

**BRYSON: Elizabeth Horne Bain (Dr)
(nee MacDonald)**

Born: 19 August 1880, Dundee, Forfarshire, Scotland

Married: 24 April 1918, Otahuhu, Auckland

**To: Dr Robert Bryson: b. 1878, Inverness, Scotland
d. 6 October 1934, Levin, New Zealand
buried Tiro Tiro Rd cemetery, Levin**

Died: 29 April 1969, Lambeth, London

Buried: Plaque with husband at Tiro Tiro Rd Cemetery, Levin

Elizabeth MacDonald's parents were:

Donald MacDonald (clerk and cashier, author of stories and books)

and

Elizabeth Bain (teacher)

Elizabeth had 8 siblings:

Isabella Manson (nurse), married George Redpath M.B., Ch.B.

Mary Christians, M.A. married George Laburn

John Bain M.A. (Hons. Classics), M.B., Ch.B., married Mary Ewan (nurse)

Peter Horne M.B., Ch.B., married Beatrice Payne

Janet

Donaldina M.A. (Hons. Classics), married John Dow M.A. D.D.

William James M.A. M.B., Ch.B. F.R.C.S. (Edin.), married Bertha Mackenzie

Flora M.B., Ch.B., married Fletcher Perry

Elizabeth and Robert had 2 children who survived beyond childbirth

Mary Elizabeth: b. 29 June 1920

William Kennedy: b. 7 December 1922, d. 1983

Upbringing and Education in Scotland

Elizabeth was the fourth of nine children brought up in a two-room house in Dundee, Scotland. Her parents were of humble means but her mother, a music teacher, was determined her children should be well-educated and equipped for professional careers.

Fortunately, in 1892 universities opened to women. At this time, Elizabeth was a student at Harris Academy in Dundee, having won a bursary to be there, and

her mother lobbied the school for girls as well as boys to be taught mathematics and Latin in order to qualify for entrance to medical studies.

In 1896, Elizabeth entered St Andrews University where she won a first in English Literature before she was 19! She became a medical student at the Bute Medical School at St Andrews where she graduated MBChB in 1905, completing an MD (Doctor of Medicine) and publishing her thesis in 1907. The principal, Yule McKay, described her as "*one of the most brilliant and capable students I have ever known*".



Emigration to New Zealand

Concerned at the degree to which surgery was being used in childbirth, Elizabeth decided to specialise in non-surgical gynaecology, but she could neither get a hospital position (being a woman!) nor afford to start her own practice, So, in 1908 she left for New Zealand to enter private practice as a medical assistant to Dr Patrick Mackin in Wellington for 3 years.

'One of her first surgical cases was a workman who had put his arm through a glass window, a long, jagged wound from wrist to elbow. Conscious of the need to stop the bleeding and doing a neat job, Elizabeth set to work neatly and carefully stitching the wound. The patient made no sound nor did he flinch but on the seventh stitch he said in a small soft voice, "Please lady, it's not a sampler you're sewing!". The arm healed perfectly and my reputation was established.'

In 1909 her older brother, John, joined her in New Zealand. A theology graduate, he settled in Dunedin.

Her Years as an Itinerant Doctor

In 1911 Elizabeth returned to Scotland. Dr Mackin urged her to come back and re-join his practice, which she was reluctant to do. However, she was finally convinced by her brother Peter, also a doctor, who was keen to come to New Zealand as well. After a few months back in Wellington, Elizabeth joined Peter in Auckland in his practice and then after a year went to Dunedin, where her other brother John had been studying to become a doctor as well.

Shortly after arriving there, she gave a well-received lecture to the Federation of University Women on the place that educated women must fill, and while practising in Dunedin she wrote articles on the Montessori Method of education.

With the onset of World War I in 1914, she went back to Auckland where she had been appointed a school medical officer and became Medical Inspector of Schools in the city.

On the road trip to Auckland, she had stopped in Levin to visit Dr Robert Bryson. He had been a determined suitor of hers from her university days in Scotland and had arrived in New Zealand on the 'Rimutaka' just before she returned to Scotland in 1911. He had been ship's surgeon on the boat. He had immediately decided to stay in this country and had taken up a practice in Levin, believed to be shared with a Dr Kennedy, in Durham Street. With Elizabeth back in Scotland, Robert had met and married a Christchurch woman, Mary Elizabeth Wells.

During her three years in Auckland through the war, Elizabeth saw how isolated, loyal and self-sacrificing many women teachers were. She worked hard on implementing ideas on health and hygiene, particularly oral health.

She was instrumental in interesting the Minister of Education in introducing Physical Culture, P.E., into schools. During that time, she developed a close friendship with a Mr Milnes. With his departure to Wellington for military training, they exchanged love letters. Unfortunately, in service in Europe he was one of the many fatalities at Passchendaele.



