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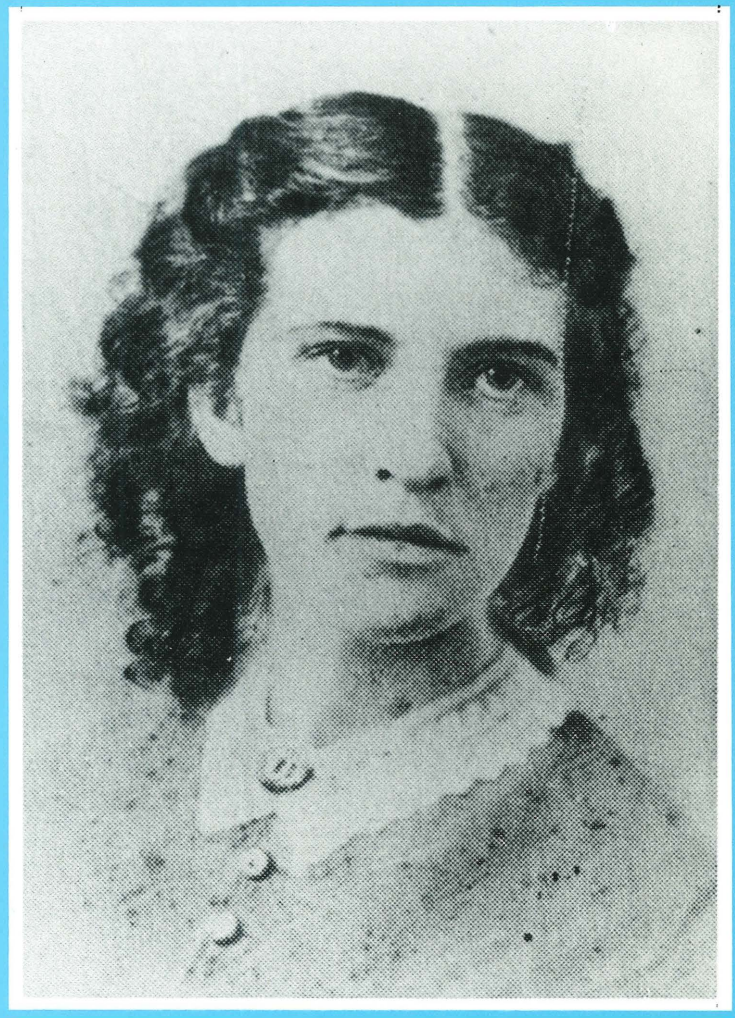
ELIZABETH BLACKWELL OF BRISTOL

THE FIRST WOMAN DOCTOR



MARY WRIGHT

THE BRISTOL BRANCH OF THE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION
LOCAL HISTORY PAMPHLETS

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Elizabeth Blackwell of Bristol is the eighty seventh pamphlet in the Local History series published by the Bristol Branch of the Historical Association.

The idea for this pamphlet arose when the author, who is researching the history of St. Paul's parish, discovered Elizabeth Blackwell's connection with the area and was surprised to find her achievements had gained so little recognition in her native city. With the help of the Medical Women's Federation she was able to place a plaque on her childhood home and her portrait in Bristol University Medical School.

The author wishes to record her thanks to staff of the Library of Congress, Washington, the Medical College of Pennsylvania and New York Downtown Hospital for their generous help. She is particularly indebted to the Curator of Hastings Museum, the Assistant Archivist of Glasgow University and librarians at Bristol Reference Library who gave unstinting support.

The Historical Association is a national body which seeks to encourage interest in all forms of history. Further details about membership and its activities can be obtained from the Secretary, The Historical Association, 59A Kennington Park Road, London, SE11 4JH.

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Cover Illustration: Elizabeth Blackwell (c1842). By courtesy of Archives and Special Collections on Women in Medicine, Medical College of Pennsylvania.

ELIZABETH BLACKWELL OF BRISTOL
THE FIRST WOMAN DOCTOR

On 23rd January, 1849 Elizabeth Blackwell graduated in medicine from Geneva College, New York State. As the first woman in the world to qualify and register as a doctor she not only made medical history but effectively opened the medical profession to women. Her achievement was all the more remarkable because she did this alone, without wealth, privilege or patronage and against an almost solid wall of prejudice.

She is often described as the 'American lady doctor', understandably so, for she qualified and did much of her pioneering work in the United States. Yet, by birth and inclination, she was an Englishwoman, spent more than half her long life in this country and was the first woman to have her name on the British Medical Register.

Elizabeth Blackwell was born in Counterslip, Bristol on February 3rd, 1821 to Hannah (*née* Lane) and Samuel Blackwell, the third child, and daughter, in a family that eventually numbered nine children. The Blackwells had their roots in Worcestershire but Hannah Lane came from an old Bristol family of goldsmiths and jewellers. Their reputation was tarnished when Hannah's father was convicted of forgery and sentenced to death, later commuted to transportation to Australia. He never returned and his wife, also named Hannah, carried on the business to support the family. After her mother's death Hannah went to live with her uncle, Henry Browne,[1] and it was from his home that she married Samuel Blackwell at St. James's Church, Bristol on September 27th, 1815.

