

TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

Women's Search for Education in Medicine



THOMAS NEVILLE BONNER

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*Women's Search for
Education in Medicine*

Thomas Neville Bonner

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To the Ends of the Earth

For Sylvia
Die alles ermöglicht

Preface

Over thirty years ago, while doing research on American doctors in European universities before 1914, I came upon the remarkable number of foreign women, including Americans, who were enrolled in medicine at Zurich, Bern, Paris, and Geneva. Although my primary interest was in postgraduate study, largely by men, I could not help noticing the strong impact that these women enrolled in medical courses had on academic and political life in every university town where they were found.

What were they doing there? Why should American women be learning medicine in Zurich or Paris or Geneva in 1870 or 1895? What drove hundreds, at times thousands, of Russian and East European women west to Swiss or French medical schools for half a century? Why were so many English women to be found in Paris or Brussels, and so many German women in Zurich and Bern? What must conditions have been like in their homelands to propel so many to study in foreign lands hundreds or thousands of miles distant from their homes and families? What drove them to forsake familiar surroundings, their native tongues, and established expectations and to exile themselves abroad?

The more I asked such questions, the greater my curiosity. Little had been written, I quickly found, about women's search for medical training, either at home or abroad, in the half-century before Sarajevo. Much of what has since been published is from the perspective of a single country and misses the international dimension of the medical women's movement. For in every major country women were seeking in these years, in different ways and with differing

success, to qualify themselves to practice medicine. Their stubborn striving to enter a male-dominated profession grew out of sweeping economic and cultural changes in their own lives that coincided with powerful changes in higher education and medicine itself. These were critical years in the Western world for university reform, new ideas about women, a rising faith in science, and efforts to control access to the learned professions. Against the backdrop of new images of science and old sexual stereotypes, the women of many countries fought to establish a niche for themselves in the emerging profession of scientific medicine.

But the women of different nations were affected in different ways by the forces of change. Women in the United States, benefiting from the loose, *laissez-faire*, private structures of American society, were early able to establish separate schools of medicine and separate hospitals when the established institutions refused them, but these same structures made possible stiff resistance later to breaking down remaining sexual barriers to medical assimilation. British and Canadian women, faced with a similarly unflinching resistance to co-education, likewise depended on privately supported hospitals and medical schools for women as the principal route to medical learning throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The independent-minded Swiss, on the other hand, were the first to open their medical schools fully to women by state action, to be followed by the French and then most of the smaller nations of the European continent. In Tsarist Russia, a complex and divided governing class, challenged constantly by intellectuals and academic authorities, alternated between barring women completely from medical study and allowing a limited number of them into special women's courses. Imperial Germany, the most fiercely resistant of all to the idea of women doctors, capitulated altogether in 1908 and was soon educating more women physicians than even the United States. Outside Europe and North America, such major nations as India, China, and Japan followed European patterns in bringing women into medicine, either by barring women altogether from medical study, by founding separate women's schools, or by allowing women to go abroad to study.

Acknowledgments

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The translations from German and French in the text are my own, those from Russian are the work of Pamela Sears McKinsey.

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Illustrations

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Mary H. Thompson. Chicago Historical Society.

Ana Preston. Archives and Special Collections on Women in Medicine, Medical College of Pennsylvania.

Maria Zakrzewska. Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

An obstetrical examination. From Samuel Gregory, *Medical Morals* (ca. 1852).

Four American women who studied in Paris. Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

Nadezhda Suslova. Medizinhistorisches Institut, University of Zurich.

Susan Dimock. Medizinhistorisches Institut, University of Zurich.

Maria Bokova. Medizinhistorisches Institut, University of Zurich.

Elizabeth Morgan. Medizinhistorisches Institut, University of Zurich.

Friedrich Erismann. Courtesy of Rudolf Mumenthaler.

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August Forel.

Edmund Rose.

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Vera Figner.

Sophia Jex-Blake.

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Cambridge University students protesting against women in 1897. Cambridgeshire Collection, Cambridgeshire Libraries.

Students in an anatomy laboratory in Philadelphia, 1897. Archives and Special Collections on Women in Medicine, Medical College of Pennsylvania.

To the Ends of the Earth

If you were a young man, I could not find words in which to express my satisfaction and pride in respect to your [medical career] . . . but you are a woman, a weak woman; and all that I can do for you is to grieve and to weep. O my daughter! return from this unhappy path.

