

DR. EMILY STOWE

1831-1903

On May 1st, 1831, a Quaker couple in Norwich, Ontario, had their third daughter--Emily. She was destined to become Canada's first female doctor and also one of the great political activists of her time.

At the early age of fifteen, Emily Jennings began to teach grade school in the pioneer settlement of Norwich. Teachers then often started their work while in their teens, because the education span was much shorter than it is today, and teachers were harder to come by.

Since she was very conscientious, Emily would often stay up past midnight studying to keep her own academic standards ahead of those of her students. (It must have been very difficult for Emily to teach students who were often not much younger than she was!) Eventually, by saving what little salary she accumulated from her teaching, Emily was able to enter Normal School (a form of high school/college). Here she was awarded her First Class Teacher's Certificate in 1854. The same year, Miss Jennings was appointed Principal of Brantford Public School, becoming the first woman principal in Canada. For a young woman to hold such a position in those days was truly extraordinary!

The year 1856 held many changes for Emily. Not only did she marry John Stowe, a local carriage maker, but she moved with him to Mount Pleasant in Brant County. It was there that the couple had their three children, Augusta, John, and Frank. Mrs. Stowe also began teaching in a private school called Nelles Academy.

After starting their family, it was necessary for Emily to teach again for financial reasons, as John Stowe fell ill with tuberculosis. After his recovery, Emily supported him while he set out to fulfill his lifelong dream of becoming a dentist. While he attended Dental College, Emily paid his fees, along with all the family bills. This must have been very difficult because, at that time, women teachers were paid only one-third the amount that male teachers received! However, John's illness, combined with hopes

for a more comfortable income, helped Emily decide to go into medicine, and she made plans to enter Victoria College in Toronto. What a shock it was when her application was refused by the Board of the College:

The President of the University replied to her application saying, "The doors of the University are not open to women, and I trust they never will be."

Challenged, Emily Stowe returned, "The business of my life is to see that they will be opened that women may have the same opportunities as men".

Professor McCaul of the University of Toronto explained, "After discussing the question in all its bearings, it has been decided that admission of lady students to the university would render the enforcement of discipline very difficult and therefore, your request will have to be denied".

Emily had an answer: "Your Senate may refuse to admit women now but the day will come when those doors will open to every female who chooses to apply!"<sup>2</sup>

In the Quaker community of Norwich, it was not unusual for girls to become educated and pursue interests outside the home. Quakers strongly believed that women were to have equal partnership in the affairs of church and state, as well as in the home. Young women were not only taught the fineries such as embroidery, music, French, sketching...but were taught other basics, on an equal level with men. The aim was to raise girls and boys to be capable of supporting themselves and of contributing to society. The Quakers believed in higher education for all and had helped with the creation of the Women's College of Pennsylvania, which was the first organized college for women's medical education.

Solomon and Hannah Jennings had raised their family with these values. A family tree shows that all three of their daughters were destined to be doctors (Emily Stowe Archives, Wilfrid Laurier University). With her family's support, these Quaker values, and her "liberal-minded" husband, Emily Stowe felt encouraged enough not to give up the battle for her medical education.

Her refusal from Victoria College was a temporary delay (no Canadian colleges were accepting females), for soon after, she was on her way to the New York Medical College for Women. Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, a pioneer woman

doctor of the United States, had established this college just prior to Emily's acceptance. It was there that Emily Stowe became Dr. Emily Stowe, M.D., in 1867, officially Canada's first female doctor.

Returning home to Ontario, she set up her practice. However, because she was not a member of the Ontario College of Physicians and Surgeons, the disturbed male doctors complained that she was practicing illegally. They felt threatened by this invasion of women into "their" profession, and opposed it in case any other women decided to follow Emily. They feared the loss of female and infant patients to Dr. Stowe and increased competition. Their concerns made them defensive and ready to oppose Dr. Stowe in her practice of medicine in Toronto.

Although she was unable to gain admittance to any Canadian Medical Schools because of discrimination, Dr. Stowe was nevertheless practising illegally. Was it illegal? The laws stated that any graduates from American schools had to attend one session of lectures at a recognized Ontario medical school before they were allowed to practise in Canada. Ignoring the law, Dr. Stowe continued her medical services as discreetly as possible, collecting produce and homemade goods as wages. However, she was fined, threatened with jail sentences, and attacked by the press.

This persecution was not a deterrent for Dr. Stowe. Later she was recognized as a physician after attending one session in a Toronto medical school in the early 1870's.

