

## U3A AUSTRALIAN HISTORY.

***Dr. AGNES LLOYD BENNETT.***

***1872-1960.***

*[Editor: When “this story first arrived at my ‘inbox’ I felt that some of the expressions in it were “needing adjustment”, being perhaps not “correct” for our times. I began an editing process, but realized that the actual forms of language used in the story reflect the language of the time and probably of the author in former times. I abandoned the edit and give you the original text. Enjoy both the story and the John’s writing of it.]*

Agnes Lloyd Bennett was born at Neutral Bay in Sydney on 24 June 1872. She was educated at Abbotsleigh and Sydney Girls High Schools. She won a scholarship and went to Sydney University and wanted to study Medicine but was told that women could not become Doctors so she studied Science and graduated with Honours.

She found that she would be welcome to study Medicine at Edinburgh University so she set sail for Scotland. In 1899 she graduated with Honours

She now returned to Australia to find that Hospitals would not allow women to be Doctors there. She opened a practice in Darlinghurst but there was much prejudice against a female Doctor and she was forced to close the practice. She was accepted by women but some men would not allow their wives and daughters to see a woman Doctor.

The only place that she was accepted was at Callan Park Hospital for the Insane.

In 1905 she went to New Zealand and was offered a position at Wellington, She was soon the Chief Medical Officer at St. Helen's Maternity Hospital and Hon. Physician to the Children's Ward at Wellington Hospital.

She was a constant supporter of Women's Rights and was critical of those male Doctors who saw Women being detrimental to Higher Education.

Some believed that women's brains were smaller than men's and should never become Doctors.

Agnes was a tall, attractive girl who excelled at all sports and was popular with several young men. At University she fell in love with a young student and they planned to marry when they finished their Degrees.

But it was not to be as there was a tragic accident and the young man was drowned. Agnes was devastated with grief but threw herself into her studies. She would never marry.

In 1914 Agnes offered her services to the Australian Army as a Doctor.

She was told;

***We only need men and you should go home and knit sox and scarves for the Troops. There is no place for women in the Army.***

Agnes was not that type of woman so she applied to the French Red Cross and was told that she would be very welcome in France and to come at once.

She set sail for France on the first boat.

When her ship arrived at Port Said, in Egypt, she saw rows of young, badly wounded men lying on the wharf, on stretchers, in the hot sun. She asked an orderly who they were and was told;

***They are ANZACS who have been wounded at Gallipoli, poor sods. There are no hospitals here.***

That was enough for Agnes and she packed her bags and went down the gangway and found that there was only one young Doctor there. She said;

***I am a doctor and you bloody well need me. Where do I start?***

Having secured a storage shed as a makeshift hospital, she ordered soldiers who were acting as orderlies to move the men out of the sun. She set up an operating theatre and with little anesthetic started to treat the wounded men.

She worked for several days and nights and saved many lives.

A British Officer arrived and said that she should not be doing this as only a Doctor who was an Officer should treat wounded troops.

She was much taller than the Officer and she said;

***Well, make me a bloody Officer.***

The Officer went away and was soon back with the necessary papers which she signed and so became the first woman to become an Officer in the British Army.

Captain Agnes Bennett RAMC now ordered that train be found and that the wounded men be taken to Cairo Army Hospital and that she would go with them

She would obtain a leather Sam Brown belt and gun holster and an Officers Cap, was now a surgeon and would take over the Cairo Hospital as she found that there were overcrowded wards and men lying on stretchers in the corridors.

The doctors and the staff were pleased to see that there was someone to put an end to the chaos. She also outranked them all.

She was told that beds were in short supply and there were some coming in a few weeks. Not prepared to wait, she rounded up a group of fit soldiers and commandeered several army trucks and went to the harbour where there were several luxury ships moored. The men ripped out all their bunks and they made fine beds for the wounded men in Cairo Hospital.

Agnes remained at Cairo and ran a very efficient Hospital until the end of the Gallipoli Campaign.

The British Government was impressed with her work and would award her with an OBE.

She was now Captain Agnes Bennett OBE.

Agnes moved on to Britain and served at the Army's Millbank Hospital and it was here that she met Dr. Elsie Inglis who was forming the Scottish Women's Field Hospitals in France. These Hospitals would be tents, close to the Front Line and be fully equipped with Operating Theatres. They had field Ambulances and they would be driven by Scottish women. All the Doctors were women.

Agnes was to be in charge of one of these Hospitals based in Serbia. She went to Edinburgh and raised a staff of high-spirited young girls who were keen to see some action, close to the Front Line.

Agnes ,in 1916, was now in charge of this Hospital at Charilaos which is now Thessalonika Airport. They would treat thousands of wounded Soldiers who were driven from the Front in ambulances by young Scottish girls who were no longer debutantes but heroines.

Agnes was joined at the Hospital by Dr. Lilian Cooper who had travelled from Queensland because she was told that she could not practice as a Doctor there. Another Queenslander, Jean Bedford, also came and would organize the Ambulances.

It was always very cold and all the staff wore woolen coats and Agnes always wore a sheepskin coat that came down to her ankles. She also wore an Aussi Slouch hat.

The Crown Prince of Serbia visited the Hospital on many occasions and was deeply grateful for the service given by the women. He would award Doctors, Bennett, Dalyell and Cooper with the highest decorations for Valour, *The Serbian Order Of Saint Sava and The Royal Red Cross of Serbia.*

After the War, Agnes returned to Sydney to find that she could not be accepted as a Doctor. She went back to New Zealand and worked at the Wellington Hospital

She would work with the Flying Doctor Service back in Australia and she went back to Britain and found work there in 1940-42.

Dr Agnes Lloyd Bennett died in 1960, her heroism almost totally forgotten.

She would proudly display her many Decorations given for her service to caring for the sick and the wounded.

***THE ORDER OF SAINT SAVA .***

***THE ORDER OF THE REDEEMER.***

***THE ROYAL RED CROSS OF VALOUR.***

***THE ORDER OF THE PHOENIX.***

***THE POLISH CROSS OF VALOUR***

***THE POLISH CROSS OF MERIT.***

***THE ORDER OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE. OBE.***

I believe that Dr Agnes Bennett is worthy of a place amongst the very special Australians.

***(John Imrie, 29 August, 2020)***