

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

WOMEN IN WHITE COATS

How the FIRST WOMEN
DOCTORS CHANGED *the*
WORLD *of* MEDICINE

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SWIFT PRESS

First published in the United States of America by Park
Row Books 2021

First published in Great Britain by Swift Press 2022

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the
British Library

ISBN: 9781800752467

eISBN: 9781800752474

*To Mom, Grandma, Laura, Ellen, Louisa, MaryAnn, Lara,
Sarah and all of the other ladies in my life who showed me
that there's nothing tenacious, independent women can't
do.*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Prologue: The Forgotten History of Healing

Chapter One: A Lady Doctor

Chapter Two: Surely, She Is a Joke

Chapter Three: Another Elizabeth Blazes the Trail

Chapter Four: More Than a Nurse

Chapter Five: Young Sophia

Chapter Six: Sophia in America

Chapter Seven: Facing Down Hurdles as America's First
Woman Doctor

Chapter Eight: Changing the Culture, One Patient at a Time

Chapter Nine: Lizzie Is Pushed into Private Study

Chapter Ten: The Blackwells Welcome Sophia in New York

Chapter Eleven: Lizzie Takes On London

Chapter Twelve: Sophia Storms Edinburgh

Chapter Thirteen: Emily's Turn to Shine in New York

Chapter Fourteen: A Lady Doctor Gets Married

Chapter Fifteen: The Campaign in Edinburgh Ends

Chapter Sixteen: Finding a Way Forward

Chapter Seventeen: Societies and Controversies

Chapter Eighteen: A Place All Their Own in London

Chapter Nineteen: On to Separate Paths

Epilogue: A Lasting Legacy

Acknowledgments

Author Note

Select Bibliography

Notes on Sources

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PROLOGUE

The Forgotten History of Healing

When Elizabeth Blackwell decided to become the first woman doctor, in many ways she wasn't actually the first. Women have delivered healthcare across the globe for centuries as herbalists, healer-priestesses, shamans, apothecaries, healers, wise women, witch doctors, diviners, surgeons, nurses, and midwives.¹ But this rich history is largely overlooked, and very few names have weathered the passing of time.

Agnodice is one of the earliest named female physicians in the historical record. The story goes that she became a doctor in the fourth century BCE to save the women of Athens from dying of treatable illnesses because they didn't want to see male physicians. It was illegal for women to be doctors, so Agnodice set up practice disguised as a man. To show her patients who she really was, she flashed her genitalia. Soon, jealous male doctors found out and convicted Agnodice of illegally practicing medicine. In the final dramatic showdown, the women of Athens rushed into the courtroom to defend her and the ban against women physicians was overturned.

There's only one problem with this tale: there was no law against women practicing medicine in ancient Greece. This inconsistency, paired with the fantastical elements of the story, is enough to convince some scholars that Agnodice didn't exist. Other scholars believe she was a real person, who surely encountered persecution even if she wasn't breaking any official law.

This is how we are introduced to historical medical women: biographies sprinkled with doubts, caveats, clauses; lives methodically dissected under a microscope by scholar after scholar looking for any hint of error, any crumb of fabrication to wave around gleefully as proof that this woman wasn't what we thought. We don't often hear about the historical contributions of women's medical brilliance, but when we do, we are taught to question the very core of such claims. Men rarely enjoy such scrutiny.

A relative scarcity of women officially labeled as professional medical practitioners in historical texts is not because they didn't exist, but rather because their occupations were not labeled as frequently as men's. As "wise women" healers or midwives, their activities may not have been believed to warrant recording. Throughout much of history, a man's entire household would have been involved in his occupational activities. Spouses and children of physicians or apothecaries would have helped mix medicines, visit the sick, and administer treatments; the family of a barber surgeon helped him pull teeth and

set broken bones. And widowed wives took over those family businesses.

