

THROUGH A WOMAN PHYSICIAN'S "I"

By

MARJORIE S. SIRRIDGE, M.D.
Professor, Medicine and Medical Humanities
University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Medicine

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Marjorie S. Sirridge, M.D.

The author (AQA, University of Kansas, 1943) is a member of the editorial board of The Pharos.

The material included in this article was the subject of the Peter T. Bohan lecture, which I was invited to give at the University of Kansas School of Medicine on May 7, 1999. I chose the subject because of my long-time interest in the autobiographical writing of women physicians. I had received my first such autobiography, *A Woman Surgeon: the Life and Work of Rosalie Slaughter Morton*,¹ as a gift from my parents when I was a premedical student and that book has remained on my bookshelf since that time along with other autobiographies added since. My own oral history was published in 1982 as part of a collection called *In Her Own Words*.² In the past few years, with the help of a clinical medical librarian, I have searched for all such autobiographies that are available and chose in this lecture to write about some of these women's lives as the women themselves told them. A much longer and still growing list of women physicians' autobiographical writings is available on the internet at <http://research.med.umkc.edu/teams/cml/womendrs.html>.

A small number of women physicians chose to write with some degree of completeness about their lives. Most of these books were printed in single editions and by obscure publishers, so that they are not readily available in medical libraries. Most of the earlier ones were published as complete works, often late in the lives of their authors, but also available are some diaries, journals, and memoirs that were found and edited after the deaths of the authors by friends, families, or scholars. Some recent autobiographies, written by women still living, are also extant.

The earliest of the autobiographies, published by **Harriot K. Hunt** in 1856 when she was 51 years old, has a long involved title, *Glances and Glimpses; or Fifty Years Social, Including Twenty Years Professional Life*.³ The author lived from 1805 until 1875 in Boston. Although she



Harriot K. Hunt

never formally attended medical school, she practiced medicine successfully for many years; and, after being refused admission to Harvard twice, and after eighteen years of medical practice, she received an honorary M.D. from the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania in 1853. Because of the the failure of the

medical profession to help her only sister during a severe illness, she set out to educate herself. She apprenticed herself to a husband and wife team of "naturalist" English physicians practicing in Boston. Under their care, her sister did eventually recover from this poorly-defined malady and began to practice medicine with her. Hunt became an active social reformer and was personally committed to educating women about health issues. Her autobiography in-

Mary Ann Kuchta, Senior Medical Illustrator, University of Missouri - Kansas City School of Medicine

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cludes impassioned commentary on her social concerns about a woman's right to education, a career, and appropriate payment for work. A biographical sketch of Hunt was published in 1868 in a volume entitled *Eminent Women of the Age*.⁴ The author of the section about woman physicians was the Reverend H. B. Elliot, and his opening line was: "Perhaps no American woman of our time has made herself heard and felt in so many directions and amid such diverse circumstances as Harriot K. Hunt."^{4p528} Perhaps it was this widespread influence that explains her desire to publish an autobiographical work in which she could not only tell the story of her own struggles as a physician, but could also deliver to the reading public her fervent social commentary.



Another of the five physicians included in *Eminent Women of the Age* is **Elizabeth Blackwell**, whose name is known the world over as the first woman to receive an "official" medical degree. She, too, published an autobiography,

Elizabeth Blackwell which appeared much later in the century. Her diploma, received from Geneva Medical College in New York state in 1849, was altered to read "Domina" instead of "Dominus." The news of this historic event prompted the publication of a poem in *Punch* "in honour of the fair M.D." The next to the last stanza, which is included in the 1914 Everyman's Library edition of her autobiography is:

*How much more blest were married life
To men of small condition
If every one could have his wife
For family physician;*

*His nursery kept from ailments free,
By proper regulation,
And for advice his only fee
A thankful salutation.*⁵

Blackwell was born in 1821 and lived until 1910. Her autobiography, *Pioneer Work in Opening of the Medical Profession to Women*⁶ was first published in 1895

when she was 74 years old. It describes in detail her early life in England; the years spent earning money for medical study; her two years of medical study, including a summer apprenticeship at the Blockly Almshouse in Philadelphia; postgraduate study in Europe, where she lost the vision in one eye from an infection she developed while caring for a newborn at la Maternité Hospital in Paris; her "practical work," as she described it, in America; and her later return to England. The personal telling of her story ends in 1876 when she was 55 years old. The 1914 Everyman's Library edition includes a supplementary chapter by Robert Cochrane that describes the last 30 years of her life.

