



Jessica Kirwan // This past July, seven women known as the Edinburgh Seven were posthumously awarded bachelor degrees in medicine by the University of Edinburgh, 150 years after they had been allowed to enroll in the medical school but not actually earn degrees. Although the women had garnered some support at the university, and much more at the city level, they were eventually pushed out by opposing male students and faculty who rioted and threatened the university. Not until 1894 were women allowed to earn a degree in medicine at the University of Edinburgh, and the first women graduated in 1896, more than two decades after their pioneering predecessors had abandoned Edinburgh to pursue degrees on the continent. Although the seven women did not succeed in earning their degrees in Edinburgh, their campaign was successful in publicizing their efforts and raising awareness about their mistreatment. One of the most interesting characteristics about the campaign of the Edinburgh Seven is how their leader, Sophia Jex-Blake, leveraged the reach of local media to achieve these goals.

Originally from England, Sophia Jex-Blake traveled to America as a young woman where she began her medical education in the 1860s. In America, co-ed classes were common and women had been studying and practicing medicine since the 1830s. But her studies were interrupted by the death of her father, and Sophia returned home wanting to remain closer to family. Sophia also wanted to continue her medical education, but no UK medical schools were open to women at that time. Nevertheless, she decided to apply to the University of Edinburgh owing to their historically progressive views on education. She was originally denied admittance to the medical school with the excuse that matriculating women and men together was unthinkable considering the sensitive nature of the subject matter. Moreover, they said, they did not want to make exceptions for a single woman student; therefore, Sophia advertised for additional women to join her in her mission and she succeeded in meeting six additional women who then applied for enrollment at the school. Sophia's time in America had taught her of the power of organized feminism as she witnessed the many gains American women were making in education and healthcare by organizing supportive communities, developing strategic relationships, and publishing in the popular press. Her American friends instilled in her the belief that public political action was the best means to achieving her progressive goals.

Soon after arriving in Edinburgh, Sophia approached the newspaper *The Scotsman*, where she found a sympathetic ear in the editor-in-chief Alexander Russel. By then, Russel had been at the paper's helm for two decades and he would serve an additional decade to remain its longest-running editor-in-chief. (Russel, by the way, went on to marry one of the Edinburgh Seven, Helen Evans, with whom he had three children, including the fascinating feminist and writer Helen

Archdale.) *The Scotsman* covered the events surrounding the Edinburgh Seven in detail, transcribing legal proceedings, and assisting in drawing financial support. Founded in 1817, the Edinburgh-based periodical was a driving force behind the cause. Although still considered a liberal newspaper today, in the nineteenth century, *The Scotsman* was a more radical newspaper, a “declared enemy of privilege and corruption,” according to long-time columnist Albert Morris. Per Morris, in 1872, the Scotsman became the first company to run its own train, delivering papers to Glasgow within an hour of printing in Edinburgh. By 1865, circulation had risen to 17,000 a day and by 1873 it was 40,000 (which, interestingly, is more than double its print circulation today). Stories in *The Scotsman* could then be picked up by other periodicals, quickly publicizing the events surrounding Jex-Blake’s campaign and helping garner support among an increasingly literate British populace.

The influence of the press in broadly publicizing the events occurring in Edinburgh between 1869 and 1871 cannot be over-emphasized. Here it helps to quote Catriona Blake in length, who, for her book on the history of England’s early women doctors, *Charge of the Parasols*, dove into periodical archives:

“The Scotsman maintained detailed, and at times daily, reporting of...events...It published verbatim texts of statements made by those involved and complete lists of subscribers to appeal funds. This is characteristic of the detailed coverage of the issue of medical women in the local and national press during the years of the campaign. All the major issues, such as mixed versus separate classes, the demand for women doctors, and the scope of female medical practitioners, were debated fully in leading articles and in letters to the editor in various newspapers and periodicals.