Elizabeth's father was a sugar refiner, partner in the firm of Harwood and Blackwell at Counterslip. He was a Dissenter, one of the deacons at Bridge Street Congregational Chapel, and a supporter of the liberal, progressive section of the Whig Party. He was also a fervent Abolitionist, one of the founders of the Bristol branch of the Anti-Slavery Society.[2] His very public opposition to slavery cannot have helped his business but Samuel Blackwell was not a man to let self-interest deflect him from his principles.

He believed in equality for all and put his beliefs into practice inside as well as outside the home. He treated his wife with consideration and respect and gave his five daughters the same opportunities as their brothers. Whilst they were in Bristol all the children were educated at home by tutors or governesses; they were encouraged to read widely and to discuss the social and political issues of the day. Samuel's four unmarried sisters who lived with the family deplored their nieces' preoccupation with 'unfeminine' activities and tried to interest them in sewing and other genteel pursuits.

Elizabeth's earliest memories were connected with their home at 1 Wilson Street, off Portland Square, to which they moved in 1824.[3] She remembered the garden behind the house and the large walled garden opposite where the small Blackwells used to play with a neighbour's children. Her recollection is borne out by an auction notice of 1831:

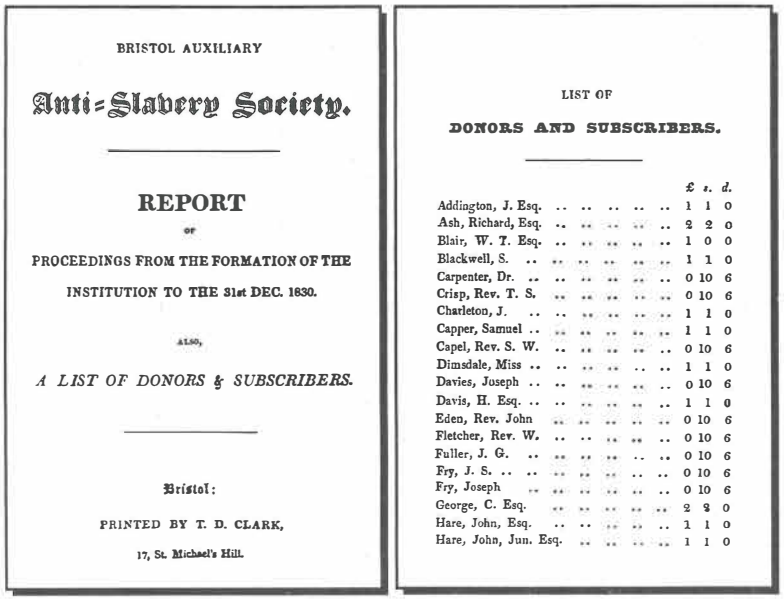
> 16th March **Auction** 1 Wilson Street, small garden at the end of which there are a 2-stalled stable, laundry, Brewhouse etc. Also a large walled garden opposite the messuage, enclosed with a high wall.
>
> In occupation of Dr Chadwick.[4]

The house was built in 1792 by James Lockier, one of the speculators then developing the streets and square in the newly-created parish of St. Paul. The street was named in honour of Christopher Wilson, Bishop of Bristol, 1783-92. In the financial panic that followed the outbreak of war with France in 1793 Lockier was declared bankrupt and house-building in this and other parts of Bristol came to an abrupt halt. Only one side of Wilson Street had been built and the land opposite remained as gardens and a bowling green until work restarted to complete the street in the late 1820s.

When the Blackwells moved there St. Paul's was in its heyday as a fashionable suburb. The large elegant houses in Portland Square were eagerly sought after by the prosperous middle-classes: residents included senior clergymen, retired army officers, an eminent surgeon and the Wills family of tobacconists. Often when younger members of these families married they moved into the more modest houses, of the type occupied by the Blackwells, in nearby streets. During the decade after Elizabeth and her family left Wilson Street one of its notable residents was the philanthropist George Muller who, in 1835, opened his first orphan house in No. 6 and subsequently took over three more houses in the street, including No. 1.

In her autobiography Elizabeth recalled an occasion when her parents were entertaining some rather jolly visiting missionaries in this house, an

1 Wilson Street, 19th century



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REPORT

OF

PROCEEDINGS FROM THE FORMATION OF THE INSTITUTION TO THE 31st DEC. 1830.

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Samuel Blackwell listed as a subscriber to the Bristol branch of the Anti-Slavery Society. By courtesy of Bristol Reference Library

Insignia of the Anti-Slavery Society. By courtesy of Bristol Reference Library

event at which the children would normally be present. She had committed some misdemeanour for which she was deprived of this treat and sent up to bed. She remembered leaning over the banisters wistfully watching as the servants carried in dishes of steaming food and listening to the animated conversation and laughter that floated up the stairs. Another memory of this period illustrates the nature of their family relationships. Anna, the eldest daughter, had been given a telescope and the girls believed that if they could climb out on to the roof with it they would get a good view of the Duchess of Beaufort's woods at Stapleton. Their father rejected their pleas but did so in a deft, unauthoritarian way by writing to them in verse warning, 'the leads are too high for those who can't fly' and advising them 'to keep to the earth, the place of your birth'.

