

Blue Plaque Presentation: Mabel Purefoy FitzGerald

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Mabel Purefoy FitzGerald

- The first woman to attend the Honours School of Physiology at Oxford
- More than 3000 hours of medical education
- Three years of clinical training with the Father of Modern Medicine, Sir William Osler
- Eleven scientific publications
- Four years working as a clinical pathologist
- Sixteen years as a lecturer in bacteriology

Too often, we sum up the worth of another by listing their accomplishments. Yet, the circumstances under which they achieve these feats are critical for understanding history. Evaluating someone by a list of their achievements is dehumanizing. Mabel persisted through extraordinary challenges to accomplish the items on her list. To understand her fight to survive in a profession that often didn't seem to want her, one must delve deeply into her life experiences and the realities of the time in which she lived. We can't do that in ten minutes. Therefore, I hope to stir your curiosity about Mabel by offering brief insights into her intriguing life.

A typical entry from the diaries Mabel penned throughout childhood and into her twenties reads:

“Wet day so cleared the coach house and played snob cricket and hockey. Made a fearful row. Had screaming fun! Made toffee in the evening, ate it as well. Music with Henry, Laura and Mother. Henry Wilson came up to supper, did tricks, played Dumb Crambo (first line of songs), great fun.” – August 14th, 1889

Mabel grew up with two brothers, four sisters and her parents on the family estate, North Hall Farm and Brickworks in Preston Candover near Basingstoke in Hampshire. Her energy was legendary, and she could frequently be found cajoling family and friends into tennis and hockey matches, long walks to distant villages and putting on plays and musical evenings. The FitzGerald women were an integral part of their small community. They did good works, visited friends and family, and helped with village and church functions. Marriage was unlikely as eligible bachelors in the landed gentry were scarce. The five FitzGerald daughters and other women in their position generally accepted the situation as the order of the day.

In the winter of 1895, when Mabel was twenty-two years old, tragedy struck. Her father was caught in a severe snowstorm, fell ill with pneumonia and died. Two months later, her mother died. Some said of a broken heart.

The FitzGerald women moved to Oxford in the autumn of 1896. Mabel's sisters resumed their roles in the local community doing good works, visiting friends, and helping at church and village events. However, amidst riots against higher education for women and dire warnings that women risked insanity if they tried to learn too much, Mabel enrolled in chemistry and zoology lectures through the Society of Oxford Home Students.

In search of a larger garden and a more spacious house, the sisters moved from Norham Gardens here to this beautiful home at 12 Crick Road one year later. Over the next ten years, Mabel discovered a passion for medical science and reveled in long days of attending lectures, conducting research, and learning clinical medicine.

One day, Professor Osler and pathologist James Ritchie stopped her in the hall of the Radcliffe Infirmary and showed her a room filled with boxes and old furniture. They cajoled Mabel into helping them clear the space and then turn it into a clinical pathology lab which she staffed in her spare time. She loved the work and said of Osler: "He would often call in on his way to the wards, stimulating interest and leaving that ineffable something that gave wings to the day!"

Finally accepting that she would never obtain her medical degree at Oxford, Mabel went to New York City on a research fellowship at the newly established Rockefeller Institute. Although this was the start of years of travel, Mabel frequently returned to her beloved sisters and cherished Crick Road home to restore her faith in herself and humanity.

After a few years in New York, hoping to finally become a physician, Mabel applied to Cornell Medical School. Her mentors provided glowing references.

Nobel Laureate Sir Charles Sherrington - "[Mabel has a] thoroughness, untiring zeal, [and a] truly critical spirit." [She] impressed me with her pursuit of inquiry into function."

John Scott Haldane - "[Mabel] afforded abundant evidence of remarkable capacity and keenness for scientific work together with the power of persistent application."

Upon reviewing her credentials, Cornell and the New York Board of Regents informed Mabel that she must attend high school to prove that she was sufficiently educated for the rigors of American medical school. Imagine completing more than 1200 hours of medical

education, publishing five research papers and then being told to attend secondary school. Thirty-eight-year-old Mabel began high school in January 1911.

On her summer holiday, she joined Haldane's research team on an expedition to Pikes Peak in Colorado. The men deemed it unseemly for a woman to stay with them at the comfortable inn atop the 14,000-foot mountain. Instead, Mabel traveled alone by train, wagon, mule and on foot throughout the wild and remote mining camps perched high in the Rocky Mountains, measuring carbon dioxide and hemoglobin in men, women and children.

Mabel proved more than capable of handling the dangers of the wild west. One afternoon she was riding on the front seat of an open wagon traversing a deadly road carelessly tacked to the side of a mountain more than 11,000 feet above sea level. She looked to her left to find nothing but air and a lush green valley hundreds of feet below. Concerned for her safety, Mabel glanced at the driver only to find him fast asleep! She gave him a swift jab with her umbrella, and he awoke mumbling that he had only been thinking of his dear mother. Unimpressed, she held her makeshift weapon at the ready for the rest of the journey.

In September, Mabel returned to New York City to finish high school and compile her results. More than one hundred years later, in his 2019 Nobel speech, Sir Peter Ratcliffe lauded Mabel and those results as the first to demonstrate the extreme sensitivity of the hypoxia sensing system.

Cornell and the Regents continued to deny Mabel entry to medical school and insisted she attend college. She dutifully attended New York University for two years, only to be informed that the Regents of the University of New York did not recognize the credentials of New York University, and they summarily rejected her application.

Despite relentless setbacks in her career, Mabel's years in New York City were not without great joy and adventure. She often accompanied her friend Dick Welling, a solicitor and political reformer, to concerts, art shows, and operas. Dick's friends, who included some of the city's most affluent and influential families, were quick to welcome Mabel into their midst. Mabel reported to her sisters that she had "quite been taken up by the 400" a tongue-in-cheek reference to a list of those at the top of New York society composed by the famed Mrs Astor in the Gilded Age. Mabel became fast friends with the Roosevelts, Forbes, and Morgans.

In the spring of 1915, days after her last devastating rejection, Mabel received a telegram from James Ritchie, who was now working in Edinburgh. He asked her to replace one of his physicians, a clinical pathologist at the Royal Infirmary who was leaving to serve in the war.

New York did not think her worthy of applying to medical school, while Scotland wanted her to be a clinical pathologist. She immediately left for Scotland.

As soon as Mabel was settled, she resumed her quest to become a physician by applying to the Royal College of Physicians in London. They cautioned her that she would be too busy with her duties as a clinical pathologist and that she was too old. Nevertheless, if she insisted, she first needed to attend a few more classes.

Mabel persisted in her pursuit of a medical degree until 1936, when, at the age of sixty-four, she returned to her home, here at Crick Road, to care for her aging sisters. For the next thirty-seven years, Mabel lived quietly in Oxford, caring for her sisters, doing good works, visiting friends and volunteering at village festivals. She rarely spoke of her life in science.

When her niece, Molly, who took great care of Mabel in her last years, asked about a barometer on the mantelpiece, Mabel was cryptic in her response, “That’s not a barometer. It’s an altimeter. I used it when surveying in the Rockies.”

Her friend and neighbor, physicist Sir Roger Elliot, lured her into telling a few tales of her scientific career. Impressed and fascinated with her story, he approached Regius Professor of Medicine Sir Richard Doll about awarding Mabel an honorary degree.

To her great delight, on December 14th, 1972, in Convocation House, at the age of 100, under the admiring gaze of more than 200 family and friends, Mabel was presented with an Honorary Master of the Arts.