

1901

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Neill, Elizabeth Grace

1846–1926

Nurse, senior public servant, social reformer

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Born in Edinburgh, Scotland, on 25 May 1846 to a wealthy family belonging to the Scottish gentry, Elizabeth Grace Campbell (known as Grace) was the daughter of James Archibald Campbell and his second wife, Maria Grace Cameron. She grew up on the shores of Loch Awe, Argyll, but spent her later teenage years on the family farm in Warwickshire, near Rugby School.

Intended for a life of idle gentility, Grace aspired to a more challenging existence. It was with some difficulty that she persuaded her father to allow her to attend a Warwickshire academy for young ladies, and to sit the University of Cambridge entrance examinations.

Although she passed with very distinguished marks, her father forbade her to enter university. Thwarted in her desire to train for medicine, Grace Campbell looked to the newly respectable career of nursing to afford escape from family expectation.

From 1873 to 1876 she trained at King's College and Charing Cross hospitals under the Anglican Sisterhood of St John's House in London. Nursing equipped her with saleable skills and experience of authority and command, but it also provided the occasion of a final breach with her family. Between 1876 and 1879 she was lady superintendent of the children's hospital at Pendlebury, near Manchester. While there Grace Campbell met Dr Channing Neill. They were married on 21 January 1879, at Edinburgh, a union that her father regarded as beneath her social class. Despite the fact that she was a hospital matron of 32, her father cast her out of her family. She paid the price later in financial hardship, but gained (as she herself once said) a life comprising 'heaps of variety'.

Grace Neill began married life conventionally enough as a general practitioner's wife on the Isle of Wight. Her only child, James Oliver Campbell, was born there, at Ryde, on 17 July 1882. Then, around 1885, Channing Neill's health deteriorated and he moved to Queensland, Australia, in search of a better climate. After a period spent training as a midwife among the poor in Battersea, London, Grace joined him in 1886. Channing is thought to have died around 1890 and, reluctant to accept her widowed mother's offer of a comfortable home in England, she turned to journalism to support herself and her young son. (She had apparently had previous journalistic experience, editing an English-language magazine in Dresden, Germany, but it is unclear when this occurred.) In Brisbane Grace Neill conducted a small typewriting business while writing at various times for the *Boomerang* and the *Telegraph*. She also assisted in the establishment of a union for women workers. Although the union was short-lived, Neill's involvement prompted the Queensland government to appoint her to a royal commission on labour conditions in 1891. This in turn brought her to the attention of William Pember Reeves, New Zealand's minister of labour. Her appointment in March 1894

as New Zealand's first woman inspector of factories began a 13-year career in the New Zealand public service.

Neill was a pioneer – at the time of her appointment the only woman working in Wellington's Government Buildings. Her initial isolation and curiosity value were demonstrated by a request that she enter the buildings either before or after the men employed there. Even the redoubtable Neill felt obliged to accede to this, although by the end of her career she was able to comment on the number of 'bright faces and pretty frocks' flitting up and down the stairs of the old building.

Grace Neill remained only one year in the Department of Labour, during which time she travelled to the industrial centres of both islands and to some country districts. She claimed to have met with almost universal courtesy and co-operation during her travels, and felt that women workers were less reticent about discussing their conditions with an inspector of their own sex. She noted the need for a careful watch against abuses of the factory acts, and commended the establishment of unions. The success of her appointment justified the extension of the female inspectorate and the establishment of a women's labour bureau in 1895.

During her period in the Department of Labour, Neill was involved in inquiries which anticipated her transfer to the inspectorship of hospitals and asylums. In September 1894 she was appointed official visitor to the Porirua and Mount View lunatic asylums, and in December of that year she served on an official investigation into charitable aid in Christchurch. Neill's success in these capacities and her hospital experience prompted Dr Duncan MacGregor, inspector of asylums, hospitals and charitable institutions, to request her transfer to his department. MacGregor clearly felt that this fellow Scot would fit his need for 'an able and experienced woman' assistant, who could inquire into the circumstances of female applicants for charity, and manage obstreperous nurses. In May 1895 Grace Neill joined Duncan MacGregor as deputy inspector of lunatic asylums, hospitals, licensed houses and charitable institutions at a salary of £230 per annum; her brief, to deal with the 'numerous and delicate' questions affecting women in the areas of health and welfare.

As the third member of a minute department, Neill's workload was vast, but the opportunity for personal influence all the greater. Much of her work involved stressful inquiries into hospital disputes and charitable-aid administration. It brought her into conflict with hospital and charitable-aid boards which were under pressure to reduce costs and target expenditure more effectively. Neill frequently deputised for MacGregor on official inquiries, sometimes wrote the annual report to Parliament, and in 1902 was 'lent' to the New South Wales government to report on poor relief in Sydney. Although working in a contentious area she seems to have commanded widespread respect, and in 1898 the visiting Fabian investigator, Beatrice Webb, commended her abilities. Something of Grace Neill's political acumen and formidable character shows through in her later boast that she loved to 'bully the male if he be placed in the position of superior officer. It was real plums to twist & twiddle Ministers & Premiers & make them think they were having their own way all the time. Catch me allowing any public official to treat me as "putty" however soft my outer coat might be. They knew I could take it off on occasions.' Her successor, Hester Maclean, she criticised for having all too lofty a view of the opposite sex.