Most areas in Europe would have had a wise woman or man who inherited the role of village healer, and women were largely the ones called upon to tend sick or dying family members; the ones sent to care for sick or dying neighbors who had no other family to care for them. As late as the 1500s, King Henry VIII was still granting the occasional medical license “to certain women to attend the sick poor who could not afford to pay the fees of regular practitioners.” In medieval France, about one hundred women have been identified as medical practitioners (alongside seven thousand men). Nuns soon became the main practitioners of the healing arts; convents could be considered proto-hospitals. Nuns would tend medicinal herb gardens, dress soldiers’ battle wounds, and nurse ill villagers back to health.

When medicine began to be solidified as a profession during the thirteenth century—its practice now requiring university training and licensure—patriarchal control swept in. Women could not become “official” doctors since most universities wouldn’t admit them. Outside of England and France, some institutions were more amenable. In 1390, Italian physician Dorotea Bucca took over for her father as chair of medicine at the University of Bologna, a post she held for more than forty years. Still, such women were the exceptions, not the rule.

Professionalization further sidelined women because book learning was now viewed as superior to any wisdom passed down orally, like most of women's folk medicine was.

Women's claims of medical prowess began to be questioned in real time, not by history scholars, but by the women's newly professionalized male contemporaries. Lay women healers were vilified as dangerously incompetent because they lacked a classical education (which they couldn't obtain even if they wanted to). In 1421, English physicians petitioned parliament and King Henry V to request that no women practice medicine "under payne of long imprisonment" and steep fines, declaring those who tried "worthless and presumptuous women who usurped the profession." Women who were found guilty of practicing medicine illegally were excommunicated and fined. Things took a deadly turn when the Church stepped in.

The Church controlled most university medical schools and wanted to ensure they also monopolized its practice. Between 1400 and 1700, the Catholic and Lutheran churches executed a massive campaign to rid Europe of wise women, branding them witches or sorceresses—even the nuns! They reasoned that only through God could a person be healed, and since women weren't ordained by Him to wield such powers, their ability to make sick people well must originate from the devil. While the Church claimed it was fighting dark magic—not medicine or women

—their campaign saw more than a hundred thousand women healers burned at the stake.

This legacy of discrimination against women healers cast a wide shadow over the medical profession. Even if women did somehow manage to achieve professional qualifications, they were relegated to specialties deemed feminine: they could deliver healthcare, but only as nurses or midwives.

For Victorian women like Elizabeth Blackwell, Lizzie Garrett, and Sophia Jex-Blake to seek entrance into the male realm of medicine was a radical request to be seen as equals. It meant these women couldn't just be students, they also had to be women's rights activists. If they wished to fully reenter the realm of medicine as doctors, they'd have to put up a hell of a fight.

Each woman's journey to a medical degree would vary; each was driven by vastly different motivations. One sought a degree in Scotland with disastrous results. One was forced to travel to France for her degree. One's college application was considered a practical joke. Each would grapple with defining women's work and purpose—as sister, wife, mother, daughter, adoptive mother, single parent, lesbian partner.

But even in the early days of their studies, each one recognized their role as trailblazers paving the way for others. They knew their actions would allow future generations of women to forge their own paths, craft their own definitions of what women's work could be. They

would never stop fighting, because they saw how women physicians could revolutionize medicine, not just for the benefit of female patients, but for everyone. History would be made by these medical women.

1 Midwifery wasn't typically considered medicine, per se.

ONE

A Lady Doctor

Mary Donaldson was dying. One day in early 1845, Mary's neighbor Elizabeth Blackwell stopped by to offer the ailing woman some solace and comfort. This casual chat over a cup of tea in suburban Cincinnati would turn out to change the course of medical history. Elizabeth was a frightfully small woman with a thin nose, a sweet voice, and remarkably soft, fine hands. Everything about her seemed petite, except for her mind.

