

Cecilia Grierson: Argentina's First Female Doctor

By Carolina Barry (1)

Translated by David Barnwell

The name of the first female doctor in Argentina is associated with the pioneering period when a group of women in Latin America and the Caribbean challenged barriers of indifference and rejection. These were the first women to join the professions.

Cecilia Grierson was born in Buenos Aires on 22 November 1859. Her appearance - round face, lively blue eyes and bright brown hair, betrayed her family origin. Her mother, Jane Duffy (1832-1887) was Irish. (2) Her father, John Parish Robertson Grierson (1828-1872) was the eighth child of William Grierson, one of the Scottish colonists who had arrived in Buenos Aires in 1825 to settle the Scottish colony of Santa Catalina-Monte Grande.

Cecilia Grierson spent her early childhood on her family's estancia in the province of Entre Ríos, where her family were prosperous farmers. At the age of six she was sent to attend English and French schools in Buenos Aires, but had to return home upon the early death of her father. Despite her youth, she helped her mother run a country school, at which the young Cecilia worked as teacher. As she was still a minor, Cecilia's teaching salary was paid to her mother. With time the family overcame its tragedy, and Cecilia returned to Buenos Aires to enter the N° 1 Girls Normal School. She graduated as teacher in 1878. She taught for some years at a boys' school but then decided to undertake the study of medicine, a rare choice for a young woman at that time.

Medical Career

Her path was difficult and in the beginning, strewn with obstacles. At the age of twenty-three, Grierson had to provide written justification for her wish to become a doctor. In the interests of truth it should be recorded that earlier another woman, Elida Passo, had entered the School of Medicine to study

pharmacy, becoming the first woman to graduate in that field in 1885. Unfortunately she became seriously ill while in the fifth year of medical school and died in 1893, without being awarded a degree.

The path that led Cecilia Grierson to study medicine, with all the difficulties she had to confront, must be seen in terms of the slow but important reforms and changes in the law that gave women greater access to education in Argentina, indeed throughout the Latin America of the 1870s and 1880s. This was the period of the creation of schools and colleges for young ladies, with the goal of forming good and suitable wives and mothers. The curriculum was elementary, being restricted to reading and writing as well as some basic arithmetic and language. It should be remembered that secondary education for girls did not exist until the early years of the twentieth century. Such was the climate in which Cecilia Grierson and her contemporaries had to move. There is no doubt that for a woman to decide to study medicine in 1882 was totally novel, ground-breaking and, it might be added, illegal. It was considered inappropriate for a female to be in contact with human bodies, even if it were with the noble goal of curing them. Grierson began her studies in a difficult environment, full of prejudices and even animosity. Women were until then barred from the School of Medicine; as we have seen, they scarcely yet participated in formal secondary education. Nevertheless, Grierson was an exceptional student and managed to get involved in an impressive range of activities while still a student. Among the most important were: her unpaid service as assistant of the university laboratory: and, in 1885, her practicum in Public Health in several hospitals. Here she organised an ambulance service, introducing the use of alarm bells (equivalent to today's sirens), an innovation in a system that

till then had been exclusive to the fire brigade. In 1886, during a cholera epidemic, she received widespread acknowledgment for her efficient work in caring for patients in the Isolation Unit (present-day Hospital Muñiz).

It was there that she began to see the need for professionalising auxiliary medical staff. This was a new measure in the Argentina of the time. She introduced the teaching of nursing and incorporated the latest European - especially British - practices. She founded the first Nurses' School in the country, inspired by the reports of the Third International Conference of the Red Cross on first aid training. Student nurses attended classes on childcare, first aid and treatment of patients. This initiative led in 1891 to the creation and official recognition of the Nurses' School of the Argentine Medical Circle. This later became the Municipal Nursing School 'Dr Cecilia Grierson', which still today bears her name. She continued as Director until 1913. In 1890 Dr Grierson also founded the Nursing School of the British Hospital. Grierson was a pioneer in what today is known as kinesiology. She put this into practice in a course in massage which she taught at the School of Medicine, and she later developed her ideas in her book *Practical Massage*. The book was widely read and played a key role in the development of modern kinesiology in Argentina. Nowadays two of the fundamental pillars in nursing education in Argentina are the Nurses' School founded by Cecilia Grierson and the School founded by the Ministry of Public Health under the direction of Ramón Carrillo.

Grierson was a practical person. What she learned, she taught, wrote about and then put into practice. In 1888 she was practising at the Rivadavia Hospital, a fact even more revolutionary than her becoming a doctor in the first place. A year later she successfully defended her thesis on gynaecology, the fruit of her work in that area: *Histero-ovariotomías efectuadas en el Hospital de Mujeres desde 1883 a 1889* (Ovary Extractions at the Women's Hospital 1883-1889). She became the first woman in Argentina to receive a degree in medicine. (3) But Dr Grierson continued to face difficulties even after graduating, to the

point of discovering that she was unable to practice legally. Yet, undeterred, she continued her many activities, especially that of teaching.

