Mary B. Walker, M.D. and the pioneering use of prostigmin to treat myasthenia gravis

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Key words: St. Alfege’s Hospital, neurology, Scotland, archaeology, Deil’s Dyke

Abstract. In an era when women were not admitted to the University of Edinburgh and when England’s first female physician (Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, 1836–1917) had to venture to Paris, France, to earn her M.D. in 1870, the career of Mary Broadfoot Walker (Figure 1) (1888–1974) stands out for truly remarkable achievement. She is credited with making the most significant discovery in medical therapeutic within the British empire.

Personal background

Doctor Walker’s father and grandfather were both barristers. Her father attended the University of Edinburgh and graduated as a ‘prize man in the law class’. He returned to his home of Wigtown in 1873 where he rapidly acquired a reputation as an able and trustworthy pleader who had the ear of the court. He was recognized as a genial individual with a pleasant personality. He had community interest as the Collector of Wigtown and also served as the local Conservative agent. He was active in outdoor sports such as the Wigtown Tennis Club, the bowling club, and billiard club. He was also interested in fishing.

The maternal family name, Broadfoot, was largely localized to the Wigtownshire area of southern Scotland from the mid 1500s. Seven families of Broadfoots emigrated to the United States in April 1775, shortly before the Revolutionary War. Other Broadfoots followed as late as 1779.†

Mary Broadfoot Walker was born in 1888 at Croft-an-Righ, the daughter of Alexander D. Walker and Ellen MacLelland Walker. Mary was the eldest of a family of four, and she and her siblings (Gracie, William, and James) attended local Wigtown schools.

The premature death of Dr. Walker’s mother in 1901 led to a second marriage of her father to the sister (Mary) of his first wife (Ellen). Dr. Walker’s

* Read at the annual meeting of the Cogan Ophthalmic History Society, National Library of Medicine, Bethesda, Maryland, March 15 and 16, 1996.
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¹ Handwritten family records covering six generations.
father died in 1908 at about the age of 60 years when Mary was 20 years of age. However, he had established a happy home and was devoted to his family of two sons and two daughters. Mary’s step-mother led the family until her death in 1949. The family home then passed to Mary, who was a warm and loving family leader.

Dr. Walker received her basic medical degree (MB, ChB) from the Glasgow & Edinburgh Medical College for Woman in 1913. She was now financially helpful to both her sister and surviving brother through their university education. Her sister (Figure 2) Gracie (born 1892), also became a physician; James (born 1889) became a third-generation barrister.

Today the entire sibship is deceased. Dr. Walker’s brother, William (born 1894), was killed in combat flying with the Royal Air Service in France during World War I (1918). He was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Croix de Guerre. A sole surviving niece, Mrs. Pamela...