Blackwell was a very broadly educated and attractive woman. She wrote about the everyday happenings in her life skillfully and with a delightful sense of humor. She shared her feelings of despair and loneliness, her satisfaction in her accomplishments, her joys and sorrows. In her autobiography she also included notes from the journal in which she recorded her experiences. One of her journal entries from soon after her enrollment at Geneva College shows her sense of humor particularly well:

November 9.—My first happy day; I feel really encouraged. The little fat Professor of Anatomy is a capital fellow; certainly I shall love fat men more than lean ones henceforth. He gave just the go-ahead directing impulse needful; he will afford me every advantage, and says I shall graduate with *éclat*. Then too, I am glad that they like the notoriety of the thing, and think it a good "spec."^{5p70}

We are fortunate that many of her letters to family and friends were saved; some are included in the autobiography. The value she placed on her freedom is expressed in a letter written to a friend while she was in Paris in 1849. She described in great detail her restrictive life at la Maternité Hospital. The letter opens with these lines: "I last wrote to you when I was my own mistress; now in some measure I have given up my liberty, and I must give you a little sketch of my prison life, that you may be able to picture the surroundings of your sis-

ter M.D."^{5p106} It is a tribute to the importance of Elizabeth Blackwell's accomplishments that a statue of her was recently installed on the grounds of Hobart and William Smith Colleges, the scion of Geneva Medical College.



Marie Zakrzewska

Only one other autobiography by a woman physician was published in the 1800s. In 1860, **Marie Zakrzewska**, one of the very early courageous pioneers for whom the medical profession was opened by Elizabeth Blackwell, published a partial autobiography entitled, *A*

Practical Illustration of Woman's Right to Labor.⁷ Her formal autobiography, *A Woman's Quest*,⁸ was not published until 1924, many years after her death in 1902. She was a well trained German midwife to whom the medical profession in Germany was completely closed, and it was only through Elizabeth Blackwell's help that she was able to attend the Cleveland Medical College, from which she graduated in 1856. What is most remarkable and impressive about her life story is her commitment to the importance of clinical training for physicians. She was described as having a "quick, impatient temper," and she, herself, said that she was "too frank and candid." She spent most of her life providing much needed clinical training for women at the New England Hospital for Women and Children in Boston, which she founded in 1862. In a book about the hospital, *Hospital with a Heart*,⁹ the first chapter is composed of a biographical sketch of "Dr. Zak," who is lovingly called "The Mother of Us All." The first paragraph of the chapter praises her for turning the New England Hospital into one of the most important women's medical institutions of the nineteenth century. The chapter ends with a quotation from her final goodbye, which she wrote only weeks before her death, intending it to be read at her funeral.

During my whole lifetime, I have had my own way as much as any human

being can have it without entirely neglecting social rules or trespassing upon the comfort of others more than is necessary for self-preservation.

And now upon this occasion, I wish to have my own way in taking leave of those who shall come for the last time to pay such respect as custom, inclination and friendship shall permit, asking them to accept the assurance that I am sorry to pass from them, this time never to return. . . .

I am not speaking of fame, nor do I think that my name, difficult though it be, will be remembered. Yet the idea for which I have worked, the seeds which I have tried to sow here and there, must live and spread and bear fruit.^{9p42}

An unusual autobiography whose title page reads, *The Autobiography of a Neurasthene: As Told By One of Them and Recorded by Margaret A. Cleaves M.D.*,¹⁰ was published in 1910. Cleaves graduated from Iowa State University in 1873 and was sixty-two years old when the book was published. It is perhaps the earliest example among women physicians' writings of that literary subgenre in which physicians describe their personal experiences with illness. In a confusing introduction, Cleaves declares her intention to write the story of a patient with neurasthenia as follows:

This the biography of a physician. The actual conditions are recorded. It does not matter whether it was really a man or a woman. The complete exhaustion of supreme nerve centres as in this case rarely befalls a woman. So far as the fulfillment of professional duties, the achievement of a definite purpose with this tremendous handicap is concerned, it was done.^{10p5}

The difficulty in maintaining a career despite nervous exhaustion constitutes the subject of the story, and as a portrait of a specific disorder the story provides a great deal of insight into the patient's perspective. With the recent increased interest in "illness stories," there has been much autobiographical writing of this type by both men and women lately,

including books by several women physicians.