Her father, to whom she was devoted, was undoubtedly the strongest influence on Elizabeth in her formative years. In later life she wrote: 'dear Father, with his warm affection, his sense of fun and his talent for rhyming represented a beneficent Providence to me from my earliest days'. His enlightened views on women's place in society provided her with an upbringing that nurtured in her those qualities of intellectual curiosity, moral courage and self-reliance that she was to display so conspicuously in her future pioneering work.

When the growing family needed larger accommodation they took two houses in Nelson Street, next to Samuel's new sugar refinery, and converted them into one. From there the children took regular walks with their governess to Clifton Down; Leigh Woods; along Kingsdown Parade to Mother Pugsley's Well or to Redland Court to admire Sir Richard Vaughan's peacocks. The Blackwells appeared to be enjoying a comfortable, relatively prosperous way of life in their spacious house, with a resident governess and servants and even a country cottage at Olveston that they rented each summer. But they, with their high level of political consciousness, were more aware than most of the level of social unrest in the country and had witnessed its local manifestation in the Bristol Riots in October 1831. Samuel also had personal financial problems which arose from his brother's mismanagement of the Irish branch of his sugar refinery. This may have been the decisive factor that tipped the balance in favour of the family leaving Britain for the United States. It was something Samuel had been contemplating for months for he had been receiving enthusiastic accounts of life there from a friend who had emigrated earlier. He may also have been influenced by the prospect of a better future for the children of a Nonconformist family in a land of tolerance and equal opportunity. In August 1832 the Blackwell family of eight children and seven adults (the maiden aunts and the

governess went too) sailed from Bristol in the *Cosmo*. When they left cholera was raging in the city and several of the infected passengers died on the voyage. According to Anna the ship was filthy and overcrowded and they endured seven weeks and three days on what she described as 'a floating hell' before docking in New York.

During the next six years they lived in or around New York City. Samuel rented a sugar house and, with his experience and innovative ideas, looked set to succeed. He was experimenting with methods of refining beet sugar and hoped to persuade his fellow manufacturers to do the same and substitute it for the slave-picked cane, but he knew they would be wary of anything that might reduce their profits. Now that they were living in America, which at that time had around 2½ million slaves,[5] the Blackwells became even more conscious of the evils of the system. All the family threw themselves whole-heartedly into the anti-slavery movement. They attended rallies, organised petitions and, on one occasion, saved a prominent activist from a lynch mob. Samuel, who retained his penchant for rhyming, published a book of anti-slavery verses. The children were sent to what Elizabeth afterwards described as 'an excellent school' and the girls were allowed a considerable amount of freedom and independence, often returning home from political meetings unescorted on the late night ferry.

Although Hannah had not initiated the move to America, once they were there she became the one most anxious to identify with the new country. Their ninth, and last, child, born soon after their arrival, was named George Washington and when, on the death of William IV, Samuel and Elizabeth trimmed their hats with black crepe, Hannah lectured them on their want of respect for America. Samuel was not doing as well as he had hoped. Trade was declining and, since the great New York fire of 1835, it was becoming increasingly difficult to obtain insurance cover. Because he had invested all his capital in his refinery Samuel felt he had to spend every night there guarding it. His financial problems steadily worsened.

In 1838 Elizabeth wrote in her diary: 'we had no meat for dinner yesterday, today we had a stew composed of potatoes, with a few bones which had been carefully preserved and *one penny leek*'. At that point Samuel decided to sell up and start again in Cincinnati, but it was too late. He succumbed to a sudden attack of fever and within weeks he was dead, at the age of 48.

Elizabeth was devastated. She wrote: 'never till my dying day shall I forget the dreadful feeling ... I felt as if all hope and joy were gone and nought was left but to die also'. In addition to their grief the family had to face the problem of how they were to survive, for Hannah and her 9 children had been left entirely unprovided for and in debt. Within weeks Anna, Marian and Elizabeth, the three eldest daughters, had converted their home into a small private school and were enrolling their first pupils. The whole family helped with the cooking and housekeeping so, by careful economy, they were able to keep a roof over their heads and to pay off the debts.

Elizabeth hated teaching and had moments of profound depression when she realised that if she was to be economically independent (and she seems never to have doubted that she must) she might be trapped in it for the rest of her life. When their younger brothers started to earn their living the sisters closed the school but, because they had no alternative, they took other teaching posts. Elizabeth went to the slave-state of Kentucky, but not for long. Her sense of justice was continually outraged by the degradation of the slaves and the complacency of their owners so, after only one term, she resigned.

At the age of 23 she had reached a watershed in her life. Despite her many accomplishments - she read the works of French and German philosophers in the original; she had published some short stories and had musical and artistic talent - she felt unfulfilled. She had considered, and rejected, the idea of marriage. It was not that she did not find some men attractive (and they her), in fact she described herself as all too susceptible to falling in love but, as soon as she considered the implications of a life-long commitment, she drew back. She could envisage all too clearly the conflicts that could arise if she tried to exercise the freedom she so cherished within a conventional marriage. She realised that what she needed was demanding and purposeful work that would set her 'a hard challenge'. Her problem was that she had no idea where she would find it.

