

DR. ELIZABETH BLACKWELL'S GRADUATION—
AN EYE-WITNESS ACCOUNT BY
MARGARET MUNRO DE LANCEY

Contributed with an introduction by
WENDELL TRIPP*

Elizabeth Blackwell (1821-1910), the first woman to receive the degree of Doctor of Medicine from a recognized medical school, was graduated from the Medical Institution of Geneva College (now Hobart College) on January 23, 1849. The occasion marked the culmination of years of trial and disappointment for Miss Blackwell, and was a key event in the struggle for the emancipation of women in nineteenth century America.

Miss Blackwell had applied to some twenty-nine medical schools, and had been urged by friends to resort to male disguise and study abroad, before she was finally accepted by the small medical school in Geneva, New York. After two years of study during which she endured the real and imagined hostility of the townspeople, and survived the awkwardness of her attendance in all-male medical classes, she received the degree. The event attracted nationwide attention and was even made the subject of a humorous poem in *Punch*. More important, it unlocked the hitherto-closed portals of medical study for women. Within three years of Dr. Blackwell's graduation twenty women had been graduated from American medical schools. Further contributions to the movement were made by Dr. Blackwell herself. She was instrumental in founding the first institution devoted to the training of women doctors in this country and also helped found the first school of medicine for women in her native England.

Accounts of Dr. Blackwell's commencement have been based on two personal descriptions, one written by herself and the other by the brother who escorted her to the gradua-

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tion ceremonies; these are found in her autobiographical sketches: *Pioneer Work in Opening the Medical Profession to Women* (London, 1895). Both accounts refer to the many ladies who packed the galleries of the Presbyterian Church where the exercises were held, but until now the ladies themselves have not been heard from. The following letter was written by one of those witnesses, Miss Margaret Munro DeLancey of Geneva. It is preserved among the DeLancey Papers in the Museum of the City of New York, which courteously allowed its publication, and it has not, apparently, been known to Dr. Blackwell's biographers.

Miss DeLancey, who was twenty-five when the letter was written, was the daughter of the Right Reverend William Heathcote DeLancey, first Protestant Episcopal Bishop of the Diocese of Western New York and a niece of Susan Augusta (DeLancey) Cooper, wife of the novelist James Fenimore Cooper. In 1852 she married Thomas Fortescue Rochester, M.D., of New York City and later of Buffalo, where she died in 1890. Her future husband had been graduated from Geneva College in 1845. The letter was written to her sister-in-law, Josephine M. (DeZeng) DeLancey, daughter of William Steuben DeZeng of Geneva (one of the Trustees of Geneva College), and wife of the lawyer and later historian, Edward Floyd DeLancey (the "Ned" mentioned at the beginning of the letter), who had been graduated from Geneva in 1843 and who was then living (briefly) in Albany.

The letter is of some significance in that it presents the viewpoint of one of the Geneva townspeople, a group which, in Miss Blackwell's opinion, was unsympathetic to her venture. Also noteworthy is the fact that this is a woman's letter, expressing a female reaction to the pioneering work of a fellow member of the sex. Certainly Miss DeLancey expresses no strong approval of the venture, but neither is she obviously hostile. Her tone may be one of pride or simple amazement or both. It would seem, however, that above all, Miss Blackwell was a curiosity in 1849.

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Letter from Margaret Munro DeLancey
(Owned by the Museum of the City of New York)

[Geneva, N. Y.] Monday evening [January 29, 1849]

Dear Joe— As Mother is writing to Ned, I thought I would scribble a few words to you about the graduation of "the female Student." The Medical Commencement took place last Tuesday—a bright Sunshiny day. . . . Annie and I went down early to the "Presbyterian House" but though there a full hour before the exercises commenced yet we were unable to get a *front* seat in the gallery. We sat in the Second tier. About half past ten or eleven the procession entered the building. The Lioness of the day, Miss Blackwell met them at the door and entered with the Medical Students—*without* hat or shawl. She wore a black silk dress—and cape—lace collar and cuffs and her *reddishly inclined* hair was very nicely braided. She sat in a front side pew with old Mrs. Waller until she received her Diploma. After President Hale "made a prayer" the choir and fiddles struck up, and the audience were favored with some *extraordinary* performances in *Presbyterian* church music. One *woman* in the choir was (next to Miss Blackwell) the most conspicuous individual in the meetinghouse. Most alarmingly loud were the tones she uttered, and the *very* peculiar emphasis of the words in the anthem (or whatever they called it) excited any feeling *but* that of solemnity! Take it altogether—the *ladies*—carried the day! There was scarcely a coat—excepting the Students'—visible! Nothing but a vast expanse of woman's [*sic*] bonnets and curious eyes. The noise on the "Singers' bench" completed, *President* Hale made a brief Address to the graduating class, then donned the velvet cap and seated himself in the large chair. *As usual*, he did not know his lesson, and had *to read* his few words in Latin as he called up the graduates. Four at a time they came on the stage. The Doctor spoke. They *looked* Knowing. One of them grasped the bundle of sheepskins, all four bowed and vanished. Last of all came "Domina Blackwell"! She ascended the steps.

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The President touched his cap and rose. You might have heard a pin drop. He *stood* while he conferred the Degree on her, handed her the diploma and bowed, evidently expecting she would bow also and retreat. Not so, however! She seemed embarrassed and after an effort, said to the Dr.—“I thank you Sir. It shall be the effort of my life, by God's blessing, to shed honor on this Diploma”—then bowed, blushed scarlet, left the stage and took her seat in the front pew among the Graduates, amid the Enthusiastic applause of all present. Her color left her cheek in a few moments and she sat calm and composed through the address of Dr. [Charles A.] Lee. This was long but very interesting and ably written. And at the conclusion he alluded in a dignified manner to the fact that one of the present class was a female, complimented the sex generally and Miss B. in particular, and told us that she was fully qualified to practise as Physician, and that the degree was *fully merited*. The applause was again *loud*, though brief. The music “*audiantur*”-ed, according to the Presidents order, a short prayer made, the benediction given, and *Elizabeth Blackwell M. D.* and her classmates were turned adrift on the Streams of time each “to paddle his own canoe”! The Faculty of Arts, the Medical professors, Father [Bishop DeLancey], and sundry others, as they passed out stopped and congratulated her. When nearly all the crowd had gone she put on her hat and shawl, took the arm of her brother [Henry Blackwell] (who came from N. Y. to be present) and so escorted, *Miss Blackwell, M. D.* mingled with the mass and disappeared and so ended Medical Commencement January 23d, 1849—a day to be remembered—being the first instance the world has ever had, where the degree of M. D. was conferred on a *Woman*. She intends proceeding to Philadelphia to study a few months with Dr. Bryan and will then go to Paris, and on her return establish herself in New York, where, as Dr. Lee told me, she would have more practice than she could attend to—that he would insure her *six thousand* dollars the first year! ! Nearly as good as going to California, is it not? . . .

Yours ever, M. M. DeL.