There are eleven more full-length autobiographies written by women who graduated in the 1800s (see the author's list on the University of Missouri—Kansas City's web site). These appeared primarily in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, when these women were between sixty and ninety years old. It is interesting that five popular novels in which a central character was a woman physician were published between 1881 and 1891, indicating that there was considerable public recognition of the physician role for women. Autobiographies written toward the ends of the women physicians' lives told stories of great courage. In her autobiography, *Mine Eyes Have Seen: A Woman Doctor's Saga*,¹¹ published in 1941, **Alfreda Withington** told of serving with Dr. Wilfred Grenfell in Labrador and with the Red Cross in France during World War I. An urban practice was not exciting enough for her after her return from the war, so she went to the hill country of Kentucky,



Anne Walter Fearn

where she served a very backward population and made house calls on foot or on horseback. **Anne Walter Fearn** was one of two courageous women who described their lives as missionary physicians in China in their autobiographies. (The other was Hattie L. Rankin.) Fearn graduated from the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania in 1893 and spent forty years in China where she started a medical school for Chinese students in a missionary hospital. In her autobiography, *My Days of Strength*,¹² published when she was seventy-two years old, she described her life and work there and the birth of her daughter:

The birth of a baby in China is not news; thousands are born with each tick of the clock. By the time I was

ready to give birth to Elizabeth I had delivered upward of three thousand babies since my medical school days, a number that was to grow to six thousand and seventeen recorded births before I was through practicing medicine. But when an obstetrician gives birth to her own child it ceases to be an incident and assumes proportions of grave magnitude.^{12p101-02}

Even more moving is her description of her terrible suffering at the the later loss of this Elizabeth, her only child.



Bertha Van Hoosen

The intrepid **Bertha Van Hoosen's** autobiography, *Petticoat Surgeon*,¹³ was written in 1947 when she was eighty-five years old and still practicing medicine. She had traveled all over the world, and in 1923 had written a series of travel articles that were published in the *Medical Women's Journal*. She described how she had started medical practice alone in Chicago and how she eventually became the chairman of the obstetrics/gynecology department at Loyola University. She was committed to the concept of women physicians supporting each other and was one of the founding members of the American Medical Women's Association. Despite her success, she always said that she had a "medical-practice inferiority complex" that kept her studying and striving to improve. There were three printings of the original edition of her autobiography, but later a special edition was published exclusively for

members of the People's Book Club at a cost of \$3.75. It had a rather colorful, dramatic paper jacket and inside the hard covers were idealized pic-(missionary)



Helen McKnight Doyle

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lished in 1983, following her death.¹⁴ Doyle's life story is representative of women who did not have to crusade for admittance to medical school, since the schools in California where she lived had, from the very beginning, accepted women. Also, she worked outside of academe and, like several other women physicians, practiced in a remote area where the few male physicians were more likely to be glad of help than threatened by the competition.

Full-length autobiographies written by women who graduated in the first 50 years of this century in the United States number twelve (see the author's list on the University of Missouri—Kansas City's web site). By 1910, all except two women's medical colleges had closed, so that most of these women physicians graduated from public institutions that were no longer segregated. Many of these women married, and their autobiographies began to appear in the 1950s and 1960s, when the authors were more than sixty years old. An exception are the memoirs of **Mary Canaga Rowland**, which were not published until 1994, long after her death. Rowland's memoirs are entitled *As Long As Life: The Memoirs of a Frontier Woman Doctor*.¹⁵ She told of growing up in a sod house in Nebraska and attending medical school at the insistence of her husband, who practiced in Herndon, Kansas. She eventually joined him in practice there before moving to Topeka, Kansas, after his death.

From *Dugout to Hilltop*,¹⁶ the autobiography of **Margaret Ross Evans Stewart**, who graduated from the San Francisco Medical School in 1900, described her early life in rural Nebraska. Her career in the Public Health Service during World War I, and later in the Veterans Administration, showed the change in the types of career options available to women in the early 1900s. She wrote that she did not see herself as a pioneer but as a practitioner. Perhaps being part of a more protected governmental system created for her a different practice environment.