Dr. ELIZABETH BRYSON

Settling Down in Levin to Family and General Practice

Meanwhile in Levin, Robert Bryson's wife Mary had died in childbirth in 1917 and a few months later when he and Elizabeth met again, they decided to marry. She joined him in general practice in Levin in 1918. The practice was busy with 'Bob' doing all the midwifery in the district. He was sometimes out up to 5 nights in a week.

Their own first child died at birth in July 1919. Mary Elizabeth was born 29 June 1920 and William Kennedy was born 7 December 1922, both in Levin.

During 1918, Elizabeth was involved in committees raising funds for the Red Cross and took over her husband's workload when he was confined to bed with influenza, the epidemic that took a dreadful toll on the country (9000 people died in 2 months of that year).

*"If I had never pulled my weight in medical practice before, I certainly had to now. There was no other doctor standing for miles around. We had received instructions from Wellington on how to attack the enemy if it should arrive. We had two chemists in the main street of Levin. The people were summoned there. I gave orders to close down both hotels, then when the people had gathered near the chemists, I addressed the crowd from a motor car. I told them to get disinfectant, which they would be given free, from the chemists. They were then to go home, take all knick-knacks down off shelves or tables, and wash all floors and chairs and furniture with the disinfectant. They were to put to bed, in a **clean** bed, any person who seemed indisposed and to wait till I could visit them."*

She joined the Adult Education Committee in March 1919 and was vice President of the Levin Branch of the Workers' Educational Association in 1920. She presented lectures at Levin District High School on hygiene and the Social Hygiene Bill.

Also a prominent member of the newly-founded League of Mothers (1926), Elizabeth promoted their central tenet, the Christian faith in the upbringing of children. She was considered a 'born organiser' and 'excelling in all things domestic'.

Leaving Levin for Better Opportunities

In 1925 she travelled back to England with the children to visit relatives and to refresh herself with postgraduate work in Edinburgh and London. On her return to Levin, she decided they needed to move to Wellington. Robert had a badly damaged heart caused by rheumatic fever in early life, and his maternity and night work was taking a toll on his health.

They sold the Levin practices to Dr Lance Hunter. Robert took a trip to Australia and did a course in anaesthetics which enabled him to set up as an anaesthetist. There was more opportunity for Elizabeth to practice in Wellington and better education options for the children.

'There was a public send-off for us from the Levin people...the mothers of the district insisted on presenting **their** doctor with a beautiful eight-day clock with the Westminster Chime - inscribed "FROM ALL THE MOTHERS OF THE DISTRICT", 25/2/1926.



**Drs Robert and Elizabeth Bryson & their children William and Mary
(Kete Horowhenua)**

So, from 1926 the Brysons lived in Willis Street in Wellington with both Elizabeth and Robert practising there. In 1927, Elizabeth became President of the Wellington Province League of Mothers.

Elizabeth's fears about Robert's fragile health were realised when he suffered a fatal heart attack in 1934. He was driving to the Otaki Races at the time, and his car crashed off the road before a passenger could bring it to a halt. He was buried in Levin, the town he had been so fond of.

More Years of To and Fro, Study, Writing and Broadcasting

In 1936 she returned to London yet again and studied psychology at Tavistock, applying this in her pioneering research on the psychosomatic approach to gynaecology (that is, recognising the importance of the social and mental aspects of women's reproductive health as well as their physical well-being).

In 1938, Elizabeth's daughter Mary travelled to Edinburgh to study to become a doctor at St Andrews. She married, had two children, and practised medicine back in England as Doctor Morison.

In the same year, Elizabeth wrote and had published a book '*Learning to Live*' which was well received.

After her return to New Zealand in 1939 she broadcast eight radio talks on nutrition for the Health Department.

During World War II, Elizabeth was back in Scotland again working in Edinburgh as a physician dealing with nerve surgery and then in Glasgow as Resident Physician in charge of War Exhaustion cases.

Her son William had also become a student of medicine at St Andrews. He married Jean Grieve Gordon, another doctor, and they returned to New Zealand with the aspiration of joining William's parents' old practice in Levin. It's believed they were told by Dr Hunter there was no opening there, so instead they set up a new practice at Plimmerton, north of Wellington, and would continue running the Plimmerton Medical Centre for the next 35 years. They had four children.

After the war, Elizabeth was accompanied back to New Zealand by her youngest brother William (Bill) MacDonald, yet another doctor!

She retired in 1953, after which she wrote "*The History of the League of Mothers in New Zealand*" in 1959, and later her autobiography "*Look Back in Wonder*" in 1966. This has been quoted by researchers on topics such as the power of the book in the lives of working people and the medical career ambitions of women of her generation.

She was known to have been back in her home city of Dundee in 1965 but died in London in 1969, aged 89.

Sources included:

The Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Women (Edinburgh University Press)

www.dundee-women-strail.org.uk

Kete Horowhenua (horowhenua.kete.net.nz)

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