

DOCTOR AGNES McLAREN LAY APOSTLE AND DOMINICAN TERTIARY

FORTY years ago an unassuming old lady dressed in grey travelled up and down England with the novel purpose of interesting Catholic young women in a medical career so that they might devote themselves to the women of India, who could not be treated by men doctors. All doors were open to her since her family was well known. Her father, Duncan McLaren, had been a member of Parliament for Scotland; her stepmother, Priscilla, was the sister of John Bright; her home, from her earliest infancy, was a rendezvous of men and women earnestly interested in social problems. In her youth the Ragged Schools of Dr Guthrie occupied much of her time. Later she became an active member of the suffragette movement. The white slave trade was to her not something to be deplored as a necessary evil; she took active steps campaigning against it, even so far as to interview the Queen of Spain on behalf of its abolition.

Already well on in the thirties, she became an active sympathiser and friend of Elizabeth Blackwell and her companions in their endeavour to study medicine and obtain degrees. With a natural aptitude for the care of the sick frequently seen in her family circle and her great desire to help suffering humanity, she herself decided to study medicine. As the licensing in degrees in medicine for women had not yet been sanctioned by Parliament, she went to France to study. She was the first and only woman at the Medical Faculty of Montpellier, but was treated with respect and consideration. In 1876 she graduated. In order to be able to practise in her own country, she took an examination in Dublin, then the only medical school in Great Britain to grant medical degrees to women. Her health being delicate, she decided to settle in the British Colony of Cannes, on the Riviera, where she treated both the rich and the poor. The latter she treated free and also supplied their medicines. She even took them out for occasional drives. Her family, and her native Scotland, she loved ardently and visited every year.

On the occasion of one of her annual visits home, she broke her journey in Lyons and there heard a sermon in the Church of St Bruno. It impressed her so much that she sought an interview with the preacher, the Abbé Perra. She liked to talk about religious questions without, however, intending to give up Protestantism. Her idea was that it did not matter to what particular denomination one belonged exteriorly but that the important thing was the interior

disposition. She had adopted what she called 'an interior Catholicism', made up of its ideals, but one she considered more in the spirit of our Lord's teachings. Her interview with the Abbé Perra had no special effect, except that the following year she called on him again, with the strange request to help her to make a private retreat. He consented, but the only condition he asked was that she be willing to keep an open mind. For twenty years this retreat was repeated. Abbé Perra's method of dealing with a soul of Dr McLaren's stamp must be admired. From her biography by Father Cormier, the former Master General of the Dominicans, we learn with what tact and patience, what gentleness and lucid teaching, he led her on. At the age of 61 she became a Catholic apparently without any special struggle. Her biographer says that her conversion seemed to be the reward of her good life and charity. Soon after her conversion she was confirmed and later became a Dominican tertiary. The Dominican spirit and broad charity especially as she saw it in the work of Père Lataste appealed to her.

In addition to her past interests, she now wanted to share her newly-won treasure of the faith with others. For instance, she made suggestions for a more practical audio-visual teaching of the Catechism for children.

That the favourite interest of her youth, namely the welfare and progress of women, never flagged can be seen from the last and most important work of her life. It was to provide medical care for women hidden behind the curtain of 'purdah'. Millions of Mohammedan women in India were deprived of proper medical aid because customs or religious laws forbade them to be seen by men, other than their relatives. This excluded even men doctors. That the health conditions and mortality of these women and their children were deplorable she knew from her protestant friends who, after the study of medicine was open to women, went in increasing numbers to their aid, establishing Zenana (Women's) hospitals from north to south.

'What are Catholic women doctors doing for them?' she asked. Not finding any answer she wrote to the Archbishop of Edinburgh who put her in touch with the St Joseph's Foreign Missionary Society at Mill Hill. Providence willed that just then the Prefect Apostolic of Kashmir and Kafirstan was home for a Chapter. Mgr Wagner, having laboured in the most Mohammedan part of India, was the very person to answer the question. He was most willing and interested, for in the twenty-six years of his apostolic career he had never seen a Mohammedan woman except veiled from head to foot. He himself, having seen the easy access to them by protestant women doctors, had thought of establishing a hospital in his

Prefecture. After a personal meeting with Dr McLaren the foundation of a small hospital for women and children in Rawalpindi was decided upon. Mgr Wagner returned to India and purchased the necessary property, while Dr McLaren remained at home to raise funds. To make the support continuous she organised a committee in London under the patronage of Cardinal Bourne and the presidency of Lady Mary Howard. Mrs Jarrett, the mother of Father Bede Jarrett, O.P., was the treasurer for many years.

