state of obstetrical practice and related research, and reported in November 1926 and April 1928. His practical approach, keen observations and well-founded recommendations won general approval; the report remains a milestone in the history of obstetrics in Australia.

Allan then began private practice in Melbourne. He was appointed to the honorary staff of the (Royal) Women's Hospital, honorary obstetrician to the Melbourne District Nursing Society and examiner for the Midwives' Board. He became a central councillor of the Victorian Bush Nursing Association to which he gave enthusiastic lifelong service. He was elected fellow of the recently founded College of Surgeons of Australasia (later the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons).

As an immediate result of his report a chair of obstetrics was established in the University of Melbourne. Allan was the obvious choice and was appointed in July 1929; he also became State

director of obstetrics. In addition, he was to be available for consultation in difficult cases of confinement at both the Women's and Queen Victoria hospitals. Without delay he toured Britain, Europe and North America to assess progress in his speciality. He began work in Melbourne in 1930 and his influence on undergraduate teaching was immediate. He continually revised his lecture notes, and lengthened the time of training in residence at the Women's Hospital. His teaching was noted for conscientious and careful preparation rather than for dramatic presentation, for he eschewed the flamboyant. He appreciated the need for improvement in care of the new-born and supported the appointment in 1929 of Dr (Dame) Kate Campbell as clinical lecturer in infant welfare. He sought also to improve postgraduate training and in 1932 established at Melbourne the first Australian diploma of obstetrics and gynaecology. In 1933 the university conferred on him the degree of M.D. (*ad eund*). Next year, on another study trip abroad, he was made an honorary fellow of the American College of Surgeons. In clinical work Allan's strength lay in sound opinion in consultation rather than in technical operative skill. He shared the obstetric side of the Women's Hospital work with senior colleagues in private practice; in gynaecology, his teaching was restricted almost entirely to didactic university lectures. Consistently active in university affairs, in 1944 he was appointed dean of the faculty of medicine.

Allan was a foundation fellow and an enthusiastic supporter of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (London), and became vice-president, an honour not previously conferred on a member residing outside Britain. He was chairman of the college's Australian reference committee in 1941 and his foresight and endeavour were largely responsible for its high standing in Australia; the standard of preparation which he demanded from candidates from Melbourne became traditional. He held many other offices: honorary secretary and president of the Victorian branch of the B.M.A. in 1937; chairman of the Nurses' Board and of the examiners for its midwifery examination; and chairman of the Federal inquiry in 1944 into the medical aspects of the decline in the birth rate, which resulted in a sterility clinic at the Women's Hospital. He gave several valuable formal lectures, of which the most important were the Listerian Oration to the South Australian branch of the B.M.A. (1927), the Anne MacKenzie Oration (1936) and the presidential address to the Victorian branch of the B.M.A. (1938). He was a lifelong supporter of the Presbyterian Church, an omnivorous reader and a passionate follower of Rugby Union football.

Marshall Allan, as he was known, was no seeker after hollow status. Handsome, 'of well-proportioned build and with twinkling eyes', he had great knowledge and, although at times rigid in his opinions on religion, politics and international affairs, was essentially modest, unpretentious and kindly. After a severe coronary occlusion in 1945 he rested and then gradually resumed full duties, but died on 29 July 1946 after a further episode, and was cremated. He was survived by his wife, a son and a daughter; his estate, valued for probate at £18,001, was left to his wife. He is remembered by the Marshall Allan Prize in obstetrics and by the Marshall Allan Library at the Royal Women's Hospital.

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Sources: Frank Forster, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 1979, Vol.7; Russell, K F "The Melbourne Medical School", 1977.



Robert Marshall Allan who, as professor of obstetrics, occupied the first clinical chair in the medical school.