Upon her graduation she joined the Hospital San Roque, today Hospital Ramos Mejía. In 1892, not three years after her graduation, she created the Argentine First Aid Society and published a book on the care of accident victims. At the same time she was offering classes in anatomy at the Academia de Bellas Artes, as well as providing free psychological and learning consultations for children with special needs. She promoted the teaching of childcare and was a pioneer in the education of blind and deaf mute children. Around this time she also finished her books: *La educación del ciego* (The Education of the Blind), *Cuidado del enfermo* (Patient Care - a book of more than 800 pages) and *Primer Tratado Nacional de Enfermería* (First National Nursing Textbook).

In 1901 she founded the National Obstetrics Association, where she adopted the best practice from the obstetric and gynaecological clinics of Paris. Typically, she accompanied this with the creation of the *Revista Obstétrica*, a journal that set out to offer midwives in Argentina a scientific and medical approach in a field that had traditionally been run by untrained women. In 1902 she founded the Society for Domestic Economy, later to become the Technical School for Home Management, the first of its kind in the country. In 1907 she began teaching Domestic Science at the *Liceo de Señoritas de la Capital* (Buenos Aires Girls' Secondary School), the first such course in Argentina. Two years later she travelled to Europe in order to study issues of concern to women: education, domestic economy, industrial schools. As a result of what she observed, the *Consejo Nacional de Educación* (National Education Council) put together a curriculum for professional schools. Grierson published *Educación técnica de la mujer* (Women's Technical Education), introducing the study of childcare into these schools. She held teaching positions in the Escuela de Bellas Artes (School of Fine Arts) and Liceo Nacional de Señoritas (National Secondary School for Girls) where she taught from its inception in 1907. She was a tireless worker throughout, even giving

gymnastics lessons at the School of Medicine. In 1912 the Argentine government sent her to return to Europe to study curricula and participate in the First International Eugenics Conference, held in London (Kohn Loncarica 1976: 79).

Feminist Activity

The lack of acceptance which Cecilia Grierson faced led her to adopt a militant posture and agitate to change the real living conditions of her sex. This task came in addition to her prolific academic activity. Soon she held an important role in the recently founded Argentine Socialist Party, and was taking part in the first feminist groups which arose out of the international women's emancipation movement that had started in the United States and Britain. Membership of these groups was in the main restricted to university graduates from the upper middle classes. They were women who had faced resistance and obstacles at every step, both in the home and in the academy, and yet had managed to complete their courses of study. Dr Grierson, together with other women such as Petrona Eyle, Julieta Lantieri Renshaw, Alicia Rawson de Dellepiane, Alicia Moreau de Justo, Sara Justo and Raquel Camaña, began the struggle to reform the civil and political situation of women. They campaigned against women's inferior legal status, their exclusion from civic activity and lack of educational access. Grierson was part of a generation which, as Alicia Moreau de Justo has pointed out, had the courage to break the silence which shrouded these problems (civil and political rights, the situation of children, be they legitimate or not, family organization, divorce, the fight against alcoholism, prostitution and gambling) at a time when many men did not care to discuss such topics in public (Barrancos 2007: 114).

Cecilia Grierson was vice-president of the second meeting of the suffragist organization, the International Council of Women (ICW), which was held in London in 1889. This led her to found the Argentine Women's Council (CNM) in September 1900. The Council sought to work for the improvement of the situation of women by promoting a difficult alliance

between women of the elite upper classes who were involved in charitable work, on the one hand, and female university graduates and professionals who felt deprived of power and influence and held different perspectives on women's problems. At the beginning the CNM acted as coordinator for the diverse groups and philanthropic associations of women in Argentina, as well as a link with similar bodies in other countries.

CNM members operated according to the principle that home and family were fundamental interests for women. It was agreed that their principal goal would be women's equality, both as a means of gaining a respected place within society as well as helping women attain their goals in life as mothers and wives. They however accepted that men were more intelligent and rational than women, though women were morally superior. Given such views, agreement among the membership did not survive for long. Alvina Van Praet de Sala, the president, arranged for a priest to attend all their meetings, a decision which was opposed by Cecilia Grierson and other women. These began to identify themselves with feminism and to promote more vigorous campaigns in favour of women's suffrage. In any case, while the CNM was still in existence, Cecilia Grierson, together with another doctor, Elvira Rawson, presented a draft bill to the National Congress of 1906. This measure proposed the creation of funds for social welfare benefits and maternity leave for working-class women. It was unsuccessful, as was another measure designed to combat the white slave trade (Nari 2004: 98).

