

Major Lady MacKenzie AAMC

The first woman doctor of the Royal Australian Army Medical Corps

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THE FIRST WOMAN TO RECEIVE A COMMISSION with the Australian Army Medical Corps (AAMC) was Lady Winifred MacKenzie, in September, 1940. Her appointment represented an unobtrusive milestone on the road to gender equality in Australia. Despite the importance of her achievement, she has remained relatively unknown, and this is her first biography.

Pre-Service life

Lady MacKenzie was born Winifred Iris Evelyn Smith on 10 April 1900, in Melbourne. Her father was Arthur N Smith, a journalist. She attended high school in Melbourne where she studied English, French, Geometry, Chemistry, Botany, Physics and Latin to Intermediate standard; and English, Anatomical Morphology and Physiology, History and Botany to Senior (Leaving) standard. She matriculated on the 13 March 1919 to the University of Melbourne.¹

She completed her medical course with considerable difficulty and courage. Over the four years of the medical course, she failed 7 of the 17 subjects at her first attempt and had to spend Christmas holidays studying for the supplementary examinations in March the following year.¹

At that time, the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Melbourne granted separate degrees for Medicine and for Surgery. She graduated Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery, both degrees being conferred upon her in Melbourne on 15 September 1924.¹ She was known as “Win Smith” by her cohort of fellow medical students,² one of whom was John (later Sir John) Eccles, Nobel Laureate for Medicine and Physiology in 1963.

One of Australia’s most influential doctors in the first three decades of the twentieth century was Colin “Bricky” MacKenzie (1877–1938), an orthopaedic surgeon, comparative anatomist, rehabilitation pioneer and philanthropist, of Melbourne.^{3,4} He was well known to the medical students of Melbourne and in Win Smith’s graduation year he wrote a paper in the journal of the medical students society, *The Speculum*, entitled “The Australian Fauna and the Medical Student”.⁵ As a young graduate, in 1925, Win Smith went to work with him at his extensive private



Major Lady MacKenzie (1900–1972), photographed on 15 November 1944 in her office at A Branch, Allied Land Headquarters, Victoria Barracks, Melbourne, when she was Deputy Assistant Director General Medical Services.

laboratories in 612 St Kilda Road in central Melbourne.² Dr Colin MacKenzie had named these laboratories the “Australian Institute of Anatomical Research”.³

Although Colin MacKenzie was 23 years older than Win Smith, the couple were married on 22 December 1928. MacKenzie was knighted in the following year and Win Smith was Lady MacKenzie thereafter. Over the ensuing decade they contributed much in the fields of medical and zoological research, in the promotion of anatomy (particularly comparative anatomy) and in philanthropy. MacKenzie established the Australian Institute of Anatomy in Canberra in 1930. In May 1934 the Sir Colin MacKenzie Sanctuary was opened at Healesville, Victoria, where between 1920 and 1927 MacKenzie had established and worked at his research centre for native Australian fauna. It was there in 1943 that the platypus was first bred in captivity.⁶

Lady and Sir Colin MacKenzie had no children. Sir Colin died from a cerebral haemorrhage in 1938, leaving Lady MacKenzie a widow at the age of 38 years. The Second World War broke out 15 months later. The Australian Army Medical Corps had been established in 1903 but women doctors, pharmacists and women medical scientists had been debarred from joining the Corps.



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War service

In April 1940, Lady MacKenzie went to work at Army Headquarters in Melbourne as a civilian volunteer, undertaking administrative and office duties in the Office of the Deputy Assistant Director of Medical Services (DADMS).⁷ In September 1940, she was commissioned with the rank of

Honorary Captain and placed on the Reserve of Officers, while still performing these duties.⁸

On 1 November 1940 she was enlisted as a full Captain in the AAMC with Service Number VX81148 — the first woman of the Corps to be commissioned, 37 years after its creation. I believe it is doubtful whether she would have been accepted as Australia's first woman military doctor if she had not been titled, if she had not been the wife of one of the establishment's most influential doctors and if she had not been a widow. Her conservative background would have reduced the apparent radicalism of such an appointment, but this allowed Lady MacKenzie to set a precedent that benefitted other women. Captain H B Kershaw followed and was commissioned on 21 August 1941, and Captain D M Kiel on 1 February 1942.

Throughout the War, her duties included the maintenance of accurate records of the professional qualifications of the (male) Officers of the AAMC and the keeping of details of their allotment for duty. She worked at A Branch, Allied Land Headquarters, at Victoria Barracks in central Melbourne. Her diligence was rewarded and she was promoted to the rank of Temporary Major (9 September 1941), then Major (1 September 1942).⁹ Later, with her appointment to the position of Assistant Director General of Medical Services (ADGMS) to Land Headquarters, she held for a short period until the end of the war the rank of Temporary Lieutenant Colonel, reverting to that of Major at the end of 1945. She was discharged on 31 January 1947.

A servant of society

After her discharge from the Army, Lady MacKenzie immersed herself in good works. She listed her professional interests as “anaesthetics”. She joined the Victorian Tuberculosis and Lung Association, later to be the Australian Lung Foundation. She joined and was active in the Lyceum Club in central Melbourne, an exclusive club for professional women of Victoria. She was an active member of the Victorian Medical Women's Society and of Red Cross.

Her particular contributions were the promotion of home nursing and the provision of home nursing services. She believed that local district nursing services, available to even the poorest in their own homes, was one of the most important health institutions in society.

The home nursing movement had been founded in Melbourne in 1885 and became the Royal District Nursing Service. Lady MacKenzie, with her combined medical and military experience, joined the District Committee of the Royal District Nursing Service (RDNS) in October 1958.¹⁰ The history of the RDNS recorded that she was “a medical woman with wide administrative experience and her contributions to the future of the Organisation, was, in many ways, to prove unique”.¹⁰

She chaired both the Hospitals Liaison Committee and the Community Services Sub-committee of the RDNS.

In 1967, the various national bodies which promoted home and domiciliary nursing established the framework for an international congress to be held in Australia. Lady MacKenzie was

elected as the Chair of the Congress Co-ordinating Committee in January 1969 and she was successful in securing a £10 000 grant from the Federal Government and a £5000 grant from the Victorian State Government for this pioneering international forum. The First International Congress on Domiciliary Nursing was held in Melbourne 1–8 February 1970, with Lady MacKenzie as the Chair of the Congress.¹⁰ She read the special Message from the Queen Mother, Patron of the Queen's Institute of District Nursing, immediately before the official opening by the Prime Minister, John Gorton.

Lady MacKenzie is remembered as a “down-to-earth lady”.¹⁰ Her death on 4 February 1972 was “greatly deplored” by all members of the RDNS of which she had been Vice-President since 1964. A short obituary passage in the official history of the RDNS read:

Lady MacKenzie possessed an extraordinary ability to evaluate concisely and with clarity and quickness of thought that which proved tremendously useful to her colleagues. A doctor in her own right, she soon showed a keen interest in the nursing staff and especially in nursing education. She was a leading spirit in the setting of Australia's National Domiciliary Nursing Council.... she is remembered by so many friends with whom she had so sympathetic a relationship of mutual self-respect [Rosenthal, page 195]¹⁰

The Royal Australian Army Medical Corps accords special esteem to Lady MacKenzie's memory in its Centenary Year.

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