The third child of the family, it was no secret that Elizabeth was her father's favorite. He lovingly referred to her as "Little Shy." While she may have been socially awkward, she could also be quite stubborn, happy to put all of her energies into a cause to prove a point. At a time when most women were raised to be subservient to men, Elizabeth's parents encouraged all of their children to be knowledge-seeking independent thinkers unafraid to speak their minds.

Elizabeth's family was somewhat new to Cincinnati, having moved frequently when Elizabeth was growing up. First, when she was eleven, her father uprooted their entire

household—his eight children, pregnant wife, their governess, two servants, and two aunts—to move from Bristol, England, to New York, New York. It was a seven-week voyage on the merchant ship *Cosmo*, during which Elizabeth suffered terrible seasickness. Next, they moved to Jersey City, then Cincinnati where her father spent his final days.

Now, twenty-four-year-old Elizabeth sat perched by Mary Donaldson's bed, listening to her catalog the agonizing months she'd spent in increasingly worsening abdominal pain. Mary was more than likely suffering from advanced uterine cancer. She hadn't sought medical treatment for her symptoms at first, and when she had, her doctor only seemed to make her more uncomfortable.

"The worst part of my illness is that I am being treated by a rough unfeeling man," Mary confided in Elizabeth, complaining that her checkups and treatment were nearly as excruciating as the illness itself. "If I could have been treated by a lady doctor, my worst sufferings would have been spared me."

Elizabeth agreed that this was an unfortunate state of affairs and offered sympathy and comfort as best she could. Short wisps of Elizabeth's wavy, reddish-blond hair escaped from its pulled-back confines and spilled across her forehead.

"You are fond of study, have health and leisure," Mary nudged Elizabeth. "Why not study medicine?"

The question hung in the air. This time, Elizabeth disagreed, finding it difficult to hide her shock behind her wide-set bluegray eyes. "I hate everything connected with the body and could not bear the sight of a medical book," she protested. "The very thought of dwelling on the physical structure of the body and its various ailments fills me with disgust."

Elizabeth's exposure to the medical field would have been limited at the time. Most women healers in history had a family member in the trade who sparked their interest, but this was not the case with Elizabeth. Her father had been a sugar refiner, her mother a devout Christian kept busy with raising their nine children. Her uncle and grandfather were both jewelers. Elizabeth's maternal grandmother ran a successful millinery shop to support her family after her husband was convicted of forging £5 notes and banished to Australia.

Elizabeth's most recent experience with medicine was seven years prior, when her father had become gravely ill. She watched as his doctors dosed him with brandy and arrowroot laudanum and rubbed his joints with mercurial ointment. When they left, she and her sisters took over: giving him sponge baths of muriatic acid solution, feeding him broth and brandy, and administering his medicines. He died shortly after falling sick. This firsthand exposure to medical care did nothing to pique then-seventeen-year-old Elizabeth's interest in medicine.

It's no wonder Elizabeth was initially repulsed by the prospect of becoming a doctor. The practice of medicine in the first half of the 1800s was a gruesome business. "Heroic" measures were the go-to treatments, such as bloodletting, blistering, and purging. Hippocrates's theory of humors still reigned supreme. It asserted that illness was the result of an imbalance of the four humors: melancholic (cold and dry), choleric (warm and dry), sanguine (warm and wet), and phlegmatic (cold and wet). Different foods or treatments could return balance and therefore restore health. Infections were thought to be caused by an excess of blood, so bloodletting should fix a fever.

Toxic metals made up some of the early Victorians' favorite medicines. Calomel, or mercury chloride, was believed to cure anything from cancer, tuberculosis, and cholera to syphilis, ingrown toenails, and influenza. Babies were given the white, odorless powder to soothe teething pain. Around the 1840s, megadoses were the fashion: twenty grains four times a day. Treatment was working when violent, dark diarrhea was achieved (the body trying to rid itself of the poison) and three pints of saliva was produced via excessive drooling, which we now know is actually a sign of mercury poisoning.

