

## Dr Mary Clementina De Garis (1881-1963)

From an article by Ruth Lee

Dr Mary Clementina De Garis was one of the first 35 women to complete their medical degrees at the University of Melbourne in Victoria. She graduated M.B. (1904), B.S. (1905) and was the second woman in the state to achieve her Doctorate of Medicine in 1907. With her twin sister Elizabeth, she went from Mildura to study at Methodist Ladies College in 1898- 1899, to prepare for university entrance. Mary excelled academically, and with her family's encouragement, enrolled to study medicine in 1900.

Both of her parents were strong members of their community. Their mother Elizabeth Buncle, was known for her healing skills and her father, Elisha, had been a Methodist minister then business entrepreneur in real estate and dried fruit, founding E.C. De Garis and Co. He was also an influential advocate for irrigation. They had 8 children of whom six survived to adulthood : Mary, Elizabeth, Clement, Alfred, Lilian and Lucas George.

The early Melbourne medical women knew each other and many were largely united in their feminist mission to achieve equal rights of women focusing particularly women's right to knowledge, control and protection of their bodies, both for women and girls. At university the women mentored and tutored each other in their Princess Ida Club and the Victorian Women Medical Students' Society. This networking continued throughout their professional lives with the Victorian Medical Women's Society and the British Medical Association (later the Australian Medical Association). Although Mary did her Residency year at the Melbourne Hospital – the only woman that year- she was philosophically and politically aligned with the medical women at the Queen Victoria Hospital. She worked there in 1910-11 as Honorary Medical Officer to Outpatients, then again in 1915-1916 and 1919-1922.

Adventurously, she took her first paid position at the Muttaborra Hospital, via Rockhampton in north Queensland from 1906 -7, as Resident Surgeon. Restless and lonely, after 14 months, she travelled for 14 months, sailing to the United Kingdom and the USA completing postgraduate courses. She was thrilled to attend the suffrage rallies and hear the Pankhursts speak in London. Returning to the family's new home in Sandringham, Melbourne, in 1910 she tried private practice at 24 Collins Street; however, this failed. (It seems people were not yet ready for women doctors). In 1911 she took up a Resident Surgeon position in Tibooburra Hospital, western New South Wales. Here she met Colin Thomson, a farmer, and they were engaged one week before the outbreak of the First World War, in 1914.

Believing in women's full citizenship, she offered her medical services to the Australian Army but was rejected – only nurses could enlist. Colin volunteered and sailed in 1914 to Egypt, Gallipoli then France. Wanting to be closer to him, Mary sailed to London in 1915 and worked at the Manor Hospital. On 4 August 1916 Colin was killed at Pozieres. Grief stricken, Mary decided to join the feminist Scottish Women's Hospitals who provided female staffed and fully equipped medical units to assist the Allies (the British War Office refused their offer). Mary was assigned to the 4th 'America' Unit, based in Ostrovo, Northern Macedonia, caring for mostly Serbian wounded. She worked with other Australian doctors – Agnes Bennett and Lilian Cooper, nurses Saunders and Angell and cook and orderly, Miles Franklin. Mary was in charge of the 200 bed tent hospital for 12 months. They were away from the war front but malaria was endemic and it snowed in winter. After the death of her mother, she resigned in September 1918 and was awarded the medal of St Sava, third class, by the grateful Serbian Government. En route in Rome she contracted Spanish Influenza, but arrived back in Melbourne in February 1919. By May, she was in Geelong practising as the city's first female medical practitioner, and the first woman doctor to drive a car around Geelong.

Small with olive complexion and white hair, in Geelong her energetic, reformist zeal for women's health helped achieve female members on the Hospital General Committee (1925) and a maternity ward to be built and

commissioned (1931). That year, she became the head of the maternity ward where she also established an antenatal and a postnatal clinic, bringing 'Melbourne' standards to Geelong. In 1938 the Hospital management congratulated her on an exemplary record of 1,000 deliveries without the loss of any mothers.

Her skill and her mother focused approach was very popular in Geelong, especially prior to the use of antibiotics and when infant and maternal mortality rates were a concern.

In addition to her patients, she was conducting research into the causes of pain in labour; she published around 48 articles in medical journals. She developed a new definition for labour and did not accept that pain was a necessary part of it; she also discussed uterine inertia, hidden sources of infection, such as bad teeth, the effects of diet on pregnancy and particularly toxæmia and other complications of mothers' health. She published three books; the most significant was *The Theory of Obstetrics* (1931) which was well received. A matron, who worked with Mary in the 1950s wrote: "Her dietary treatment of toxæmia of pregnancy was revolutionary at the time and became an accepted method in later years". Her work at the Geelong Hospital was commemorated with De Garis House named after her. She practised well into her seventies (similar to male doctors) although this was controversial at the time. One of her patients described her : "She had a mother's natural instincts herself but the whole world was her family"



**Mary in 1905**



**Mary at war in 1917**