

## **Interview with Derek S. Linton, Distinguished Professor of History, Hobart and William Smith Colleges**

### **Q. Summarize the impact of Blackwell's achievements from your perspective.**

The two most important and enduring of Blackwell's achievements seem to me to have been the intertwined ones of providing medical care for poor women and children both in New York City and London and providing opportunities for women to pursue medical careers. The New York Infirmary for Women and Children not only offered free medical treatment for thousands of women and children annually in Lower Manhattan, but also enabled women with newly minted medical degrees, including her sister, with clinical training which was otherwise difficult for women to obtain since hospitals wouldn't accept women doctors. The Infirmary also trained nurses during the Civil War and regularly taught midwifery at a time in which qualifications for midwives were generally low. Medical education of women doctors, nurses, and midwives was institutionalized with the founding of an associated medical college in 1868. Blackwell was also instrumental in introducing the same opportunities in London when she returned to England in the 1870s. There she helps found the London School of Medicine for Women and also established a clinic for poor women and children in London's notoriously impoverished East End.

### **Q. Were the hardships Blackwell faced in her time similar to the ones women face today?**

Different times, different problems. After all, at the time she completed her Md. at Geneva Medical College no medical institution in the world would accept women. When attending Geneva Medical College, she seems to have encountered the greatest opposition from the wives of members of the faculty, who wouldn't deal with her. Today in several countries women constitute most physicians. There are still some specialties, such as surgery, in which women are a small minority, but that is changing. Blackwell thought that women should confine themselves to what today would be OBGY and pediatrics, a limitation against which a number of her students subsequently chafed.

### **Q. What aspect of Elizabeth Blackwell's personality do you think helped her succeed and why?**

Well, she was certainly determined, perseverant, and completely confident. Some of her confidence certainly came from her religiosity, since she firmly believed that she was doing God's work. Her strong character enabled her to find a medical school that would accept her and complete her studies and subsequently to receive clinical training and establish her own dispensary and infirmary. Her strengths also had their downsides, however, since she was somewhat rigid and inflexible and ended up having clashes with many of her closest colleagues and supporters including her own sister and Florence Nightingale.

**Q. Do you believe Blackwell's effect has extended beyond the field of medicine? If so, what other fields do you believe she's made an impact on?**

No. She was, of course, a lifelong moral and social reformer, as an abolitionist, an anti-vivisectionist, a moral purity advocate (against prostitution). But although outspoken and dedicated, her work in these areas wasn't particularly successful.

**Q. What do you personally think Blackwell's biggest accomplishment is?**

Largely the ones alluded to in Q.1 above-her contributions to providing medical care for poor women and children and her enormous efforts to expand opportunities for the education and training of women as medical professionals.

**Q. How did Blackwell overcome and endure those who questioned her views, morals, and motives?**

As mentioned, Blackwell was intensely religious and not one given to self-doubting. She had a rigid sense of personal rectitude, which enabled her to overcome opposition. You should bear in mind that her kind of intense Protestant moralism was widely shared in the milieu she operated in both in New York City in the 1850s and 60s- and middle-class Victorian London. Some of the causes she espoused were ultimately triumphant such as Abolition obviously and the campaign against the Contagious Disease Acts in Britain which moral purity supporters saw as inimical to liberty and virtually legalizing prostitution. But Blackwell's role in the movements was relatively small, and there is no evidence that she had much impact as a social and moral reformer.