At about this time a family friend who was dying of uterine cancer told Elizabeth of the embarrassment and distress her treatment had caused her and of her belief that she would have suffered much less if only she could have been attended by a woman doctor. She pressed her point; 'You are fond of study, and have health and leisure; why not study medicine?'. Initially Elizabeth recoiled from the suggestion, the thought of having close contact with physical disease nauseated her. Yet she

could not quite dismiss the idea. She began tentatively to enquire about her chances of obtaining a medical education. Some of the doctors she consulted agreed that there was a need for women doctors but the consensus was that the obstacles were insurmountable and that she would be foolish even to try. She was particularly disappointed by the reaction of her friend Harriet Beecher Stowe who warned that she was likely to be crushed by the weight of prejudice she would encounter. The unanimity of that opposition cleared all doubt from her mind. Elizabeth Blackwell had found her hard challenge.

She had no medical knowledge and no money to pay for her training at any college that she might persuade to admit her. But, she reasoned, if her goal was right there must be a way to achieve it. She knew this would mean going back to teaching and scrimping to save the $3,000 she would need for the fees. For the next two years she taught in schools in Carolina by day and gave extra music lessons in the evenings. Every morning she spent two hours before breakfast teaching herself Greek and, in her spare time, studied anatomy and physiology under the guidance of a friendly physician. She could not be accused of overstatement when she wrote to her mother 'my brain is as busy as can be.'

With her 'carefully hoarded earnings' Elizabeth embarked on the formidable task of gaining admission to medical school. She enrolled in a private school in Philadelphia, then the recognised centre for medical excellence, to further her study of anatomy and took the opportunity to visit some professors personally to argue her case. Some were interested, most were dismissive and one summed up his position very frankly when he said 'you cannot expect us to furnish you with a stick to break our heads with'. She was advised to go to Paris where women were allowed to attend medical school lectures, although denied a diploma, or to enter an American college disguised as a man. She firmly rejected such subterfuge. If she was to open the medical profession to women she must qualify openly and equally with male students and have that achievement publicly acknowledged.

She did not allow herself to become discouraged when the first sixteen colleges she applied to rejected her and it seemed her persistence had been rewarded when the small Geneva College offered her a place. But her admission had never been intended. The faculty, wanting to reject her but reluctant to offend the eminent Philadelphia doctor who had recommended her, delegated the decision to the students, confident that they would ridicule the proposal. This rebounded on the professors when, in an uproarious scene[6], the students voted unanimously to admit her.

Elizabeth arrived in Geneva College in 1847 and her first days at Geneva were a test of her commitment. She was alone in a cheap boarding house and none of the local people - who had already decided that she must be either mad or bad - would speak to her. She had no books and had not been told where she could get any and, when she entered the lecture hall for the first time, she was under the close scrutiny of 150 young men. The professors were doubtful about the propriety of allowing her to attend any classes on the reproductive system but her evident seriousness and quiet determination soon disarmed them and she became their star pupil. Once their initial curiosity had subsided the other students accepted Elizabeth's presence as normal and she thought many of them regarded her as an elder sister. One of her brothers, when visiting her in Geneva, overheard a student describing her as 'a great girl'.

By present day standards the period of study required to qualify as a doctor in the 1840s was relatively short: three years under the private supervision of a physician, followed by two 16-week terms of college lectures. After the student submitted a thesis (Elizabeth's, on typhus, was later published) he was then examined by the faculty and, if successful, was allowed to practise. Elizabeth passed her examinations with ease and graduated in January, 1849 at the head of her class, with top honours in every subject. Her reception at the degree ceremony was in marked contrast to that she experienced on her arrival at Geneva. Her brother, Henry Browne Blackwell, wrote of the large numbers of people who came in from the surrounding area and of the local ladies who, quite forgetting their earlier hostility, turned out *en masse* to applaud the new doctor. The Dean, displaying equal amnesia, claimed that Elizabeth's success had amply justified the risk the college had taken in admitting her. The event was widely reported in the United States and Europe. In England *Punch* magazine published some verses in praise of 'Doctrix Blackwell' who was so 'well deserving of esteem and admiration'. A New York newspaper fervently declared, 'Elizabeth Blackwell, the world cannot thank you too much'. That pleased her better than another article that described her as 'a pretty little specimen of the female gender'.

Elizabeth was well aware that gaining her M.D. was only a first step. She needed further training and intended to seek it in Europe. But first she took a holiday in England with her cousin, Kenyon Blackwell, an ironmaster who lived near Dudley. She visited hospitals in Birmingham and London where she was received with deference and respect. Leading

physicians showed her round their wards, invited her to examine patients and to attend lectures. In the light of the hostility later encountered by Englishwomen when they tried to enter the profession, the warmth of Elizabeth Blackwell's reception seems surprising. It may be that what she had done was seen as the achievement of an exceptional woman rather than the blazing of a trail for other aspiring women. She thoroughly enjoyed the whirl of social activities that were arranged for her in London and discovered that 'iced champagne is really good'. This, despite having signed the abstinence pledge - twice.

