

Sophia Jex-Blake By Alexandra Webb

Personal Reflection

In researching Sophia Jex-Blake for this biography project, I learned several things. I was not aware of the extent of the restrictions on women's education in Europe during the 19th century. Most of the women's history courses I have taken have focused on American women and their struggles, and it was interesting to see how the plight of European women paralleled what I already knew of women in my own country. I was also interested to find a concrete example of the staunch social traditions of the middle classes in European society. By expressing his discontent with his daughter's desire to hold a job and earn a wage, Sophia's father provided further evidence of the ideologies regarding gender spheres during this time.

Biography

Every year, thousands of women across the world are admitted to medical school and begin the arduous process of becoming doctors. Today, as more and more women enter the medical field, the profession continues to diversify. But these women are lucky; they live in an era in which women can break out of the domestic sphere and embrace all the same privileges and opportunities open to men. They are ready to be at the forefront of the professional world and step into the future of medicine without hesitation or resistance. This transition was not always as simple, however, and in order to understand where they are going, one must acknowledge where they came from. This journey begins with a pioneer in the medical field, a champion of women's rights for equality in education: Sophia Jex-Blake.

Sophia was born in Hastings, England in 1840 to very traditional Anglican parents. Her parents were staunchly religious and very strict with Sophia and her sisters, and from an early age, Sophia was rebellious, often labeled "fresh, willful, and naughty"¹ Her father, Thomas Jex-Blake, was a former barrister, and while he was incredibly educated himself, he was not entirely supportive of Sophia's desire for higher education. However, Sophia was a very persistent and determined young woman, and in 1858 her father allowed her to attend Queen's College. As a student, she excelled in all of her lessons, and was eventually asked to teach mathematics, which her parents only consented to under the stipulation that Sophia was not to earn a salary. Sophia was a rather progressive thinker, and naturally disagreed with her parents on her position at the college. There is little mention of Sophia's mother with regard to her opinions about her daughter's education and employment; while it is likely she sided with her husband because she agreed with him, it is also possible that she simply did not feel it was her place to disagree with his decisions as head of the household. Thomas, specifically, had very traditional views on the place of middle class women in society and did not approve of Sophia joining the workforce as a wage earner. He acknowledged his objections in an 1859 letter: "I agree to all you say in favor of working; it is very honorable, very right and worthy of all praise but what I object to is your taking money for it...If you married tomorrow, to my liking, I should give you a good fortune."² In response to her father's narrow views, Sophia responded defiantly, saying that "as a man, [you] did your work and received your payment, and no one thought it any degradation, but a fair exchange. Why should the difference of my sex alter the laws of right and honor?"³

The idea of domesticity was very popular in the 19th century; the home was a very important and sacred institution. A middle class woman had numerous roles in the home- she was responsible for all of the servants, making sure they were performing their specific duties and overseeing the cooking, cleaning, and general care of the home itself. She contributed to the education of any children, oversaw their lessons, and provided emotional and spiritual support for her wage earning husband. Without many of the modern conveniences we enjoy today, running a 19th century home was a considerable amount of

¹ Edythe Lutzker, *Women Gain a Place in Medicine*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), 41.

² Margaret Todd, *The Life of Sophia Jex-Blake*. (London: Macmillan & Company, 1918), 70.

³ Lutzker, 42.

work, with or without the help of servants. This was the established and expected role of middle class women in England and much of Europe during this time.

Although she did not share her father's opinion, Sophia consented to teach at Queen's College without a salary. She worked there quite happily for a period of about three years, until 1862, when she was offered a teaching position at the Grand Ducal Institute in Germany. During this time, many schools for girls were being opened throughout England at the request of Queen's College, and Sophia was asked to help establish a school in Manchester.⁴ In order to better prepare herself for such a task, she decided to visit the United States in 1865 to take a tour of colleges for girls. She enjoyed this venture immensely: "I cannot speak in too high terms of the cordial kindness show to me and my friend in almost every place of education that we visited..."⁵ In 1867, she published *A Visit to Some American Schools and Colleges*, a comprehensive review of her tour of the United States, in which she gave praise to the work being done across the country to improve the educational opportunities for girls and women. It was in Boston that Sophia first began to take an interest in the field of medicine. During her time there, she stayed with Dr. Lucy Sewell and had the chance to meet a large group of female doctors working at the New England Hospital for Women and Children.⁶ Sophia was touched by the work these women were doing, and soon began volunteering at the hospital, eventually making the switch from the teaching profession to the medical field.

