
Dr. Elizabeth Cass: a tribute

Dr. Elizabeth Cass died on Jan. 8. The *Toronto Globe and Mail* noted the event and, under the heading "Ophthalmologist spent 20 years serving the Inuit", referred to her as "an eye specialist".

To describe Elizabeth Cass as an eye specialist is like referring to Winston Churchill as "a well-known politician". The *News of the North* came nearer the mark when it described her as "a great woman of the north", and hinted at her versatility.

But even this was an understatement. For the public service curriculum vitae of this extraordinary woman is so full, so variegated and packed with achievement it reads as though a committee had been formed to produce an imaginative work of fiction.

Consider the bare facts. Born in the UK, a year or two after the turn of the century, her true age is in dispute. The *Globe and Mail* gave it as 74 on her death, while the *News of the North* reported her variously as 75 and 81 — both times on the same page. She was educated at Cheltenham Ladies College, and later graduated with her MRCS and, in 1927, her LRCP. Then, in rapid succession, she became out-patient house surgeon, gynecologic and obstetric house surgeon, anesthetist, assistant in children's ophthalmic clinics and ophthalmic surgeon, first at St. Mary's Hospital, London then, as she rose in her profession, at New Sussex Hospital, Brighton.

In 1939 her career suddenly

broadened when, after being awarded a University of London research scholarship, she was invited by the governments of Argentina and Brazil to lecture on the etiology and treatment of strabismus. That year saw the beginning of World War II, and another career switch when, in the first of a series of firsts, Elizabeth Cass was appointed

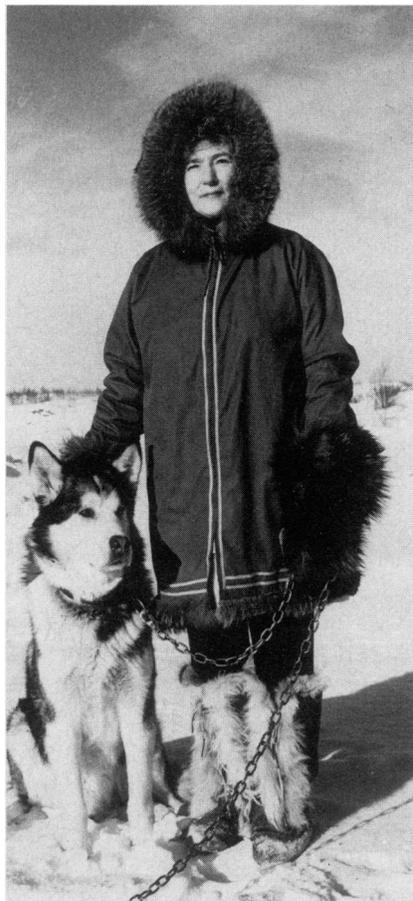
senior ophthalmologist to the forces — the first woman ophthalmologist in the Royal Army Medical Corps and the only one to be admitted with the rank of major.

In 1943 she was transferred to the military hospital in Gibraltar, where she lived more than 10 years and where she began her lifelong acquaintance with Spain and the Spanish, in whose language she became fluent enough to lecture and to write, and in whose cooking she was sufficiently expert to publish a book that went into three editions.

Remaining in Gibraltar after leaving the army in 1947, Dr. Cass was appointed by WHO in the mid-1950s, as an expert in trachoma, to conduct a survey in the Middle East. Due to political upheavals in that part of the world the survey was aborted, and in 1956 Elizabeth Cass emigrated to Canada, thus beginning the fourth and final chapter in her peripatetic career.

Welcomed as an ophthalmologist by the Department of National Health and Welfare she was sent, in April 1958, to Aklavik, initially for a 3-week period. (Twenty years later, still in the north, she commented: "It seems to me it's been a rather long 3 weeks.") She was to be the north's first resident ophthalmologist.

