

# A Pioneering Alumna: Dr Jeannie MacLeod (1874-1902)

by Dr Robert Clarke



**Dr Jeannie MacLeod**

My great aunt Jeannie Charlotte MacLeod was a star pupil at the High School for Girls and became a pioneer as the second woman to qualify as a doctor in Aberdeen. Tragically, she committed suicide in 1902 at the age of 28, after just one week working as the resident physician at the Children's Hospital.



**The Old School House, Little Belmont Street**

CC/2.0 © Bill Harrison [Geograph.org.uk/p/4294208](http://Geograph.org.uk/p/4294208)

## Jeannie's family

Jeannie's father Alfred (my great grandfather) was a university lecturer in Edinburgh. He married my great grandmother Jean McDougal Smith in 1871. Very sadly their first daughter Marie Una died of meningitis aged two and Alfred looked for an opportunity for a fresh start, wanting to leave behind all the sad memories of

Una's death. When the post of Lecturer in Theology and Public Speaking came up at the University of Aberdeen, he and Jean left Edinburgh taking six-month-old Jeannie with them. They lived just off the Great Western Road and went on to have six more children. Alfred made his name by publishing "MacLeod's First Textbook of Elocution" and supplemented his meagre academic salary by giving public readings of poetry and fiction throughout Scotland and the north of England, explicitly modelling his performances on those of Charles Dickens, who had developed this artform in the previous decade.



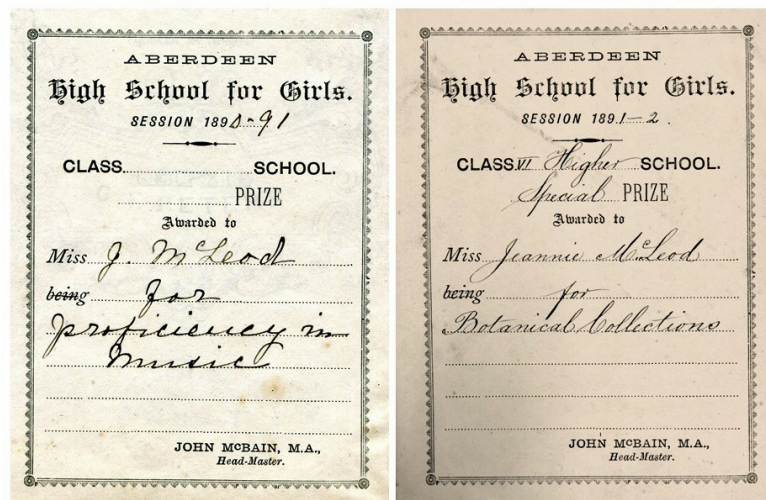
**Alfred MacLeod**



**Jean McDougal Smith**

## Aberdeen High School for Girls

The "Girls Academy" was founded in 1874, the year that Jeannie was born, and initially it provided only primary education at premises on Little Belmont Street. However, in 1878 it expanded, with an additional "higher school" and changed its name to "Aberdeen High School for Girls". A year later, Jeannie became a pupil in the "lower school".



Two of Jeannie's prizes in 1891 and 1892

Jeannie was outstanding academically, receiving an Aberdeen Town Council scholarship at the age of 15, which allowed her to continue her secondary education. She was particularly fond of languages and literature and won numerous prizes, completing her schooling in 1892, just before the move to Albyn Place.

Late Victorian society was undergoing major social changes and it would be helpful to discuss two aspects to give some context to Jeannie's life.

### The Education Act

In 1872, just two years before Jeannie was born, the Education Act had revolutionised teaching in Scotland, establishing local Boards responsible for overseeing schools, making primary education compulsory and specifically making provision for paid teaching assistants. Prior to that, there would typically be just one or at the most two teachers in a school, with much of the teaching of younger children being undertaken by the older children - so-called pupil teachers.

There were two important consequences of this change for Jeannie: first, she received excellent schooling and second, with her academic father as a role model, Jeannie decided that

working as a paid teaching assistant should be her vocation. She spent four years doing this, first in Thurso and then in Banff. Her letters home paint the picture of a spirited young woman who loved her family and friends, loved her work and loved nature and hill walking.