Grace Neill shared with many of her contemporaries a belief in the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor, and criticised 'brazen-faced beggars of the female sex' who, she alleged,

took advantage of poorly administered charities. Neill did concede that there were 'independent spirited' women who hesitated to seek aid, but her own patrician background, self-sufficiency and successful struggle as a solo parent did little to generate sisterly feelings toward the less competent. A working mother whose job involved a good deal of travel, she at least was able to support her son in boarding school on her slender but secure salary, an option available to few of the 'brazen-faced beggars'. None the less, Neill's task in this side of her work was a thankless one, unlikely to enhance her own popularity or that of her department.

For Grace Neill, nursing reform constituted a more satisfying goal. She herself was trained to Florence Nightingale's ideals of commitment and service, and regretted an influx of young women into nursing without the supposed dedication of their predecessors. She expressed her concerns to the 1899 International Congress of Women in London, urging that only women over 24 who had obtained a broad general education should be allowed to train as probationers. She claimed that 'the main function of a nurse is to serve – to serve others', an attitude which, in the long term, would work to constrain the profession. But she also linked the status of nurses to that of women as a group, and ended by encouraging all women, especially professional women, to seek political enfranchisement.

Convinced of the need for a uniform system of nursing training followed by a national examination and state recognition, Neill played a major part in drafting New Zealand's Nurses Registration Act 1901. She also assumed sole responsibility for implementing this, said to be the world's first national registration act for nurses. Neill defined the curriculum, appointed examiners and designed the medal of the registered nurse. Within two years 292 names were on the register, among the first being that of Grace Neill herself.

Grace Neill promoted a similar measure to provide for the registration of midwives. The implementation of the Midwives Act 1904 was complex, because there were few institutions where New Zealand women could acquire a formal training in midwifery. She had not only to formulate a curriculum, but also to establish state maternity hospitals in which training could occur.

The last two years of her inspectorate were taken up with the St Helens hospitals (named after the Lancashire birthplace of the premier, Richard Seddon). These were intended for a particular class of woman: the 'respectable' wives of working men, who could not easily afford private maternity care, but who had sufficient means to pay a moderate fee. Destitute single women were excluded (being seen as undermining the status of the new hospitals); so were medical students, since Neill wanted to emphasise the role of the midwife in maternity care. Her aim, she later stated, was a 'State hospital for mothers, managed by women, and doctored by women'.

Grace Neill faced persistent opposition from doctors, who saw the St Helens hospitals as threats to their own incomes and, ultimately, their control of family health. The speed and economy with which the hospitals were established meant that some of the buildings chosen were old and unsuitable for the purpose, and Neill was also criticised for this. Seddon's death in June 1906 removed one of her strongest political supporters, and in September of that year she felt ready to tender her resignation: 'I feel it is a choice between resignation or a breakdown in health', she wrote. In December she went on a final tour of duty, introducing her successor, Hester Maclean, to her new responsibilities.

Even then Grace Neill's involvement in hospital and nursing affairs did not end. Although spending three years in America with her son (1907–9), she maintained contact with other women health professionals such as Agnes Bennett and Hester Maclean, who seem to have regarded their senior colleague with fondness as well as respect. Despite her advanced age, she worked as sister in charge of the children's ward at Wellington Hospital during World War One, served a term on the Wellington Hospital and Charitable Aid Board and from 1916 to 1920 was official visitor to the Porirua Mental Hospital. In June 1920 she finally conceded that 'Anno Domini has got the better of me' and severed this last link with her old department.

Tall, red-headed and cigarette-smoking, Grace Neill was the first New Zealand woman to gain a position of any seniority within the public service. Her appointment came at a time when the distinctive needs of women and children were beginning to impinge on New Zealand's nascent welfare bureaucracy. Her concerns initially ranged over women's employment, poverty, exploitation of welfare and child care. By the end of her career her time was dominated by nursing matters, and it is as one of the founding mothers of the nursing profession in New Zealand that she is best remembered. But Neill herself had no doubts about where her real contribution lay. Describing herself as a 'nondescript combatant against drink, poverty, factory owners & the medical profession', she concluded that she had had two successful achievements in her life: 'No 1 – bringing a healthy wholesome man child to maturity. No 2 – making the pains & risks of child bearing less for hundreds of women in St Helens Hospitals...I feel duly grateful to the fates or the gods for giving me these two opportunities for benefiting the human race.' Grace Neill died in Wellington on 18 August 1926, crippled and blind.

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