

No 16 Dr Louise McIlroy

Morag Cross 20 December 2013

***16.1

In 1916, the Scottish Women's Hospitals field unit in Dobrudja, Romania used a telling quote for fundraising: 'The large corps of the Scottish women motor transport ... is earning the greatest admiration ... [a Romanian official] said 'these women endure hardship ... they carry the wounded themselves. They work like navvies. No wonder England is a great country if the women are like that'. Dr (later Dame) Anne Louise McIlroy (1874-1968) may have been neither English, nor Scottish, but she was, by any measure, a woman of remarkable achievements. [Source: *The Times*, 9 Nov 1916, p3].

***16.2

Her father was a general practitioner in County Antrim, who, most unusually for the 1890s, educated his four daughters to a very high standard. 'Annie' (later 'A Louise McIlroy') and her sister Jane Hamilton McIlroy (1876-1967, an ophthalmic surgeon) attended Glasgow University in the 1890s, to be joined in 1901 by Maude Gilmour McIlroy (c1882-1967, later Mrs R J W Marshall, an animal painter and championship golfer). Their sister Edith Mary studied music, but died of TB in 1925 at Little Turnberry, Ayrshire, Maud's married home. [Sources: 1901, 1911 Census, Statutory Register of Marriages, Deaths, at www.scotlandspople.gov.uk; Irish Census 1901, 1911, at www.census.nationalarchives.ie; *Ireland, Births and Baptisms 1620-1911*, Online Resource, at www.ancestry.co.uk; *The Scotsman* 14 May 1921, p12; 16 Jan 1923, p10; 'Graduates to 1913', *University of Glasgow Story*, at www.universitystory.gla.ac.uk; *Queen Margaret College Register*, DC233/2/7/1/2, and Alma Topen (Personal Communication), University of Glasgow Archive Services].

***16.3

Almost inevitably, by being among the first female medical graduates in Scotland, Drs Louise and Janie McIlroy achieved many 'firsts' as women in their respective fields. Louise graduated in 1898, becoming the first woman at Glasgow to earn a Doctorate in Medicine (an additional qualification), in 1901, and then undertook research in Berlin and Vienna. She was 'assistant surgeon at Glasgow Female Lock Hospital, district obstetric physician ... of Glasgow Royal Maternity Hospital, [and] assistant gynaecological surgeon at the Royal Samaritan Hospital, Glasgow'. Louise was the first female 'gynaecological surgeon to the Victoria Infirmary', from 1906-10, and sat her DSc degree at Glasgow that year. In 1911 she was appointed 'senior assistant to the Muirhead Professor of Obstetrics ... at the University'. [Source: *British Medical Journal*, Feb 26, 1921, p324; *The Times*, 17 Feb 1921, p15; 'Dame Anne Louise McIlroy', *University of Glasgow Story*, at www.universitystory.gla.ac.uk].

***16.4

Until the late 1900s, Louise lived with her sister Janie, (who qualified in medicine in 1904), at Sandyford Place. Janie was 'extra dispensary surgeon for diseases of the eye', at Glasgow Royal Infirmary in 1908, also conducted neurological research at Glasgow University in 1911. [Sources:

Census 1911, at www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk; *Medical Registers* for 1907 (pp1052-3), 1911, p986, at www.ancestry.co.uk; J H McIlroy, 'Bupthalmia', *Scottish Medical Journal* 12 Dec 1908, p1745; J H McIlroy, 'Independence of the Peripheral Sensory Neurone ...', *Brain*, 4 Mar 1911, p464].

***16.5

On the outbreak of war, Louise was 'assistant gynaecological surgeon, Glasgow Royal Infirmary', which was situated in the congested Townhead area. While emergency medical committees tried desperately to cover civilian practices in Townhead, thereby releasing doctors, as 'the need for medical men ... with the forces is imperative', a group of suffragettes, feminists and 'lady doctors' offered their own services. 'It had been ordained that women could not fight, and therefore they were of no use in war time'. [Source: A L McIlroy, *British Medical Journal*, 14 Mar 1914, p579; *Glasgow Herald*, 3 Jul 1915 p12; Frances Balfour 1918, *Dr Elsie Inglis*, London, pp141, 143-5].

***16.6

Dr Elsie Inglis, who had already organised an auxiliary hospital in Edinburgh (It 'was not accepted'), was famously told by the War Office 'My good lady, go home and sit still'. 'In that utterance lay the germ of [her] inspiration ... "We will have a unit of our own"'. In this, Dr Inglis had many prominent supporters, including Lady Frances Balfour, sister-in-law of both Princess Louise, (Queen Victoria's daughter), and of Arthur Balfour, the former Prime Minister. [Source: *Glasgow Herald*, 3 Jul 1915 p12; Frances Balfour 1918, *Dr Elsie Inglis*, London, pp141, 143-5].

***16.7

A contemporary observed: 'Dr Louise McIlroy ... is one of little band of notable woman CMO's [chief medical officers] who made the name of the Scottish Women's Hospitals synonymous with surgical brilliancy and administrative efficiency on three fronts during the war. She went to France with the Girton and Newnham Unit [financed by the two Cambridge women's colleges] in 1915, and after six months work at Troyes, the French military authorities sent this camp hospital ... to Serbia, and later to Salonika'. As one journalist wryly noted, 'Before the War Office had learned there were competent women surgeons', the hospitals were being fully utilised by Britain's European allies. [Source: *Traralgon Record*, (Australia), 1921, p3, at <http://trove.nla.gov.au>; *Evening Telegraph*, 18 Feb 1921, p2].