Some thirty university and professional women, in open disagreement with the 'moderate' and Catholic line of the CNM created the Association of Argentine University Women (AMUA). Cecilia Grierson was among these. The AMUA sought to engage with the problems of working-class women as much as with those of female university graduates. In all likelihood they had no thought of revolutionary social change, but rather sought to lend moral support to women in the professions, combining the struggle for a European-style rationalist feminism with social work aimed at helping working-class women. Cecilia Grierson

presided over the First International Women's Conference, organized by the AMUA. Among the principal resolutions and declarations adopted were calls for legislative reform to ensure equality of civil and legal rights of men and women, support for women's political rights, the establishment of unlimited access to divorce and the struggle to better the conditions of women and children.

In 1905 Grierson was an enthusiastic supporter of the membership of the Argentine Free Thinkers Association (AALP) who advocated, among other things, universal rationalism, anticlericalism, a scientific approach to life, and citizenship and full equality for women. The AALP sought to join the CNM but were rejected on account of their anticlericalism. This provoked a new confrontation between Grierson and the membership of the CNM. Simultaneously and in parallel to the organisation of the AMUA, the Argentine Socialist Party created the Women's Socialist Centre, of which Cecilia Grierson became a member. As part of the events to mark the centenary of Argentine independence, Grierson chaired the First International Feminist Conference of Argentina that was organised by the Association of Women University Graduates. This provoked her departure from the CNM, which, with official support, had put together the parallel First Patriotic Women's Congress. This exemplified the existence of contradictory tendencies in the women's movement. Grierson articulated the alternative

posture in her *Decadencia del Consejo Nacional de Mujeres de la República Argentina* (Degeneration of the Argentine National Women's Council, 1910). Once more she was combining ideas, struggle and writing. She always felt compelled to set out her analysis of events in writing, perhaps as a means of rebelling against what she considered to be injustices.

Final Years

In 1914, she was publicly honoured on the occasion of the silver jubilee of her graduation, an homage repeated in 1916, when she retired from her teaching duties. In her retirement she lived in Los Cocos, Córdoba. She donated a school to the town, as well as a residence for teachers and artists. Most of her activities were carried out pro bono. Upon her retirement she was allowed credit for only a few years service and received but a modest pension. Yet she at no stage complained about money, and indeed she probably was most hurt by the fact that she never was offered a Chair in the School of Medicine. She died in Buenos Aires on 10 April 1934, aged seventy-five years. Today many medical institutions bear her name, as does a street in the modern Puerto Madero district.

Carolina Barry

Notes

1. A preliminary version of this article was published in *The Southern Cross*, April 2005. Carolina Barry is Doctor in Political Science, teacher, researcher and academic coordinator of the programme in the History of Peronism at University of Tres de Febrero in Buenos Aires. She has published *Evita Capitana. Creación y formación del Partido Peronista Femenino* (Eduntref) and edited *El Sufragio Femenino en Argentina y América Latina* (Eduntref). She has co-authored with K. Ramacciotti and A. Valobra, *La Fundación Eva Perón y las mujeres: entre la provocación y la inclusión* (Biblos).
2. Jane Duffy was the second daughter of John Duffy (c.1780-1871) of Banagher, County Offaly, and Cecily Killeen. John Duffy arrived in Buenos Aires in c. 1836 and was the owner of a well-known bookstore in Buenos Aires, as well as the librarian of the Buenos Ayres British Library (Hanon 2005: 292).
3. Interestingly, Britain's first female doctor may have been Margaret Ann Bulkley (1792-1865), who dressed as a man for more than fifty years working as an army surgeon. But the first woman in Britain to receive a medicine degree (as a woman) was Frances Hoggan (1843-1927) in 1870. In the United States, English-born Elizabeth Blackwell (1821-1910) graduated in January 1849, becoming thereby the

first woman to graduate from a medical school in the Americas. In 1877, Chile was the first country in Latin America to admit women to its universities, including the School of Medicine. In Mexico, Matilde Montoya (1859-1938) was the first woman who graduated as a medicine doctor in 1887. Brazilian Rita Lobato Velho (1866-1954) graduated the same year from the School of Medicine at Bahia.

References

- Barrancos, Dora. *Mujeres en la sociedad argentina. Una historia de cinco siglos* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2007).
- Hanon, Maxine. *Diccionario de Británicos en Buenos Aires* (primera época) (Buenos Aires: Maxine Hanon, 2005).
- Kohn Loncarica, Alfredo. *Cecilia Grierson: vida y obra de la primera médica argentina* (Buenos Aires: Stilcograf: 1976).
- Nari, Marcela. *Políticas de maternidad y maternalismo político* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2004).