In May 1849 Elizabeth arrived in Paris, where she hoped to train as an obstetric surgeon. When she found that none of the city's hospitals would admit her she enrolled at La Maternité, the leading school for midwives. To register she needed an *acte de naissance* so she wrote to her cousin Kenyon, 'would it be possible to secure in Bristol a copy of my register of baptism ... I was baptised at Bridge Street by Mr Leifchild'.[7] There she gained valuable experience in obstetrics and a leading surgeon predicted that she would become the best obstetrician in America. As she neared the end of her training she had an accident that altered the course of her life. She was syringing the eyes of a baby who had purulent ophthalmia when some of the infected solution spurted into her own eye. Despite immediate treatment she lost the sight of one eye and with it all hope of becoming the first woman surgeon. Her quizzical response, 'Fate has certainly given me a strange and sudden blow', cloaked her true feelings of bitter disappointment and bleak despair. If, before, she had been discriminated against because of her sex, now she would be doubly disadvantaged. All she knew was that, having come so far, she could not give up medicine completely. So, when she was offered a year's post-graduate training under Sir James Paget at St. Bartholomew's in London she accepted with enthusiasm. There every department was open to her *except the one specialising in female diseases*. At first no-one seemed to know how to treat her but, after she had settled in, she found she 'might do anything I pleased at St. Bartholomew's'.

Outside the hospital she enjoyed a full social life, met the Herschels and Michael Faraday and visited the Crystal Palace Exhibition where her cousin Kenyon had a stand. She formed close and lasting friendships with Lady Byron and with Barbara Leigh-Smith and Bessie Rayner, who led the Women's Rights movement. Elizabeth's own attitude to women's movements was often misunderstood. Although she had no doubts about the justice of sexual equality, and led by example, she consistently refused to support any anti-man group. She was 'too conscious of the kindness, aid and just recognition' she had received from men to adopt

such a hostile position. She had long talks with Florence Nightingale in which they discussed the possibility of opening a hospital in England together. However it seemed inevitable that two such strong-minded women would eventually differ and they did, fundamentally, when Florence, who was preoccupied with raising the status of nursing, could not see the importance of opening the whole medical profession to women. In spite of this, Elizabeth never forgot her debt to Florence Nightingale for convincing her of the basic need for good sanitation.

At this time she was seriously considering staying in England but lacked the capital to establish a private practice and knew she would miss her family. Besides, there was still work to be done in America where women, including her sister Emily, were being admitted to medical schools but having difficulty in obtaining clinical training.

Before she left England in July 1851 Elizabeth visited Dr Leifchild, the former minister of Bridge Street Chapel, who had moved to London. This 'fat, rosy, laughing man' told her he still had all the letters her father had sent him from America and promised to write to her mother with news of her Bristol friends. When he learned that Elizabeth had become a doctor he declared it 'a capital thing' that heralded the beginning of a new era.

When she returned to New York to try to set up a practice Elizabeth encountered 'a blank wall of social and professional antagonism' and, worst of all, the suspicion of the women she had hoped to have as patients. Her only support came from a group of Quaker women who helped her open a Dispensary in a slum quarter of the city. Slowly she began to build up her practice but she had to contend with malicious gossip, abusive anonymous letters and harassment from men when she was out on night calls. She was short of money and desperately lonely. To Emily she wrote: 'I know why this life had never been lived before. It is hard to live against every kind of social opposition. I should like a little fun now and then. Life is altogether too sober'. Her need for a warm human relationship prompted her to adopt a seven year old orphan, Kitty Barry, from an immigrant centre. Kitty brought great joy into Elizabeth's life and never left her.

Gradually, as the reputation of the Dispensary grew, the prejudice subsided and in 1857 Elizabeth moved to larger premises and opened the New York Infirmary for Women and Children. It was staffed entirely by women with Elizabeth as director, Emily as surgeon and Dr Maria Zakrzewska as resident physician. Women medical students were able to

Artist's impression of activity outside New York Infirmary c1857.
By courtesy of New York Downtown Hospital

gain clinical experience on the wards and soon a nursing school was incorporated. English friends who visited the Infirmary urged Elizabeth to cross the Atlantic to advise and encourage women there who were struggling to enter the professions. She agreed and in 1859 undertook a lecture tour of major English cities describing her own experience and emphasising the contribution that trained and educated women could make to society. One of her listeners was the young Elizabeth Garrett (later Garrett Anderson) who was inspired to follow Elizabeth Blackwell's example. During the next few years the two women corresponded regularly and the older Elizabeth was generous with her help and encouragement. It was during this visit that, to her great pride, she became the first woman to be enrolled on the British Medical Register. There were some who were determined she would be the last for the rules were promptly changed to exclude anyone who had qualified outside the United Kingdom. To friends who pressed her to stay she explained that first she must complete her work in America but, she wrote, 'I look upon England as my home and must always do so and my return will be only a question of time'.

The New York Infirmary had become firmly established and Elizabeth decided to apply for a charter to upgrade it to a medical college for women. This represented a change in her thinking for she had always opposed separate education for women, arguing that it would be perceived as being of inferior standard. However, given the difficulties women were still having in gaining admission to the top medical schools, she calculated that if she set even more rigorous standards than those prestigious colleges she could overcome that prejudice. She did this and succeeded in her objective. One of her innovations was to give academic respectability to preventive medicine by endowing a Chair of Hygiene and taking the professorial post herself. When the college was running smoothly Elizabeth decided that her pioneering work in America was over. She wrote, 'What is done is done. I will leave it'. In 1869 she sailed for England.