Arsenic, though an infamous poisoning agent, was considered to be therapeutic in small doses. Arsenic tinctures were used to treat maladies ranging from fevers and emotional disturbance to loss of libido and asthma. It was listed in the British Pharmaceutical Codex until 1907

and in the US pharmacopoeia until 1950. Another popular remedy was the *everlasting pill*. Made of the toxic metal antimony, ingesting it would induce a “cleansing” bout of vomiting and diarrhea. The pill was then retrieved from the patient’s excrement, washed, and tucked away to be used again by the next person in the family who took ill.

Diseases of the reproductive organs were considered a woman’s burden to bear, cancer believed to be a feminine malady. “There is no fact in the history of cancer more absolutely demonstrated than the influence exercised by sex on its development,” pioneering oncology researcher Dr. Walter Walshe proclaimed in 1846. “The female population of this country is destroyed to about two and three quarters times as great an extent by cancer as the male.”

For instance, of the 9,118 cancer-related deaths in Paris between 1830 and 1840, nearly three thousand were the result of uterine cancer. There were several reasons for this grim statistic, among them that symptoms of reproductive cancers in women often don’t show up until later and tend to mask themselves as more benign ailments. Another issue was that women often put off, or couldn’t bring themselves to consult their male physicians, and cancer is much easier to treat successfully in its earliest stages. Since cancer was known to be hereditary, seeking treatment might also reveal you to society as tainted. Even if she survived, such a diagnosis could ruin a woman’s romantic, social, and professional prospects.

In the end, doctors had little to offer a patient like Elizabeth's friend Mary. The best they could do was ease suffering with morphine or opium and suggest some lifestyle changes they hoped would promote a healthier constitution: reduce their food intake, maintain open bowels, avoid exertion, and refrain from sex. Among the many cancer cures touted at the time were yellow dock root, Turkish figs boiled in milk, zapping tumors with electricity or injecting them with lead and sulfur, applying a poultice of dough and lard, or mesmerism, which purported to harness the healing power of the invisible natural forces of all living creatures.

"My friend died of a painful disease, the delicate nature of which made the methods of treatment a constant suffering to her," Elizabeth wrote about Mary. "I resolutely tried for weeks to put the idea suggested by my friend away; but it constantly recurred to me." The more she thought about it, the more plausible the idea became.

Elizabeth had just returned from a disappointing stint teaching at a girls' school in Kentucky after working many years as a governess and teacher to help her family make ends meet after her father died. These jobs didn't particularly interest her, but because they were practically the only non-working-class professions available to reasonably educated women, she did them. Her older sister Anna was off teaching in New York accompanied by their younger sister Emily, who was still in school. The family's

new home in the Cincinnati suburbs seemed unusually quiet, giving her plenty of time to think.

Elizabeth dreamed of discovering a “more engrossing pursuit” and felt like a spark without fuel. It was more than fortuitous, then, that Mary implored her to consider a career in medicine at this exact moment. Witnessing her friend dying a needlessly uncomfortable death—exactly because there were no women doctors—proved the jolt Elizabeth needed. She would become a doctor.

In addition to healing sick women like Mary, practicing medicine was attractive to Elizabeth because she believed it would be the perfect field in which to begin to push the boundaries of women’s reach. If other women would join her in becoming a physician, then no woman patient would have to suffer like Mary.

From an early age, Elizabeth believed her intelligence and strength as equal to a man’s. Despite her slight, diminutive frame, she was surprisingly strong. Once, as a young girl in their Bristol home, a gentleman houseguest was regaling Elizabeth and her family with his views on women’s physical inferiority: how even the weakest man could best the strongest woman.

“That is certainly a mistake,” Elizabeth’s brothers protested. “For Elizabeth, when she chooses to give herself the trouble of measuring strength with us, is more than a match for either of us at wrestling or at lifting, and can carry us about with perfect ease.”

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