Along with friend Susan Dimock, Sophia applied to the medical school at Harvard University, but was unfortunately, although not unexpectedly, denied admission on the grounds that women were not allowed to train as doctors. Sophia found this both unfair and unacceptable, and began a "personal campaign...to break this barrier."⁷ While she was not allowed to matriculate at Harvard, it was possible for women to train and qualify as doctors in the United States, and in the fall of 1868, Sophia found a home at the newly opened Women's Medical College of the New York Infirmary for Women and Children. Sadly, Sophia's father fell ill and died during this time, and Sophia had to return to England, leaving her medical training behind her.⁸

The opportunities for women in the medical field were slightly less promising in England than they had been in the United States. English universities did not even allow women to enter as regular students; in order to attend medical school, they needed a degree from a university first. Many women sought education abroad; however with the passage of the English Medical Act in 1858, admission to medical school was restricted to holders of British university degrees. The passage of this act would signal the beginning of a long and difficult struggle for women in England to gain equality in education. There was a great deal of anti-woman sentiment with regard to the medical profession. A poem printed in an 1875 edition of *The Englishwoman's Review* perfectly captures the frustration felt by aspiring female doctors around the country:

"Tis a beautiful thing, a woman's sphere!
She may nurse a sick bed through the small hours drear,
Brave ghastly infection untouched by fear,
But she mustn't receive a doctor's fee,
And she mustn't (oh shocking!) be called an MD,
For if woman were suffered to take a degree,
She'd be lifted quite out of her sphere!"⁹

⁴ Esther Pohl Lovejoy, *Women Doctors of the World*. (New York: Macmillan & Company, 1957), 145.

⁵ Sophia Jex-Blake, *A Visit to Some American Schools and Colleges*. (London: Macmillan & Company, 1867), x.

⁶ Ibid, 145.

⁷ Mary Roth Walsh, "Doctors Wanted: No Women Need Apply" *Sexual Barriers in the Medical Profession, 1835-1975*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 101.

⁸ Lovejoy, 148.

⁹ Excerpt from *The Englishwoman's Review*, September, 1875.

While there is a definite sarcastic and mocking tone to this poem, the views expressed in it were similar to the objections from the medical field at the time. Medicine was not a proper practice for women; they were more suited to life in the domestic sphere. To counter this judgment, in her book, *Medical Women*, Sophia quoted a Mrs. J.S. Mill: "We deny the right of any portion of the species to decide for another portion...what is and what is not their 'proper sphere.' The proper sphere for all human beings is the largest and highest which they are able to attain to. What this is cannot be ascertained without complete liberty of choice."¹⁰

Sophia herself was at the forefront of this struggle. As she was leaving America in 1868, her friend and colleague, Dr. Lucy Sewell encouraged her to fight, not only for herself, but for women everywhere. "You will open the medical profession to women in England" were the last words Lucy said to Sophia before they parted, and she was determined to fulfill this prophecy.¹¹ After a series of letter writing, and with the support of numerous doctors, teachers, and politicians, Sophia was able to convince the University of Edinburgh in Scotland to admit her, as well as several other female students, and in 1869, they began attending lectures as full time medical students.

Although they were taking the same courses, the female students were required to attend separate classes from the male students, which involved extra expenses. They were also met with a good deal of resistance from many of the male students and several members of the faculty. In one instance, Edith Pechey, a friend and classmate of Sophia's, earned the top marks on a Chemistry examination; however, because she was a woman, the professor awarded her prize, the Hope Scholarship for Chemistry, to the male student with the 2nd highest exam score.¹² Across the board, members of the medical field were making it very clear that, while women had been allowed into their world, they did not truly belong there. One by one, their professors refused to teach them in protest, until their lessons were effectively suspended entirely. In 1873, Sophia and the other female students sued the University of Edinburgh to be allowed to finish their studies and sit for their qualifying examinations. The women won their case, but the following year it was appealed and overturned; every school in England was now closed to women.¹³