After a holiday in the Lake District she came to Bristol to attend the annual meeting of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science. This organisation, founded thirteen years before, met annually in a different city for a week. It brought together leading academics and

pioneers of social and political reform to present papers and debate current issues in sections on Law, Education, Health and Economy and Trade. The *Bristol Gazette* in welcoming this 'large and influential ... gathering of wise men' was obviously unaware that many of the illustrious participants were women. This was acknowledged in its valedictory editorial which referred to 'the wise men and women'. What was not realised, or thought newsworthy, was that one of the wise women was the Bristol born Dr Blackwell for neither her arrival not her speeches were reported locally. *The Times*, by contrast, did record her contributions.[8]

During the Congress Elizabeth stayed with Mary Carpenter at the home of the latter's sister and brother-in-law, Mr and Mrs Herbert Thomas, 2 Great George Street. This was very convenient for most of the sessions were held in the Victoria Rooms or the Blind Asylum, on a site now occupied by the Wills tower. The Congress opened on 30th September with a service in the Cathedral, at which the Bishop of Bristol preached, followed by the inaugural meeting in the Victoria Rooms. The following days were spent discussing papers presented in the sections. Notable speakers included Charles Kingsley on Education; Dr William Budd of Bristol whose eloquent address on the need for tighter legislation 'to stop us poisoning ourselves to death' was warmly applauded and Octavia Hill who explored ways to help the poor without almsgiving. Mary Carpenter, who had just returned from India, spoke at a 'numerously attended' soirée about female education there and also gave papers on the work of Reform Schools and the State's role in educating the destitute. Doctrix Blackwell, as *The Times* called her, addressed a separate ladies section on the education of women for the medical profession. She also contributed to a debate on whether infanticide could be diminished by legislation. The current position, that women convicted of infanticide faced the death penalty, led to open verdicts being returned and, in the opinion of some, tended to encourage the crime. Elizabeth argued against the introduction of new legislation which she believed would only lead to an increase in abortion and supported the successful resolution that infanticide, at the time of birth, should not incur the death penalty. She described her own experience of setting up a charity in New York to help women who had committed infanticide.

For Elizabeth the most important issue that arose, one which was to mould the rest of her life's work, was the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts. She recalled that on the morning of the day they were to be debated Mary Carpenter went into her room with a sheaf of papers that detailed the Acts. They were to be discussed at a session from which

women were excluded but Elizabeth, as a doctor, could attend and, Mary Carpenter told her, 'you *must*'. When she realised that under the Acts women even suspected of prostitution would be subjected to compulsory examination while the clients could go scot-free, Elizabeth was incensed by what she saw as an endorsement of a double standard of morality for the sexes. She sat near the back of the hall in the Blind Asylum bracing herself to argue her case against substantial male opposition. To her surprise, and relief, Professor Francis Newman spoke forcefully against the Acts and a resolution recommending their repeal was carried. Francis Newman, brother of the Cardinal, was a former vice-principal of the unsectarian, and short-lived, Bristol College and he and Elizabeth were to collaborate on a book on Neo-Malthusianism. Another repercussion of the debate was the launching that autumn in Bristol of the National Campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts. Elizabeth herself campaigned against the Acts until they were repealed in 1886.

Social events arranged for those attending the Congress included excursions to Cheddar Caves, Wyndcliffe and Tintern Abbey and the Bristol Training Ship. The Mayor and Mayoress hosted entertainment at the Colston Hall and Elizabeth presided over a 'breakfast of all the religions'. This turned into an exchange of light-hearted banter between a Catholic, two Hindus, an Evangelical Christian, a Materialist, the secularist, George Holyoake, the last man in England to be imprisoned for atheism, and Charles Kingsley, the magistrate who had sentenced him.

While she was in Bristol Elizabeth visited her childhood home in Wilson Street and was shown round by the occupants. Although the house was smaller that she had remembered (and the walled garden opposite had become a carpenter's yard), once she was inside memories came flooding back. As she stood in the hall and looked up she seemed to see her childish face peering over the banisters at the dining room festivities from which she had been excluded over 40 years before. She recalled the distinctive sound of her father's peculiar key as he let himself into the house when he came home from the refinery, sometimes still wearing the white flannel suit he needed in those heated rooms.[9] She also called on her Aunt Lucy, one of her father's sisters who had returned from America. She worked at Muller's Orphanage and had married a member of the Plymouth brethren whom Elizabeth thought 'bigoted and irate'.

When she returned to London she lived for a time in the house of her friend Barbara Leigh-Smith Bodichon where she met many of the outstanding literary and artistic figures of the day. Among them were Herbert Spencer, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Robert Browning and George Eliot, for whom this meeting was the realisation of a long-held ambition.

Ten years earlier she had written to Elizabeth: 'You are one of the women I would choose from all the rest of the world to know personally'.