Letter to Marie E. Zakrzewska, M.D.,
from her father, 1855

If I were to plan with malicious hate the greatest curse I could conceive for woman, if I would estrange them from the protection of woman, and make them as far as possible loathsome and disgusting to man, I would favor the so-called reform which proposed to make doctors of them.

Buffalo Medical Journal, 1869

I think only the university is worth so much that a woman could sacrifice all for it. Only it is worth visiting notwithstanding scant means or other inconveniences. But in Russia this way is closed to woman, because for her the doors of the university are closed like those of the altar . . . I shall stop at nothing, because this whole plan [to go to Zurich] is not the product of idle fantasy, but my flesh and blood.

Vera Figner, 1872

At what sacrifice have [women] struggled to obtain the elusive prize! They have starved on half rations, shivered in cold rooms . . . when they were not permitted to walk, they have crept,—where they could not take, they have begged; they have gleaned like Ruth among the harvesters for the scantiest crumbs of knowledge, and been thankful.

Mary Putnam Jacobi, 1891

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Prologue: 1871

Paris, midsummer, 1871. The long siege of the city by Prussian troops was ended. Everywhere there was a feeling of relief after the months of suffering, hunger, and cold. Gradually, life returned to normal in the defeated capital. The victorious Prussians had remained as occupiers however, as they proclaimed a new German Empire in the great palace at Versailles. In France and throughout Europe came a vivid sense of old foundations crumbling and a new and uncertain future in the making.

In Paris, the venerable Ecole de Médecine had reopened as professors and students alike returned from war service to their studies. Many of them had served in medical units at Sedan, Belfort, Metz, or Strasbourg. Among the civilian students finishing their studies that summer was a young American woman. Twenty-nine years old, Mary Corinna Putnam, daughter of the New York publisher G. P. Putnam, had been in Paris for five years. Her French fiancé had just returned from military duty, but she found him changed and the relationship cooled. Gradually, she had overcome obstacle after obstacle to gain the right to enter special lectures, clinics, and the ancient library of medicine. With the help of the minister of education, she had been able to circumvent the opposition of a hostile faculty and to enroll at last in an official course of lectures. In the lectures, in deference to male sensitivities, she was required to sit in a separate chair near the lectern and to enter the hall through a side door. It was all a practical stratagem, she told her mother, to outflank the faculty “by an adroit maneuver.” Finally, in 1868, she had become the first woman ever to matriculate in the school of medicine.

On 24 July 1871, she stood before the formally attired members of the Paris faculty to defend her thesis on “La Graisse neutres et les acides gras” (Fats and Fatty Acids). Those present recalled especially her small stature, her dark, tightly drawn hair, and her confident manner. She reminded some of a serious, no-nonsense school-teacher. A band of three hundred curious students and physicians had crowded into the ascending tiers of the auditorium. With more than a touch of irony, she had dedicated her thesis, according to the Archives de Médecine, “To the professor, whose name I do not know, who was the only one to vote for my admission to the school, thus protesting against the prejudice which would exclude women from advanced studies.”² The questioning by the professors, by all accounts, was probing but friendly. When the examination was over, she was asked to leave the room while her performance was judged. On her return, she was congratulated warmly by her examiners, while the audience, some of them standing, applauded. Her defense of her thesis, as described in faculty records, was judged to be *extrêmement satisfait*.³ The faculty awarded her a bronze medal for her work, one of only three such awards to go to women in the first twenty years of women’s study in Paris.⁴

Putnam was not the only American woman finishing a European medical degree that eventful year. Three hundred sixty miles to the southeast and three months later, Susan Dimock of North Carolina followed another academic procession into the examination room at the University of Zurich. Leading the procession was the rector of the university, closely followed by the colorfully robed members of the medical faculty, with Dimock at the rear. She took her place next to the rector at the head of the long, narrow table, which was draped for the occasion with a green felt cloth. As in Paris, dozens of curious students and physicians had come to see and hear the young American. She was twenty-four years old, serious, thoughtful, and attractive in appearance. She was questioned at length by her professors and by members of the audience on her dissertation concerning “The Different Forms of Puerperal Fever.” When they were finished, the anatomist Hermann von Meyer, a friend of women’s education, rose to tell her: “You have shown by your example that it is possible for women to devote themselves to the medical profession without denying your female nature.”⁵ From Zurich, she would travel to Vienna, where a woman physician was an even greater