Faye C. Lewis was another child of the upper midwest. She graduated from Washington University in 1923 and

wrote three autobiographical books, the first in 1940 and the third much later in 1971.^{17,18,19} In the latter she described her early experiences as the oldest child of five in a pioneer family in South Dakota. Two other autobiographers who graduated early in the century accompanied their husbands to the rural hill country of the south and wrote about their lives as pioneer physicians there (**Mary Cravath Wharton** and **Marty T. Martin Sloop**).

Portia Lubchenko had a very different life story.²⁰ She was the first woman to graduate from a southern medical school, the North Carolina Medical College. After graduation she married a Russian agronomist who had visited her father's plantation, and returned with him to Russia where she practiced as a school and country doctor in Turkestan, a country unknown to most people in the United States at that time. She escaped from Turkestan to the United States with her husband and children at the time of the Russian revolution, and eventually practiced medicine in Colorado. A considerable portion of her autobiography concerns their Russian years.

A much more modern story is *Office Hours Day and Night*²¹ by **Janet Travell**. Published in 1968, it was very popular because of Travell's role as the private physician of President John F. Kennedy. Travell wrote that when she was a little girl she decided to be a doctor like her father because he was a magician and whatever he did was wonderful. She told of her happy childhood and how, after graduating from Wellesley, she went directly to medical school at Cornell, from which she graduated in 1926 as part of a class of sixty-three, nine of whom were women. Her privileged background, the support of her father and the educational opportunities available to her are in striking contrast to the circumstances of many earlier women physicians. Also, her marriage to a very

successful man, who supported her in her physician role and who assumed much of the responsibility for their two daughters, was very different from the lives of most of the earlier writers.

The autobiography is written in a breezy style and contains much of the author's poetry. She described her time at the White House as seeming like practicing medicine in Grand Central Station on the run, or, perhaps, at its central information booth.

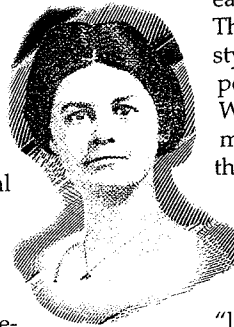
Throughout the twentieth century, there have been many book-length memoirs written by women that are "limited autobiographies." They deal with particular times or issues in the authors' lives. Some of them are based on diaries, some are related to personal or family illness experiences, and many describe experiences in medical school and residency training. Training in surgery and obstetrics/gynecology spawned a significant number of these in the 1970s and 1980s, when more women began to seek specialty training in the once-hallowed operating suites. It was no longer particularly novel for a woman to go to medical school, but becoming a surgeon aroused keen public interest.

In 1987, **Perri Klass**, who had written regularly for the *New York Times*, published a popular limited autobiography titled, somewhat dramatically, *A Not Entirely Benign Procedure*,²² which described her years as a medical student at Harvard Medical School. She later published a second limited autobiography titled *Baby Doctor*²³ about her residency years and a somewhat autobiographical novel, *Other Women's Children*.²⁴

A few more full-length life stories have appeared in the later years of this century. The most recent one is *Walking Out on the Boys*²⁵ by **Frances Conley**. Published in 1998, it attracted considerable notoriety because of her exposition

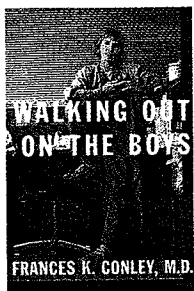


Janet Travell



Portia Lubchenko

of perceived ingrained gender discrimination at Stanford University. The book reveals her many deep personal feelings about Stanford and its faculty. Like Janet Travell, Conley came from a privileged background. She had no problems gaining entrance to the medical school at Stanford. Her father, though not a physician, was a faculty member at Stanford and he encouraged her. Her issue with the way in which women are treated in academe has to do with unequal oppor-



Frances Conley

of her book, which poignantly expresses her feelings:

On a personal level I have learned to get through one day at a time. I still work at Stanford although it is not always comfortable. . . . I have been and still am a capable neurosurgeon. Respect and gratitude come from many patients I have cared for over a number of years, and I experience tremendous power as the result of my professional competence. But I know I will never truly belong. This has been my greatest disappointment.²⁵p242

A recent book by social anthropologist Joan Cassell includes oral interviews with thirty-three living women surgeons.²⁶ She had previously studied and written about the lives of surgeons in general. These women, interestingly, differed from the male surgeons she had studied. They also spoke of interest in hearing and exchanging descriptions of the pressures they had felt to behave in "feminine" ways. The book raises many of the same issues as *Walking Out on the Boys* and *In Her Own Words*, although only one of the nine women included in the latter book is a surgeon.