Another visitor to that house was Frances Power Cobbe, writer and active campaigner for women's voting rights and the Married Women's Property Act. She was equally energetic in the promotion of animal welfare and had recently founded the National Anti-Vivisection Society. From 1857-59 she had worked with Mary Carpenter at the Red Lodge Reformatory and, for a time, had lived with her in the adjacent Red Lodge House. Not only were she and Mary Carpenter linked to each other, and to Elizabeth Blackwell, by their shared interest in social reform but also by the relationship each had to Lady Byron. That resolute, high-minded promoter of good works (who had died in 1860) had taken a keen interest in, and probably contributed to, the Blackwell New York Hospital. She had also become Mary Carpenter's patron and, by purchasing Red Lodge, had enabled her to open her girls' reformatory. It was she who, on hearing that Miss Carpenter was looking for a lady with an interest in reform to act as her assistant, recommended her friend Frances Power Cobbe. In the years that followed their meeting Elizabeth and Miss Cobbe conducted a lively correspondence on topics of mutual interest. One exchange of letters, on inhumane practices in medicine, formed the basis of Elizabeth's publication, *Medicine and Morality*.

In 1870 she set up a private practice in London and helped Elizabeth Garrett, who had obtained a medical diploma from the Apothecaries Society, in the Dispensary she had opened, which was run on the lines of the New York model. She campaigned, alongside others, for the admission of women to medical degrees but it was not until 1876 that the necessary legislation was passed. Meanwhile a committee was set up to plan the opening of a hospital for women in London. Elizabeth found that one of her main tasks was to act as a restraint on her fellow-member, the clever but impetuous Sophia Jex-Blake, a former student of hers at the New York Infirmary. When the hospital opened in 1874 as the London School of Medicine for Women, Elizabeth was appointed to the Chair of Gynaecology.

She was becoming increasingly convinced of the value of preventive medicine. In 1871 she gathered together a group of like-minded people to found the National Health Society, which adopted as its motto 'Prevention is Better than Cure'. It published pamphlets giving advice on diet and hygiene, lobbied the government over the provision of clean drinking water and secured the opening of school playgrounds during evenings and school holidays. The Society also set up the first training

programme for health visitors. It continued its work until 1948 when it was superseded by the National Health Service.

Within a few years ill-health forced Elizabeth to move out of London and she and Kitty settled in Hastings. She continued to lecture occasionally at the London School of Medicine but gave up practising medicine. This may not have been a grievous blow to her, for it had always been the challenge of breaking into medicine rather than its practice that had attracted her. She was by nature a pioneer who thrived on opposition and the time had come for her to move on.

Once her health had improved Elizabeth began to channel her still impressive energy into a social reform programme. She wrote and lectured tirelessly on the need for education to promote healthy living. The welfare of children was a constant theme; it was essential that they be 'well born, well nourished and well educated'. She stirred controversy when she tried to publish her manual of sex education for parents. Several publishers rejected it as too explicit and the shocked wife of one burned the proofs. When it was eventually printed it went into eight editions. Elizabeth drily said of her writings, 'I think they belong in the year 1998 of the future'.

She voiced her concern about the direction she saw modern medicine taking, detecting a potentially dangerous preoccupation with bacteriology at the expense of hygiene. She expressed unfashionable doubts about vaccination, which she regarded as only a temporary stop-gap. Her suggestion that some invasive surgery might be undertaken more for the benefit of the surgeon than for the patient was not well received in some medical circles. Elizabeth's interest in medical ethics (and, possibly, her discussions with Frances Power Cobbe) led her to investigate the use of animals in research. Her findings prompted her comment: 'there are just limits to scientific investigation; knowledge is not its own justification'. She became active in the Anti-Vivisection Society, advocated the use of humane methods of research and withdrew her support from any hospital that subjected animals to painful experiments.

In the last decades of her life Elizabeth espoused a wide and diverse range of causes with her customary vigour and enthusiasm. Municipal reform, experimental co-operative communities, the Garden City movement, prison reform and technical education for women, all came within her orbit of interest. For her these were not single unconnected reforms but part of an organic movement towards the creation of a perfect society in which men and women would live in equality and in

Elizabeth Blackwell in her study at Rock House, 1906.
By courtesy of Hastings Museum