Male chauvinism was still evident in various forms at medical school: teasing, rude remarks, and even sketches on the walls annoyed Emily and a classmate named Jennie Trout. Yet the girls had to remain silent because one of the conditions for admittance was that they were to "make no fuss". Life was made so difficult for the first medical women that "most of them had become rampant suffragettes by the time they succeeded in graduating".<sup>3</sup>

It took a lot of patience but after two years, Dr. Emily Stowe was able to practice "legally". However, at the time of her oral examination, Emily had refused to be "quizzed by a hostile group of 'male men'".<sup>4</sup> The resulting delay enabled Jennie Trout to become Canada's first licenced female

111 CHURCH STREET,

Toronto, *March 24* 1883



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*This certifies that Augusta Stowe  
has assisted me in my  
office one year, also  
that she has attended  
more than six cases of  
midwifery  
Emily H. Stowe*

"This certifies that  
Augusta Stowe has  
assisted me in my office  
one year, also that she  
has attended more than  
six cases of midwifery."

"Emily H. Stowe"

doctor because she completed the prescribed exam without incident.

Dr. Emily Stowe's practice in Toronto quickly earned her a reputation as a hard worker and a competent doctor and her practice grew swiftly. "Patients and colleagues alike respected her".<sup>6</sup>

Her work had prepared her to fight for the suffrage movement of which she was a well-known leader. When campaigning for better sanitary conditions for factory workers, Emily used her medical background in hygiene to add to her case. Similarly, when promoting women's rights, she pointed to herself as an example of a successful professional worker.

During one of her lectures at the Mechanics Institute, she spoke on "Women in the Medical Profession":

Women, she said, had equalled men in the various walks of science, art, literature, and in whatever they had undertaken to do. In the treatment of diseases of women, she claimed that her own sex were more competent to deal with them than men in as much as the former could enter more fully into their feelings than the latter. Scores

of physicians would admit that they were without the sympathetic knowledge which none but women could have; and many of them to her knowledge in New York had placed their female patients under women's treatment because they could not entirely enter into their feelings as well as those of their own sex.

In conclusion, she said, she had found gentlemen of the profession here were liberal in their sentiments regarding this new movement as any she had met in the States, which augered well for their intelligence.<sup>6</sup>

Dr. Emily Stowe's prophecy of schools accepting female students was beginning to show signs of reality.

## LADIES MEDICAL SCHOOL

Movement on Foot for its Establishment in Toronto

...The sessions will run concurrently with those of the other schools, and the examinations which they will be required to pass and diplomas which they will receive will be exactly the same as those of the other sex. In the hospitals, the attendance will be arranged so as not to clash with the male students.

Many of those interested in the present movement appear to think that ladies will not take up medicine with the intention of becoming regular practitioners but will rather devote their time to nursing. This may be true to a certain extent, but it will be found that very few of the graduates of the American or English colleges have done so. On the other hand, many of them have been, and are, very successful practitioners.<sup>7</sup>

Dr. Michael Barrett, one of Emily Stowe's professors, decided that he would help Emily pursue her dream to further female education. In 1883 a meeting was held under the patronage of the women's suffrage club and the project was received well--so well in fact that work began in the same year and the Women's Medical School was opened in 1883 with Dr. Barrett as its first Dean. Emily Stowe's own daughter, Augusta, was included on staff as the demonstrator in Anatomy. This school continued for twenty-five years until 1906 when the University of Toronto opened its doors to women students.



Dr. Stowe summarizes her own career:

My career has been one of much struggle characterized by the usual persecution which attends anyone who pioneers a new movement or steps out of line with established custom.<sup>8</sup>

Though she did encounter problems and persecution, Dr. Emily Stowe strongly overcame them, and broke a path for those following to enjoy the same opportunities.

#### FOOTNOTES

- 1 from M. A. Treffrey's Obituary, Norwich Archives.
- 2 Becky Kane, "Emily Stowe", in the Women's Kit (found at OISE, Toronto, Ont.)
- 3 Carlotta Hacker, The Indomitable Lady Doctors, (Toronto: Irwin and Co., Ltd., 1974), p. 17.
- 4 Ibid., p. 22.
- 5 Angus and Shirley White, Canadians All, Portraits of Our People, (Toronto: Methuen and Co.).
- 6 from the Archives at Wilfrid Laurier University, the "Emily Stowe Collection".
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Dr. Stowe, Manuscript Document, (Ottawa: Morgan Collection, Public Archives of Canada).