

## Isabella (Ella) Ferrier Pringle (1876–1963)

Regular readers will have noticed that few female Fellows have been included in this part of the Journal. This is not a deliberate omission. Nor is it due to any failure of women to be 'notable'. That such an idea is far from the truth is illustrated by Ella Pringle and many other women! One hundred years ago, few women had the opportunity to become doctors, to reach high academic positions or to become Fellows of our College.

Two centuries ago, James Barry became a medical student in Edinburgh. After studying dissection under the surgeon Andrew Fyfe, Barry successfully defended a thesis entitled 'on hernia of the groin', thus becoming a diplomate as Doctor of Medicine in 1812.<sup>1,2</sup> This was a time when women were not allowed to study medicine. Barry, said to be very young for a medical student, was only admitted because of strong recommendations from both the Earl of Buchan and from General Miranda (a Venezuelan diplomat living in London and lobbying for his country's independence). After his death in 1865, Dr James Barry was shown to be a female and to have had a child. These facts had remained secret despite a career of over four decades in the Army Medical Service; Barry having finally reached the position of Director General of Hospitals,<sup>1,2</sup> a notable position for anyone especially a woman disguised as a man!

In 1858, the Medical Act was amended to refer to persons (i.e. no longer only male persons) to be admitted to the privileges of the original Act.<sup>3</sup> In 1862, Elizabeth Garrett petitioned our College to study medicine 'with the view of obtaining the Diploma of a Licentiate of the College'. This was rejected by 18 votes to 16.<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Garrett was subsequently the first woman to qualify in medicine in 1865, with the Licence of the Apothecaries Hall.<sup>3</sup>

In 1869, Sophia Jex-Blake and five other women petitioned Edinburgh University Court for permission to matriculate and to attend all classes and examinations. This was agreed. However, this was a pyrrhic victory as lecturers were not obliged to admit women and the majority of the (male) student body were strongly opposed,<sup>3</sup> fearing that this would make their own progress more difficult.

Isabella Pringle was born in Edinburgh on 1 December 1876. She was brought up in Morningside and in the 1891 census lived in Craiglea Drive. Her mother, widowed some years earlier, was now the head of the family. Now, two decades after Sophia Jex-Blake's time, the climate of opinion about women in medicine was changing. Therefore, after several years in some academic secretarial jobs Ella was able to attend classes at



**FIGURE 1** Dr Isabella Ferrier Pringle.

Edinburgh University and to graduate MBChB in 1909 at the age of 33. After her residency she travelled to Manchuria to work as a medical missionary until 1916. A combination of ill health and her developing special interest in Scottish maternity and child welfare led her to take on further residencies - at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh and the Royal Hospital for Sick Children. She then passed the Scottish DPH examinations and moved to Paisley becoming responsible for the new maternity and child welfare scheme. Under her leadership this became one of the most comprehensive of its kind in Scotland, fully two decades before the inception of the NHS.

Moves to acknowledge and support women doctors were debated in the quarterly meeting of the College in November 1918 and incorporated into a supplementary charter in January 1920. So Dr Pringle was able to complete her MD in 1921 and, in 1925, to enter and pass the MRCPE examination. She then moved to Edinburgh to become senior assistant medical officer in the maternity and child-welfare service of the City Corporation. Her colleague and

mentor was Dr TY Finlay. The partnership of these two committed doctors ensured steady development and improving services in the City. Ella became a Fellow of the Edinburgh College in 1929, the first woman to receive this honour.

Dr Pringle died on 27 May 1963 in Chalmers Crescent, Edinburgh. She never married but, as a colleague pointed out, 'Dr Ella Pringle was one of that devoted group of

lady doctors in this country who pioneered and gave their all for the furtherance of maternal and child health'. Eight decades after Ella Pringle's advancement to the Fellowship we can now look forward towards full equality for all women doctors, not just for those who are most 'notable'.

**Sandy Raeburn**

### References

1. Rae I. The strange story of Dr James Barry. London: Longmans, Green and Co Ltd; 1958.
2. Du Preez HM. Dr James Barry (1789–1865): the Edinburgh years. *J R Coll Physicians Edinb* 2012; 42: 258–65. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4997/JRCPE.2012.315>
3. McCrae M. Physicians and society. Edinburgh: Birlinn Ltd; 2007. p. 256–258.
4. Craig WS. History of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh. Oxford: Blackwell Scientific Publications; 1976. p. 581–584.

## THE COLLEGE JOURNAL PRIZE

The College Journal Prize 2013, sponsored by the Senior Fellows' Club, has been won by B Dobb et al for their paper on 'A pilot survey of decisions by acute medicine staff after thunderclap headache'. This paper can be read in issue 3, 2013 at <http://www.rcpe.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Dobb.pdf>

A prize of £250 will be awarded to the first-named (or corresponding) author of an original research paper on a clinical topic, deemed by a panel of judges to be the best paper by a doctor-in-training (i.e. pre-consultant level) published in *The Journal of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh* in 2014. The best paper will be selected by a panel of judges, including a senior Fellow, an active clinician and a member of the Editorial team.

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