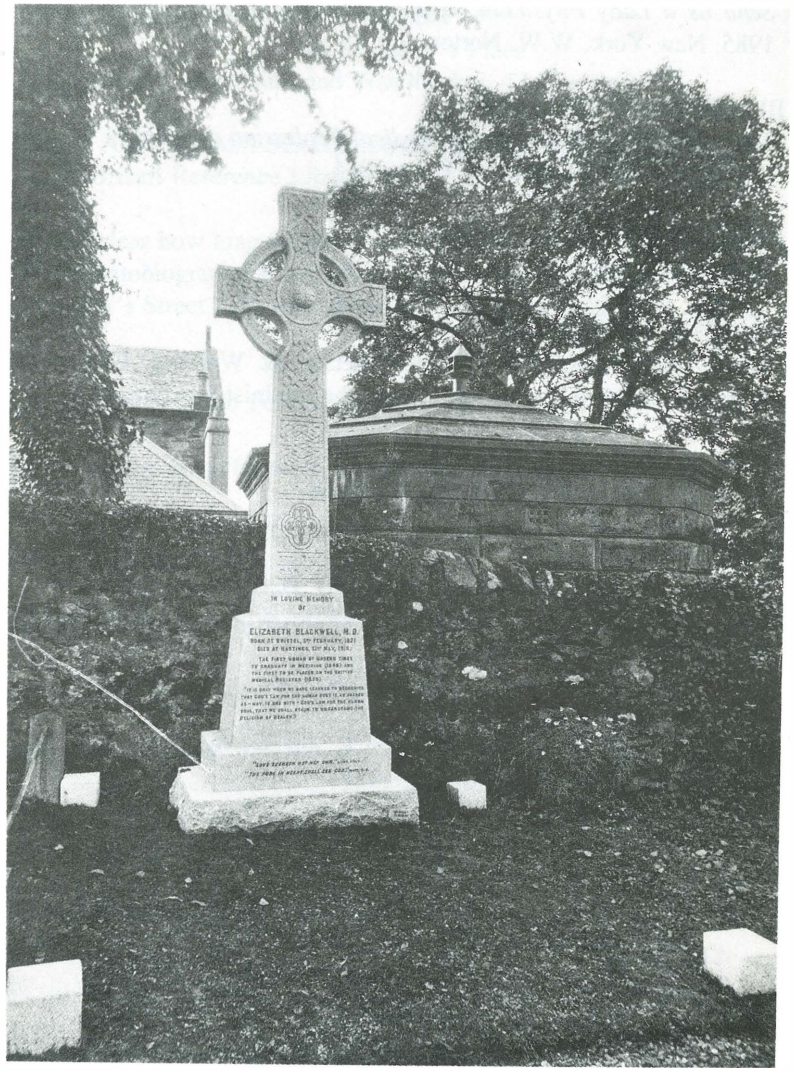
harmony with themselves and each other. Not content with having changed the medical profession Elizabeth Blackwell wanted to change the world. Her idealism was underpinned by strong religious convictions for, although her enquiring mind led her to question received doctrines and to move freely between denominations, her whole life and work were informed by basic Christian tenets.

In 1902 she came to Bristol for the last time. She and Kitty walked down Park Street, through Nelson Street, over Bridewell Bridge, through St. James's Barton and up to Kingsdown Parade so that she could show Kitty Mother Pugsley's Field. She was disappointed to find it built over and, when she realised that other landmarks, including her father's sugar house, had disappeared she suddenly felt weary of all the walking and searching. Hardly surprising at the age of 81.[10]

In 1906 she visited America, after an absence of 37 years, for Emily's 80th birthday. There were four Blackwell women doctors at the celebration, for two of their nieces had followed Elizabeth and Emily into the profession.

The following year, whilst on holiday in Kilmun, on Holy Loch, Elizabeth had a fall from which she never fully recovered. She died at her home in Hastings on 31st May, 1910, aged 89, and was buried, as she had wished, in Kilmun Churchyard.

When, in 1895, Dr Maria Zakrzewska visited Westminster Abbey and looked at the memorials to the famous she wrote: 'Will there ever be a monument to the first woman physician, because she was the leader of the movement; because she had the energy, will and talent ... and because she is a landmark of the era of women's freeing themselves from the bondage of prejudice and from the belief that they are the lower being when compared with men? We cannot afford to forget her'.[11]



Gravestone, Kilmun Churchyard.
By courtesy of Glasgow University Archives

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VIETOR, AGNES C.
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Footnotes

1 *Matthews Street Directory*, 1803:
Henry Browne, Jeweller, 37 Corn Street
16 St. James's Place
Hannah Lane, Goldsmith and Watchmaker, 57 The Quay.

2 Bristol Auxiliary Anti-Slavery Society Report of Proceedings 1823 to 1830. Bristol Reference Library L38.61.

3 It is unclear how long the Blackwell family lived at 1 Wilson Street. In her autobiography Elizabeth says it was for only a short time but Matthew's Street Directory shows them at that address from 1824 to 1829.

4 *Bristol Mirror*, 26th February, 1831.

5 R.B. Morris, *Encyclopaedia of American History*, 1953.

6 Described by Stephen Smith M.D. in Appendix to *Pioneer Work ... Women*, Dent ed. pub. 1914.

7 Baptismal Records of Bridge Street Chapel, Entry 185. BRO.

8 *The Times*, September 30th-October 6th, 1869.

9 See *Pioneer Work ...*

10 Elizabeth Blackwell Diary, 1902. (Blackwell Family Papers, Library of Congress).

11 See *A Woman's Quest* by Agnes C. Vietor.

Commemorations of Elizabeth Blackwell

Bristol

Elizabeth Blackwell House, Clifton. Private Nursing Home.

1 Wilson Street. Plaque erected by Medical Women's Federation May 1994.

Bristol University Medical School. Portrait and copy of Elizabeth's Blackwell's medical diploma, presented by M.W.F. 1994.

Hastings

Rock House. Plaque unveiled by Millicent Fawcett, June 1914.

London

Royal Free Hospital (formerly London Hospital of Medicine for Women). Plaque and Portrait.

United States

Hobart and Smith Colleges (formerly Geneva College). Elizabeth Blackwell House. Student accommodation named in her honour.

The Elizabeth Blackwell Award given annually for outstanding service to mankind.

New York Infirmary Annual award in her name to a woman doctor who has done outstanding work in medicine.

United States Postage Stamp bearing her portrait, issued 1970.

Plaque at 1 Wilson Street

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Pamphlets may be obtained from Peter Harris, 74 Bell Barn Road, Stoke Bishop, Bristol, BS9 2DG. Please add 28p to cover postage of one pamphlet and 15p for each additional pamphlet. A list of earlier pamphlets still available can be obtained from this address.