Until about halfway through this century, autobiography was viewed as a marginal and inferior literary form, even though the number of such volumes written in English was sufficient to fill an astronomical number of library shelves. Most of these books were written by men, and most critics (also men) read them from a masculine point of view. The number of autobiographies written by women is still very small compared to those written by men, despite the irony that the first full autobiography written in English by anyone was the *Book of Margery Kempe*. It was recorded by two scribes for Margery Kempe in 1438 because she was not literate. The manuscript was discovered in 1934.

In the last fifty years, there has been a substantial amount of literary criticism about autobiographical writing in general; but nothing was written about women autobiographers until 1980, when Estelle C. Jelinek published the first collection of essays on women's autobiography.²⁷ In these essays, critics argued that the genre of women's autobiography displays unique "narrative discontinuity," tests boundaries between the public and the private spheres, and exhibits a collective consciousness.

Since then, there have been several more general critical studies and many studies about specific groups of female autobiographers such as writers, African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Latin-Americans, Jews, and lesbians — but none critiquing the stories of women physicians. In such studies one of the most generally accepted theses of gender difference in autobiographical writing appears to be that men emphasize their individuality and women define their identity in terms of their relationships with others. However, I agree with Domna Stanton²⁸ that, more important than their multiple personal relationships, particularly for women physicians, are the conflicts between the private and the public, and the personal and the professional in their lives. Stanton noted that this was true even for Margery Kempe in the fifteenth century, with her two equally demanding identities of wife-mother and pilgrim-mystic.

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It is certainly true for women physicians with their two demanding identities of homemaker-wife-mother and physician-caregiver. Even women who do not marry and rear children usually assume the homemaker role in some way and often care for extended families. Most women autobiographers include details of their personal lives and relationships, as well as their experiences as physicians, in their autobiographies. The role of physician-caregiver, however, seems to take center stage in most of the books.

Anne Morrow Lindberg once commented that people who like to recount their adventures — the diary-keepers, the storytellers, the letter-writers — are a strange breed who feel half cheated of an experience unless it is retold, and that it doesn't really exist until it is put into words. This may be descriptive of many women physician autobiographers but, undoubtedly, for those who did not write autobiographies until late in their lives, the pleasures of autobiography were mainly the pleasures of reminiscence. Most of the works, however, are very much occupied with medicine as a calling. Some used their physician roles as platforms for seeking health reforms and supporting women's rights, and, in the present, for seeking equal opportunities in academe. Some had hopes that their life stories might describe their experiences in such a way that they would inspire other women to consider medicine as a career.

In 1986, Suzanne Poirier wrote an article about "role stress" in medical education, in which she looked at recent autobiographical writing of both men and women about their medical training.²⁹ She compared the limited autobiographies of five women who had graduated from medical school and published their books in a seven-year period between 1976 and 1983 with ten books written by men in a similar period. Her conclusion was that the process of personal development was more apparent and pressing for the women because so much of what they did could be attacked on the grounds of their sex. Later, in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, Poirier and Louis Borgenight wrote a review of the book *Doctors Talk About Themselves*.³⁰ In that review the authors

noted that many recent feminine autobiographies were written during the most vocal years of the women's movement, a fact that probably explains the greater willingness of women to speak out about their gender-related problems than those writing in earlier times. But the authors also felt that as long as the works of physician authors, whether male or female, mirrored some of their basic struggles in medicine, these physicians sought mainly to describe their experiences to others and in so doing to understand those experiences themselves.

An obvious conclusion about these life stories, published over the space of more than a century, is that, despite the many differences in time, place, circumstances, and type of medical experience, that which stands out is the commitment of these women to medicine and the satisfaction with their roles as physicians. Even when difficulties seemed overwhelming — and almost every book included many such situations — the pride in being a doctor was the most important thing in each writer's "I."

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Omission on Page 3 of Through A Woman Physician's I. (Omission in parentheses)

It had a rather colorful dramatic paper jacket and inside the hard covers were idealized pic-(tures of a woman physician of an earlier time.

The autobiography of **Helen MacKnight Doyle**, another nineteenth century pioneer who graduated in 1893, reads like the *Little House on the Prairie*. It was published in 1934 in both a regular and junior edition and repub-)