The hospital was opened in 1909 with a lay staff. After one year, the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary took charge of the nursing. The task of finding a Catholic woman doctor was a difficult one. To understand and cope with it the better Dr McLaren journeyed to India at the age of 72. On the way to Rawalpindi she had the opportunity of meeting and discussing the problem with several bishops. They, together with Mgr Wagner, felt that the solution would be the study of medicine by young missionary Sisters. With their written statements to this effect and her own conviction in favour of it firmly established, she returned to Europe to lay the petition for missionary Sisters to study medicine before the Holy Father, Pius X, and influential ecclesiastics in Rome. Hitherto this had been forbidden to Sisters. Already she had obtained the consent of two Religious Congregations who would allow their Sisters to study medicine, if Rome would grant permission. Five times Dr McLaren made the journey to the Holy City on the same quest. As no answer was given she appealed to Catholic women doctors in England, Ireland and Scotland. They were few in number and not one of them volunteered.

The tenacity and long-range view of Dr McLaren is proved by this that when the above appeal failed she set out to visit schools and colleges in order to find women students who would take up medical missions as their life work. She became interested in a young woman from the Austrian Tyrol who had heard of the need for women doctors for the women of India. This was Miss Anna Dengel who offered to devote her life to the cause sponsored by Dr McLaren. A personal interview never took place, but through correspondence Dr McLaren had opened the way for Miss Dengel to study medicine in Cork, Ireland. Dr McLaren died in April 1913. Miss Dengel began her medical studies in 1914 and went to India in 1920. During the four years there, in charge of the small hospital, home visits, and some travel in the country, she had seen so much unrelieved and preventable suffering that she decided to make it known. She was convinced that somehow, somewhere, the resourcefulness of Christian charity

would find ways and means for the immense need of the Medical Mission Apostolate.

In 1924 Dr Dengel went to the United States to carry out her plan. She met with much sympathy and interest and was able in 1925 to establish, with the help of Father Michael A. Mathis, C.S.C., the Society of Catholic Medical Missionaries in Washington, D.C. The community, although a religious one and ecclesiastically approved, was not a Congregation, as religious with public vows were not allowed to study and practise medicine without a dispensation from Rome. The early members of the Society made the sacrifice of public vows in order to be able to help the women in all their medical needs, including surgery and obstetrics.

Eleven years after the foundation of the Society, at the request of many mission bishops, the Sacred Congregation of Religious studied the problem of providing medical care in the missions. As a result, with the approval of Pope Pius XI, the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide issued an Instruction on 11 July, 1936, urging the foundation of communities for health work in the missions, allowing Sisters to study and practise medicine in all its branches. The Instruction decreed that they should be organised *ad normam iuris communis*. As the result of this the Society became a Congregation with public vows.

Now, after twenty-four years of existence, the Society numbers about three hundred and conducts five hospitals in India and has a medical centre in the Celebes, another on the Gold Coast and two in the United States among the negroes and Mexicans.

The Motherhouse and American Novitiate are in Philadelphia. In Washington, D.C., there is a house of studies from which the Sisters attend medical schools and schools of nursing and pharmacy.

Holland is a Pro-Province with its own novitiate.

In 1932 a postulate was established in London, at 98 Thornbury Road, Osterley, Isleworth, Middlesex.

Dr McLaren, once well-known in England and abroad, seems to be less so now, but only temporarily. Her saintly life, her heroic tenacity, her enlightened zeal, her sympathy for the poor, the helpless, the suffering, the unenlightened, cannot and will not remain hidden. Those privileged to reap the fruits of her lone efforts will always look to her as an inspiration and a model and pass on the flame to future generations. Father Cormier's biography of Dr McLaren, written one year after her death, and Katherine Burton's 'According to the Pattern', will help towards it.

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