***16.8

Although the Scottish Women's Hospitals for Foreign Service, co-ordinated by the 'National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies', bore the 'Scottish' name, they were supported by tireless, entirely voluntary fundraising networks and local committees all across the United Kingdom. 'A proposal was recently [summer 1916] made to change the name to 'British' ... [This] was rejected, first because of the 'goodwill' attached to the [Scottish] name, and secondly because of a desire to give Scotland the credit of having originated the scheme. The first unit ... serving in Salonika [Thessaloniki, Greece] under Dr McIlroy, is one of the few voluntary hospitals ... to accompany an expeditionary force'. [*The Scotsman*, 29 Aug 1916, p5].

***16.9

Some of Dr McIlroy's own letters afford brief glimpses of the general conditions. At Troyes, France [July 1915] 'We have streams of [local civilians] every Sunday coming out to see us ... We are hoping to [teach] the French the enormous advantages of open air and sunlight for septic wounds ... Our results have been simply extraordinary ... no antiseptics at all ... One man ... declared ... he would rather the English ladies would do his operation than anyone else ... Our sanitation is a great source of amusement ... we are quite expert now with inspection of cabinets, bidaye etc ... we have no marmalade or jam and we are très triste. Enclosed are some photographs ... The nurses take them. Excuse [my] writing but I live in a tent and the wind blows today'. [Source: Scottish Women's Hospital Collection, Glasgow City Archives].

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In July, 1917, at a 200-bed hospital under canvas in Salonika, an official 'had inspected every hospital out here and he thought ours looked the healthiest staff. He also commented about the extraordinary absence of flies.'

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Edith and Maude McIlroy, Louise's sisters continued fundraising in Glasgow for a mobile 'motor kitchen' for Dr Inglis's unit, 'It is to cost £285 ... on a Ford chassis ... I [Edith] have one or two schemes in view [to pay for it] ... the hospital [in Salonika] is full overflowing and with all nationalities'. [Source: Scottish Women's Hospital Collection, Glasgow City Archives].

***16.12

In a press release, June 1918, Dr McIlroy's new orthopaedic department (for 'helping our wounded Serbian allies') is described: 'A canvas shed has been erected where carpenters are ... making hospital ward furniture, etc. This is a great saving ... Some of [the patients] are making beautiful stonework designs ... the thistle and Serbian eagle feature largely ... most of the wards are making gardens outside the barracks'. [Source: Scottish Women's Hospital Collection, Glasgow City Archives].

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At various times there were additional SWH units, in Corsica, Malta, Serbia and at the Abbey of Royaumont in France. It was to France that an 'X-ray motor ambulance car ... the very latest thing in radiography ... equipped under the supervision of Marie Curie' was sent in 1915. It was 'to work just behind the firing line so that there will be no delay in X-raying wounded men. The ward orderlies were volunteers, mainly middle-class women who could afford to support themselves, as they were largely unpaid. [Source: *The Times*, Jul 30, 1915; pg. 9; Lyn Crawford, Glasgow City Archives, personal communication].

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The enormous effort undertaken by these women, frequently at great personal cost, helped to change the public perception of what women were actually capable of achieving. Elsie Inglis sadly died immediately on her return to Britain in 1917, but Dr McIlroy continued her own pioneering biography. From 1919-21, she was assistant surgeon at the 82nd General Hospital in Constantinople, and thereby finally able to work with the British Army. [Source: *British Medical Journal*, 26 Feb 1921, p324; *The Times*, 17 Feb 1921, p15; 'Obituary', *The Lancet*, 24 Feb 1968, pp429-30].

***16.16

In 1921, 'Dr Louise McIlroy ... is the first woman to be selected for a full professorship in the medical department of a leading University in competition with men... The salary, £2,000 is the largest ever paid to a woman for University work'. She was now Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, at the London School of Medicine for Women, and director of the obstetrical unit at London's Royal Free Hospital. One journalist celebrated: 'She has arrived at last - the first woman to secure an appointment open to both sexes at £2,000 a year'. A doctor who knew both the McIlroy physicians remarked: 'Dr Louise McIlroy ... her degrees, University honours and publications fill about half a column of type. Her sister, (also a Glasgow University graduate with almost as many degrees) Miss J Hamilton McIlroy MA MB DSc is assistant medical officer to the Glasgow School Board. Professor McIlroy's appointment is a triumph for feminism.' [Sources: *Aberdeen Journal*, 18 Feb 1921, p4; *Evening Post*, (Wellington, New Zealand), 20 May 1921, p2 at <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz>; *British Medical Journal*, 26 Feb 1921, p324; *The Register* (Australia), 7 June 1921, p3, at <http://trove.nla.gov.au>].

***16.17

As Dame Louise McIlroy from 1929, she again rendered valuable service organising medical services during the Second World War. Dame Louise and Dr Janie McIlroy retired to Girvan, joining their widowed sister Maude Marshall at Little Turnberry. The Carruthers twins, former military nurses (see their story), lived nearby at Largs at the same time. Janie and Maude both died in 1967, and Dame Louise in 1968. [Source: Statutory Register of Deaths, at www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk; 'Obituary', *British Medical Journal*, 17 Feb 1968, p451].