What others might consider isolation, Elizabeth Cass considered a base for even greater use of her varied talents. Apart from travelling (always accompanied by her pet husky) by dog team, canoe, snowmobile and airplane, sleeping in



Dr. Elizabeth Cass

tents and igloos, and testing the eyes of peoples speaking Inuit and all other NWT dialects, she found time to lecture not only in Canada, but also in Germany, France, the US, Finland, the Argentine, Spain and Scotland. In 1970 she organized the first Congress of Geographic Ophthalmology, in Yellowknife, at which 13 different countries were represented. A year later, as she herself was approaching her 70s, she also set up the second congress, this time in Jerusalem, which saw world representation by 300 ophthalmologists. Following a trip to Edinburgh for the organization of the fourth congress, she appeared before the Berger Commission, "speaking out compassionately," ac-

ording to the *News of the North*, "on the effect the proposed pipeline would have on the land and people of the Mackenzie Valley."

A recipient of the Commissioner's Medal, the Order of Canada, the Governor General's Gold Medallion commemorating 10 years of the Order, the Queen's Silver Jubilee Medal and the Spanish Order of Cadiz, Elizabeth Cass was equally versatile outside her chosen profession, receiving awards for rowing at university, bob sledding in Switzerland, gastronomy in West Germany and literature in Canada. Besides her book on Spanish cooking, she wrote a volume on Indian mythology.

In such a full life tragedy must

claim its share. Her adopted Spanish son was killed in a car accident in that country.

"She had tremendous spirit," says Dr. Gordon Butler, associate director general of DNH&W's medical services.

The final accolade for this richly talented woman came from the Royal Canadian Legion, which last year made her an honorary life member — an award given only to veterans and never before to a woman. It was thus fitting that it should be the legion that made the arrangements for her funeral in Fort Smith. The "Last Post" was sounded, signalling the end to a life whose many-faceted richness should be an example to all. *L.M.B.*

Alexander, Walter, Winnipeg; Manitoba, 1938; DABO; otolaryngology and ophthalmology; retired. Died Dec. 22, aged 67; survived by wife Elizabeth, daughters Susan, Barbara, Kathryn, Elizabeth, three grandsons.

Apted, William E., Toronto; Toronto, 1938; FRCS[C]; obstetrics, gynecology; retired. Died Dec. 20, survived by wife Bernadette Carolan, three daughters.

Campbell, Murray H., Winnipeg; Manitoba, 1933; AACP; internal medicine; retired; senior member, CMA. Died Dec. 24, aged 70; survived by wife Bettie, daughter Shelagh, sons David Bruce, John Harvey, two grandchildren.

Cookson, Brian A., West Vancouver; Edinburgh, 1945; CRCP[C]; psychiatry; attending staff, Lion's

Gate Hospital, North Vancouver. Died Jan. 8, survived by wife Sheila, daughters Elizabeth, Rosemary, son Nicholas.

Graham, Kathleen S., Vancouver; Alberta, 1943; obstetrics. Died Nov. 27, aged 62; survived by sister Mrs. Michael Wolk, two nephews, one niece.

Lydon, Michael J., Victoria; National University of Ireland, 1949; MB, BCH, FRCP[C]; internal medicine; medical director, Gorge Road Hospital; consultant staff, Victoria General and Royal Jubilee hospitals. Died Nov. 17, aged 55; survived by wife Aideen, children, Deirdre, John, Brian, Maeve, Mark.

MacDonald, Arthur G., Qualicum Beach; Queen's, 1939; general practice; retired. Died Nov. 1, aged 67. Survived by wife Ruth, daughters

Linda, Dianna, Barbara, Elizabeth.

MacLean, C. Peter, St. Catharines; McGill, 1923; retired. Died Oct. 23, aged 88; survived by wife Grace.

Ostafichuk, Nicholas, Oshawa; Innsbruck, Austria, 1954; MCFP; general practice; staff, Oshawa General Hospital. Died Nov. 10, aged 60; survived by wife Janet, daughter Leda, sons Gregory and Stephen.

Sevensma, Jaap, Sarnia; Amsterdam, 1953; anesthesia and general practice; staff, Sarnia General and St. Joseph's hospitals. Died Nov. 18, aged 55; survived by wife Rosemarie, daughter Susanne Ellen.

Walker, John David, Bridgetown; Dalhousie, 1974. Died Nov. 29, aged 30; survived by father Francis Gerald, mother Irene Helen, sister Mrs. Glen Hannan, brother Gary.