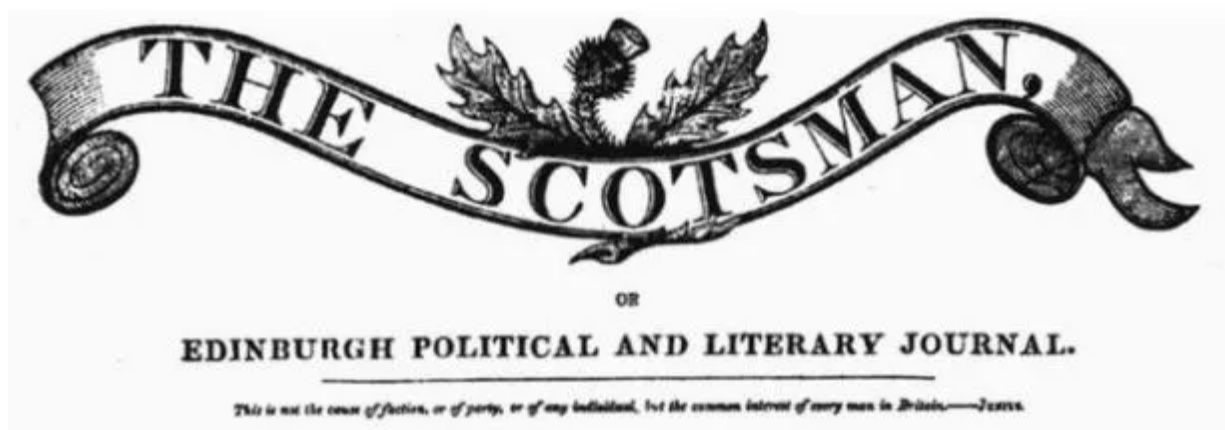
“The struggle over women’s entry to the university gripped the attention of the middle-class community in Edinburgh. Here, as elsewhere, the issue of medical women became caught up in other conflicts. There was a background of tension between ‘Town’ and ‘Gown’, that is, between the city and the university...The city was critical of any action which went against the Scottish tradition of free access to education for all. Supporters of medical women insisted that the university was meant for the general benefit of the community and not for the benefit of the professors.”

Although the opposition movement had strong support from *The Lancet* and *The British Medical Journal*, the negative publicity on the sometimes shocking behavior of the male students and faculty made their actions increasingly difficult to defend among all ranks of society. And, while most male physicians may have agreed on the reasons to exclude women from their profession (again I’ll recommend Catriona Blake for a thorough analysis of their reasoning), slowly the tides began turning against the male medical students, who, through their aggressive tactics, were putting an already insecure profession at risk of losing its credibility. Meanwhile, while the Edinburgh Seven were struggling in solidarity to earn degrees, individual women doctors such as Elizabeth Blackwell (who had studied and practiced in America) and Elizabeth Garrett Anderson (who earned her degree by building individual relationships with mentors some years before Sophia began her campaign) were proving themselves as intelligent, capable practitioners and

popular lecturers, helping dispel negative stereotypes about the unsuitability of women doctors. Undoubtedly, however, the coverage provided in *The Scotsman* helped change public sentiment towards women physicians.

While the Edinburgh Seven failed to achieve their goals in Scotland, they did all eventually complete their medical educations. Some became practitioners and some did not; some were registered and some were not. Sophia founded the first medical school for women in London as well as the Edinburgh School of Medicine for Women and a women's hospital in Edinburgh.

Today, the future of *The Scotsman* is much less certain than the future of women doctors as it struggles to stay afloat. The paper's creditors are reportedly in negotiations to sell. John McGurk, former editor of *The Scotsman*, has blogged about how the periodical has been outcompeted by British newspapers, which, he argues, have done a better job of providing Scots with the content they prefer. The strength of *The Scotsman* in the 19th century, however, was in its reach outside of Edinburgh. It seems appropriate, then, that while we are belatedly recognizing the achievements of the Edinburgh Seven we also acknowledge the role of *The Scotsman*, which, by opening its doors to Sophia Jex-Blake, helped further feminist causes.



"The Scotsman," (1817), Public Domain

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