Maude Abbott: A Revolutionary in the Museum

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Maude Elizabeth Seymour Babin

- Born March 18, 1869, St Andrews East, Quebec
- Abandoned by her father at birth, orphaned at 7 months
- Her maternal grandmother, Mrs. William Abbott, adopted and home schooled Maude and her elder sister Alice
  - She remained remarkably cheerful, despite loss of her husband and 9 children
  - She provided unwavering support: “Dear child, you may do anything you like”

The Undergraduate Years

- 1886: Maude attended third class of women students admitted to McGill’s Faculty of Arts (Donalda Department for Women)
- Simultaneously acquired a teaching diploma from the McGill Normal School
- 1890 Bachelor of Arts degree
  - Lord Stanley Gold Medal
  - Class valedictorian
Maude was determined to study medicine, however, McGill would not accept women for that program. Maude sought help from her relative, John Abbott, a McGill graduate who had been dean of its law faculty from 1855 until 1880 and who was to become prime minister of Canada in 1891-1892. 1889: public petition, public debate that caught the attention of the media, and enormous public support. But McGill would not have her. 1890 Faculty of Medicine at Bishop's College, the only woman in her class. “Those were dark days. No longer within the walls of my beloved McGill, among rough students, many of whom seemed to have lower standards than those among whom we had worked together for the pure love of working, and struggling, as only a first year student in medicine does struggle.”
**Dr. Maude Abbott…**
- 1894 graduated with honors
  - Senior Anatomy Prize
  - Chancellor's Prize
- Accepted to internship at the Montreal General Hospital by Grace Richie (the first woman to work at MGH)

**A Trip to Europe**
- Maude studied in England, Germany and Austria
- But the trip was cut short – Maude developed diphtheria, then Alice too, and Alice went on to suffer a mania that plagued her for the rest of her life

**A Clinic for Women and Children**
- Returning to Montreal, Maude opened her own office treating women and children in 1897
**The Medical Museum**

- 1898: appointed Assistant Curator of the Medical Museum of McGill University by Professor Adami.
- The specimens there had never been organized; she learned how best to classify them by visiting some American medical museums.
- Baltimore: Introduction to Osler.

**A Story of Chance**

- Maude was invited to Osler’s ward rounds.
- “The visit over, the procession had just left the wards when an unpleasant, but certainly fortunate, accident befell me, which threw me suddenly into personal contact with him to an extent which even my connection with McGill was not likely to have done.”
- led to dinner……..

**Osler’s Effect on Abbott**

- “and then, as I sat there with heart beating at the wonderful new world that had opened so unexpectedly before me, he turned suddenly upon me.”
- “I wonder now, if you realize what an opportunity you have?”
1901: Curator of The Medical Museum of McGill

At first the work seemed “a dreary and unpromising drudgery; but as Dr. Osler had prophesied, it blossomed into wonderful things”

1904: Sir William Osler at McGill

“Maude waited among the crowd assembled before the specimens, her heart fluttering as if awaiting a lover of exceptional tangency

“I shall never forget him … walking down the old museum towards me, with his great dark, burning eyes fixed full upon me.”

Osler was so impressed that he wrote McGill's Dean of Medicine, saying that Dr. Abbott's work "was the best McGill had done to date, (that) she had a genius for organizing [McGill's Medical Museum] and there was no collection in North America or Britain that came close to it."

1907: The IAMM

- Abbott’s contacts in the US led to the development of the International Association of Medical Museums, known today as the International Academy of Pathology
- 1907-1938 she served as the international secretary and editor of the Journal of the International Association of Medical Museums.

*The IAP continues to recognize her leadership and contributions.
*Its letterhead reads "Founded by Maude Abbott in 1906."
*The USCAP established the Maude Abbott Lecture in 1958
A most dynamic, amusing, lovable and sometimes maddening person

- She encouraged students to study in the museum, and it became a compulsory part of the program
- “In one afternoon, she could suggest enough research to occupy a man for a hundred years”
- Her demanding nature was compounded by her disorganized ways

A Token Recognition

- 1910 (eight years before women medical students were admitted) McGill University awarded her an honorary MD CM
- Appointed her to medical staff as Lecturer in Pathology
  - A male physician with the same outstanding reputation would have been given an assistant professorship or even a full professorship
  - She was eventually appointed Assistant Professor in 1925.

The Administrator

- In 1923 she was appointed Chief of Pathology at the Women’s Medical College of Pennsylvania.
- In 1926 Abbott returned to McGill where she continued her work on congenital heart disease that ultimately led to her book
The Foundations of Cardiac Pathology

- Earlier at the Royal Victoria Hospital, she had produced an important paper reporting a study of functional heart murmurs.
- The Montreal Medico-Chirurgical Society did not admit women, so the paper was presented by a male colleague; the paper was so well received that Maude was elected the Society’s first female member.
- In 1905, Osler invited her to write the section on congenital cardiac disease for his textbook, *Systems of modern medicine*, published in 1908.

The Atlas of Congenital Cardiac Disease

- Published in 1936.
- A new classification system for congenital heart diseases based on 1000 cases.
- Praised as an important contribution to medical knowledge.
- Paved the way for her to be made an honorary member of the all-male Osler Society.

The Legacy of Maude Abbott: The Canadian Woman in Cardiology

- Diego Rivera, Mexico, 1943.
- Maude is included among the fifty most important heart specialists in world history in a mural for the National Institute of Cardiology of Mexico City.
- She was the only Canadian and the only woman depicted in the mural.
During her career, Dr. Abbott published over 140 papers and books and delivered countless lectures.

She volunteered as editor of the Canadian Medical Association journal from 1914-1918 when the editors served in World War I.

After Sir William Osler died in 1919, she dedicated a special edition of the Bulletin of Pathology to him; that 600-page volume with 120 contributors took six years to complete.

One of her editors wrote:

“When I started editing this work, I had a beautiful suit of chestnut hair. Now it is completely white and almost gone.”

To which she replied:

“I am dreadfully distressed about your hair. I am sure when you get my illustrations it will begin to grow again.”
She Was Unstoppable!

- In 1936 Dr. Abbott turned 65 but had no wish to retire.
- McGill insisted, and compensated by granting her an honorary doctorate.

A Disorganized Eccentric

- Journeys in her company never had a dull moment…”

The Legacy of Maude Abbott

- 1924 Founding member and first Chair of the Medical Women of Canada (The Federation of Medical Women).
- 1938 The Foundation established the Maude Abbott Memorial Scholarship Loan Fund.
- 1994 Dr. Maude Abbott was posthumously inducted into the Canadian Medical Hall of Fame.
- 2000 The Federation successfully lobbied Canada Post to pay tribute to Dr. Abbott in a postage stamp entitled *The Heart of the Matter*, issued as part of the Millennium Collection.
Through her published writings and devoted teaching, as well as her patient and persistent personal style, Maude Abbott made invaluable contributions to medicine and to the advancement of women. Her life distinguishes her as one of Pathology's greatest heroines and role models.