



# Agnes McLaren

## First Woman Doctor

### From the

## Montpellier School of Medicine

## 1878



### 1/ Agnes McLaren Association

The association *Agnes McLaren*, established in August 2018 aims to maintain the memory of Agnes McLaren, a Scots woman and the first female doctor to graduate from the Faculty of Montpellier in 1878 whose life was dedicated to providing health care for the most disadvantaged or excluded women and children in society.

Agnes became only the tenth female in Britain to qualify as a doctor. She subsequently became a member of the governing council of the London School of Medicine for Women and, by 1882, was a fellow of the Royal College of Physicians at Dublin. She opened a practice in Cannes (France) and was also visiting doctor at Edinburgh's Canongate Medical Missionary Dispensary, splitting her time between the two locations.

## **2/ The actions of the association.**

### **The Agnes McLaren award**

The Agnes McLaren Award is a medical award that recognizes work leading to progress in the healthcare of the most disadvantaged or underprivileged women in society. It is organized along the following lines :

- Prize awarded by the Agnes McLaren association with the support of the Faculty of Medicine of Montpellier
- Open to students of the Faculty of Montpellier
- It will reward an original exercise thesis
- It will be awarded every two years at the end of the academic year
- The Jury members will be chosen from diverse medical and medico-social fields as well as NGO medical representatives.

### **The inauguration of a maternity teaching room named after Dr Agnes McLaren in the New Faculty of Medicine in Montpellier.**

This inauguration took place on April 12, 2019.

### **Elaboration of an exhibition on Dr McLaren's life to be held in the Old Faculty of Medicine.**

### **Support actions for foreign medical students or doctors studying in Montpellier** and therefore isolated from their family and friends.

### **3/ Agnes McLaren – her life and works**



Agnes McLaren was the daughter of Duncan McLaren, a Scottish Presbyterian, also a prominent businessman, liberal politician and Lord Provost of Edinburgh. As a young adult, she joined the fight for the liberation of women. Along with her step-mother, Priscilla Bright McLaren, she signed the women's suffrage petition in 1866 and was elected secretary of the National Society of Edinburgh for women's suffrage. With her friend Miss Jane Taylour, Agnes gave more than 70 lectures throughout Scotland to promote the Suffragists movement.

As women were not allowed to study medicine in British Universities, Agnes enrolled as a medical student at the Faculty of Medicine in Montpellier. During her studies there, she found lodgings in the convent of the Franciscan sisters. In 1878, she presented her thesis "Flexions of the Uterus", and became the first woman graduate of the Faculty of Medicine of Montpellier.

Agnes became only the tenth female in Britain to qualify as a doctor. She subsequently became a member of the governing council of the London School of Medicine for Women and, by 1882, was a fellow of the Royal College of Physicians at Dublin.

From 1879 to 1881, Agnes worked in the Canongate dispensary for the poor in Edinburgh. However, the difficult Scottish climate aggravated her health problems and the persistent antagonism of local medical practitioners towards their female colleagues, made the practice of medicine in Britain extremely difficult. Faced with all these difficulties, Agnes decided to leave Scotland and settle in France, a country she loved and which became her second home.

After returning to France, she worked in Montpellier with Dr. Combal and Dr. Grasset, kind colleagues willing to work with a woman. Finally, she chose to settle in Cannes as a General Practitioner.

She was primarily involved in caring for women and children and used the fees she charged to her wealthiest patients to cover the expenses of those who were poorer. When drugs were needed she would buy them herself at the local apothecary. She would also visit her poorest patients at home.

At the age of 61, Agnes converted to Catholicism and was received into the Third Order of Saint Dominic.

## **India**

In 1905, Agnes McLaren started the Medical Mission Committee in London. Accompanied by volunteers from a Catholic mission, she helped finance and then open the St. Catherine Hospital in Rawalpendi, northern India, now Pakistan. Because of the Indian custom of seclusion for women, known as purdah, women could not be seen by men other than those of their immediate family. It was thus impossible for them to benefit from medical care provided by a man. In the early 1900s, given the paucity of female doctors, thousands of Indian women died of illness or complications related to childbirth. On visiting Rawalpendi, her main preoccupation was to recruit experienced sisters in medicine and surgery to meet the medical needs of these women.

In her search for women to help run the hospital, she discovered that Catholic canon law prohibited nuns from achieving this level of medical care. She officially asks the Pope and the Holy See five times to lift the restriction while at the same time appealing to women interested in health care abroad. The Austrian Anna Maria Dengel, responded to her request. Shortly after the beginning of their correspondence, Anna Maria began studying medicine at the University of Cork. Dr Dengel would become the founder of The Medical Mission Sisters, a Catholic congregation of sisters trained as health professionals and dedicated to the care of women and children around the world.

Agnes McLaren died on April 17, 1913. She is buried in Antibes. The obituary in the British Medical Journal described her as “she was a woman of strong individuality and character and was known to a large circle of philanthropic workers of many nations, of many kindreds and of many creeds”.

Following her death the National Suffrage Society wrote “...the Society will gratefully remember her as one of those who worked during the hours of darkness but passed away before the dawn”