Sophia, however, was not discouraged by this experience; in 1874, after a four year battle in Edinburgh, she and her friends opened the London School of Medicine for Women. They assembled an intimidating board of governors for their school, including Charles Darwin, and the author of the 1858 Medical Act, W. Cowper-Temple. He managed to pass a bill through Parliament in 1876 that amended the Medical Act; the new bill allowed women with medical degrees from British schools to qualify as doctors in England, as well as women with medical degrees from Paris, Zurich, and Berlin, Bern, and Leipzig. In 1877, Sophia Jex-Blake graduated from medical school in Bern, passed the certification exams in Ireland, and, along with four other women, was finally allowed to practice medicine in Great Britain. The University of London soon opened its doors to female students, and the tide of resistance slowly began to turn in favor of equality.

Sophia Jex-Blake was a pioneer in the medical field. She broke barriers and approached every problem she faced with a take-no-prisoners attitude. She challenged an entire profession, and paved the way for the future of women in medicine. Her battle was fought mostly uphill, but her refusal to succumb to defeat, combined with her tenacity and determination helped her to revolutionize her field and fundamentally alter traditional ideologies about the "proper sphere" for women in the 19th century. It has been said that one can never fully and truly understand where they are going unless they acknowledge and appreciate where they have come from. For female physicians throughout England, and the world over, it is vital to recognize and value the plight of one very determined and passionate woman.

¹⁰ Sophia Jex-Blake, *Medical Women*. (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1886), 2.

¹¹ Lovejoy, 148.

¹² Ibid, 149.

¹³ Ibid, 149

Bibliography

Bonner, Thomas Neville. *To the Ends of the Earth Women's Search for Education in Medicine* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992. This book gave a lot of information about Sophia's struggles in Edinburgh and the events after she left Scotland.

Jex-Blake, Sophia. *Medical Women A Thesis and a History*. Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1886. This is a great primary source as it is Sophia's detailed and personal account of her time in Edinburgh.

Jex-Blake, Sophia. *A Visit to Some American Schools and Colleges* London: Macmillan & Company, 1867. This is another good primary source for cross referencing information about English colleges with ones in the United States.

Lovejoy, Esther Pohl. *Women Doctors of the World* New York: Macmillan & Company, 1957. This book is where I obtained a lot of my biographical information about Sophia's life- there is an entire chapter entitled 'The Quest of Sophia Jex-Blake.'

Lutzker, Edythe. *Women Gain a Place in Medicine* New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969. This book contains a great deal of biographical information about Sophia's childhood and her time in the States, with a large amount of material on her legal battle with the University of Edinburgh.

Todd, Margaret. *The Life of Sophia Jex-Blake* London: Macmillan & Company, 1918. This book literally has everything-it is a comprehensive account of Sophia's entire life and I used it to fill in any gaps in my research.

Walsh, Mary Roth. "Doctors Wanted No Women Need Apply" *Sexual Barriers in the Medical Profession 1835-1975* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977. This is where I obtained the information about Sophia's application to Harvard, and it does an excellent job of contextualizing the split between traditional and "liberal" views on women in medicine.

Time Line

1840- Sophia Jex-Blake is born

1848-1849- Queen's and Bedford Colleges founded in England (University of London)

1850- Hamburg College for Women founded in Germany

1858- Sophia attends Queen's College

1858- Medical Act passed in Great Britain, restricting admission to medical school to holders of British university degrees; medical school closed to women

1861- First woman allowed to take the baccalaureat exam in France

1865- Sophia travels to the United States, tours colleges for women, decides to attend medical school, and is rejected from medical school at Harvard University

1869- Girton College founded for women at Cambridge University

1869- Sophia, along with 6 other female students, is admitted to University of Edinburgh; lessons eventually suspended

1873- Sophia sues the University of Edinburgh to be allowed to resume classes and graduate, wins case; case is appealed and overturned a year later

1874- Sophia and friends open the London School of Medicine for Women

1876- Medical Act amended in England- women with British university degrees allowed to attend medical school, as well as holders of degrees from Paris, Zurich, Berlin, Bern, and Leipzig

1877- Sophia graduates from medical school in Bern, Switzerland, passes qualifying exams in Ireland, and is allowed to practice medicine in Great Britain

1881- Ecole Normale opened in France to train female teachers

1890- 1st woman graduates from French university

1900- Women gain access to German universities

1912- Sophia dies at the age of 62