



born near Bristol, which has been a busy seaport for centuries.

ONE

A Bright Beginning

On February 3, 1821, a baby girl was born in the village of Counterslip, near the prosperous city of Bristol in the west of England. Her parents, Samuel and Hannah Blackwell, named her Elizabeth. They watched over her carefully. She had two older sisters, Anna and Marian, but an older brother had died as a baby. Elizabeth Blackwell is remembered today for all her hard-won victories, but her first struggle was to grow strong enough to live. Stubborn and determined to succeed even as a newborn baby, Elizabeth joined the Blackwell family in her own true style.

Elizabeth Blackwell became the first woman to graduate from medical school in the United States. She was a fierce and dedicated social reformer, believing strongly in the rights of human beings to be the best

they could, no matter their gender or color. She did many great things. She became the first woman medical doctor, or M.D., in the United States. She opened the first women-run hospital and was the first woman to appear on the British Medical Register.

THE UNUSUAL BLACKWELLS

From her family, Elizabeth Blackwell learned to feel responsible for how other people were treated. This unusual family also helped her to grow confident in her own ability to succeed. Elizabeth's father, Samuel Blackwell, was a successful businessman in Bristol. He ran a sugar refinery, a factory that turns sugarcane into sugar crystals to be used in food. He had strong moral beliefs, most of which were not shared by many other British people of his time. He believed in liberal politics, wanting the government to help people who couldn't help themselves. He thought that owning slaves was one of the most cruel things people could do. He spoke out against slavery as an abolitionist. He struggled with a personal problem. While he hated slavery, slave labor was used on the plantations he bought his sugarcane from.

Everyone in England was supposed to believe in the state religion, a form of Christianity called Church of England, or Anglicanism. Samuel and Hannah Blackwell didn't believe in it. They were Congregational Christians who believed very strongly in being responsible for their own actions and having high moral standards.

Because the Blackwells were Congregationalists, they were called Dissenters. Dissenters were people who didn't believe in the Church of England. At the time this made their lives difficult. Dissenters couldn't be

doctors, lawyers, professors, or top politicians. They also couldn't attend most schools or any universities. This meant that the Blackwell children were taught by tutors in their home and learned together instead of going to school.

Samuel and Hannah were also unusual in the way they regarded women. They thought women and men were equals. At home this meant

Men and Women

At the time, most people believed that men and women were entirely different. Women were thought to have weaker bodies but stronger morals than men. Women were supposed to look after their homes and families. Men were supposed to go out into the world to earn money, to provide for and protect their families. This meant that most girls were taught household skills and refined subjects, such as painting, music, and French. Only boys learned practical subjects, such as math, Latin, and geography.



their children were educated in the same way. They all learned the same subjects and received an excellent basic education.

Beyond the classroom, the Blackwells talked about important subjects all the time. The children's questions and thoughts were respected and taken seriously in their home. Their parents liked hearing them work on and solve problems. They encouraged this kind of investigation. Elizabeth thrived in this environment. She wanted her work to be a challenge.

MOVING HOME

When Elizabeth was about three years old, the family moved to a house in Bristol, at 1 Wilson Street. The house was pleasant and large. It was next to Samuel's sugar refinery. The strong smell of cooking sugarcane filled the air. They had a big household, with servants to help cook, clean, and look after the babies and help with the children. The older children had a governess who helped teach them and took them for long walks around Bristol. Most parents didn't want their daughters to get much exercise, especially outdoors. The Blackwells believed that fresh air and exercise helped keep people healthy, even girls.

The Blackwells lived there until about 1829, when they needed more space. They moved to Nelson Street, next to Samuel's new sugar refinery. The previous one had burned down, as sugar refineries often did. They also rented a country house in nearby Olveston each summer.

In August 1832, Samuel decided to move the whole family to the United States. Cholera and other diseases such as typhoid and influenza kept sweeping through British cities in waves. England kept experiencing

tough economic times during which jobs and money became scarce. Riots led by angry workers erupted. Many people were afraid for their health, doubted their ability to earn money to support their families, and were unsure of the future. During the 1800s, hundreds of thousands of people left Britain for the United States, hoping for a better life. Samuel had suffered some large business losses and hoped that the United States would be a place where his business would flourish. He also thought that Americans were more tolerant of unusual beliefs and would welcome his family.

Three unmarried aunts, the governess, and the babies' nurse sailed along with Samuel and Hannah and their eight children on the *Cosmo*. The trip to New York took seven weeks and three days, described by Anna Blackwell as "a floating hell." The ship offered fairly good accommodations for people like the Blackwells, who could pay for them. Poorer families traveled in terrible conditions. Cholera broke out on the ship, as it had in Bristol before they left. Cholera is a disease transmitted through dirty water and sewage that thrives in crowded, filthy places, such as

Life in England in the 1800s

English society was split into social classes. The upper class owned most of the land and had most of the power and money. The middle class had skilled jobs and owned businesses, but were at the mercy of economic hard times. The working class owned little and worked very hard for very little pay. People from the higher classes usually lived longer than working-class people did.

of her lifelong quest to educate women about their bodies. Now she grew even more specific. She wanted mothers to have more information about sex and morality so they could raise their children to have knowledge and power. She had always believed that women, and especially mothers, held the key to change through their families.

LIFE IN ENGLAND

While at the Social Science Congress in Bristol, Blackwell visited the house on Wilson Street where she had lived as a young child. It was a happy visit that brought back memories. She wrote about “the home which I remembered as so large, but which then looked so small.” She vividly remembered being forbidden to attend a dinner party after being naughty as a child. She also had a vision of her father coming home, turning his key in the lock, and walking into the hall in a white flannel suit. This realistic, clear vision startled her.

Blackwell had been a religious person her whole life. From her experience as a dissident Congregationalist, Blackwell made social and moral reform a part of her religion, as it had been for her parents. She changed churches, becoming a Unitarian for a while. Whatever church she belonged to, she felt strongly that being Christian made her morally responsible to push the reforms she supported. She wrote that from 1869, “During the following twenty years the responsibility of the Christian physician assumed to me an ever-deepening significance.”

Blackwell worked with incredible energy. She threw herself into three main activities: setting up a private practice, working to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts, and working to get women into careers in



Francis Power Cobbe was a leading animal rights activist in her day.

medicine. In 1870, she set up her practice in London, and started seeing many patients. She lived for a while with her old friend, Barbara Leigh Smith. By that point, Barbara had married and was named Madame Bodichon. Blackwell's social life began to whirl as she met some of the top thinkers and artists of the day. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, George Eliot, and Robert Browning were guests in the house. Other guests were political reformers. Blackwell enjoyed the free exchange of ideas that kept her thinking and learning.

Blackwell was becoming less happy with the common practice of testing medicines and scientific theories on animals. She wrote, “I have long since realised that conscience and humanity must guide intellectual activity and curiosity, or we wander from the high-road of truth into a labyrinth of error.” She felt that testing on animals was immoral and cruel. One of her books, *Medicine and Morality*, explored this idea. Blackwell wrote, “There are limits to scientific investigation; knowledge is not its own justification.” One of the people she met at