Jeannie took particular pleasure in taking the mickey out of anything pompous: particularly men who did not take her seriously because she was a woman. This is from one of her letters home:

*Dear Mama,  
Dr Maclean was in school today and when he was introduced to me, he said that he had admired my independent walk!!! He spoke of the Revolt of the Daughters & so on, as if I was a thorough-going specimen of the strong minded female and only needed pants to be complete...*

*To say that about an academy teacher! I am sure I was the colour of beetroot... I must get it printed along with "considerable independence of character" and a "striking complement to her intellectual gifts".*

*PS I have been trying to cultivate a dependent walk, but Rome was not built in a day!*

One especially moving letter describes her visit to a rural clinic near Thurso to support the nurse who was caring for three very ill patients. Apart from the doctor's wife, she was the only visitor to the hospital in months. Most people were afraid to go there "for fear of the fever". Maybe this visit inspired her wish to become a doctor.

### The Universities Act 1889

In 1889, when Jeannie was 15, the Universities Act was passed, allowing women for the first time to be admitted to degree courses. Towards the end of her time at the High School for Girls, aged 18, she had taken a relatively new exam, for the Lady Literate in Arts qualification created by St Andrews to help women get access to University Education.<sup>(1)</sup> Initially she chose not to follow this path, instead using her qualification to support her application to become a teacher. But when she was 20, working hard as a teacher in Thurso, she would probably have been aware that a woman, Marion Gilchrist, had qualified as a doctor for the first time in Scotland, at Glasgow University. At the age of 23, she decided to change direction and applied to Aberdeen University where she was accepted as a medical student.

### Medical school

Jeannie was the only woman in her year and initially encountered considerable prejudice from the male students, for whom the idea of a woman taking a professional role in society must have seemed both bizarre and threatening. She was older than and had more life experience than her male colleagues. She did very well academically and made many friends, winning over many of those who had been initially hostile. As a student, she established and was the first president of the Women's Medical Society. She won lots of prizes and was particularly proud of winning the gold medal in anatomy.

(1) See Margie Mellis's article on "Ladies Literate in Arts" in the 2019 Magazine.



### Qualification as a doctor

Jeannie qualified in 1902, just a year after the death of Queen Victoria at a time which is regarded by historians as the start of the modern era. She had glowing references and went straight to work as the resident doctor in the Children's Hospital, which was then located on Castle Terrace, just a hundred yards from the Salvation Army Citadel.

The hospital was paid for mainly by charitable donations and was run on a shoe-string. The facilities were primitive by modern standards and the resident doctor's accommodation must have been grim. The workload was horrendous because the city was in the middle of a whooping cough epidemic.

One morning on 3rd May 1902, just a week after she had started work as a doctor, Jeannie failed to turn up on the ward. A porter was sent to find her. He discovered her dead body in her room. She had cut her throat using a surgical scalpel. The cause of death was given as suicide due to "temporary mental aberration".

### Why did Jeannie commit suicide?

Her parents were told that Jeannie had been particularly distressed about the death of a child on the ward following an operation, for whom she felt responsible. This rings true because one of her references on completion of her medical degree describes how competent she had been as a final year student in giving anaesthetics to children. The resident newly qualified doctor may well have been the on-call anaesthetist, something that would be unheard of today.

Did she have a mental illness? If she did, then no one in her family was

previously aware of it. But then, as now, there was a big stigma associated with mental illness and it may well be that Jeannie had been putting on a brave face to her family and friends while trying to cope with the stresses and strains that every medical student faces, in addition to coping with the particular strain of having put herself forward as a pioneering modern woman at the turn of the century.

I can't help feeling that the health



**Painting of Dr Jeannie MacLeod**  
© Richard Greaves 2021, with permission

system at the time let her down and that she was put in a very difficult situation, with minimal support. She certainly felt undervalued - she had told her brother that she felt she had to take this job because the hospital needed a resident doctor, but also pointed out that she would be earning less than a servant.

### What can we learn from Jeannie's life and death?

Jeannie MacLeod's story is hugely inspiring, because it demonstrates what was achieved by a determined, hard-working, sociable and talented young woman at a time of massive societal change. The Harlaw Academy website summarises the importance of the high-quality education she received in her formative years:

*These days it may be difficult to understand how significant Aberdeen High School for Girls was in its early days. At a point in history when women still did not have the vote, the school aided the cause of education for women in the North-East of Scotland, affording its student an excellent education and giving many of the students of their day the opportunity to achieve University Education at a time when only a small number of women had the chance at all.*

There is no doubt that Jeannie was a pioneer, paving the way for others, but her life was cut tragically short by her own hand. The suicide rate amongst doctors remains high and there is still a huge stigma associated with mental illness, both in society and within the medical profession. The stigma surrounding suicide certainly made it hard for Jeannie's immediate family to grieve. Her story is also a stark reminder of the need to

support and care for junior doctors, particularly in the early years as they are making the transition from students to established practitioners. Above all we need to tackle both the continuing gender inequalities within our society and the stigma associated with mental illness.