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Historical Sketches

# "In His Name"

## The Life and Times of Jenny Kidd Trout

by Darrell Buchanan

Early in 1876 a free dispensary for the poor opened in the heart of Toronto. It was an experiment in giving medical care to the indigent that would only last six months. However, the free medical care marked an extraordinary departure in late Victorian Toronto, for the doctor and devout Christian who opened the clinic, Dr. Jenny Kidd Trout, was the first woman licensed to practice medicine in Canada.

Jenny<sup>1</sup> was born on April 21, 1841, at Kelso, Scotland, and came to Canada with her parents, Andrew and Elizabeth Gowanlock, in 1847. The family settled just north of Stratford, Ontario, where they grew potatoes, turnips, hay and butter on a ten-acre farm. The Gowanlocks were descendants of a persecuted Swiss preacher who fled to Scotland in the middle of the 18th century.<sup>2</sup> Jenny's maternal grandmother, Elizabeth Haldane, was born in Haldane Hall and may have been a descendant of the Haldane brothers.<sup>3</sup> At Stratford, the Gowanlocks were members of the Knox Presbyterian Church, the local branch of the Free Kirk.

After doing well through school, Jenny traveled to Toronto in 1860 where, at 19, she was "baptized, and took upon herself the Christian name and profession."<sup>4</sup> In all likelihood she had come in contact with the earliest Restoration Movement church in Toronto, the Shuter Street Church of Christ founded in 1838 by James Beaty, Sr.<sup>5</sup>

A year later Jenny graduated from normal school and returned to the Stratford area where she taught for the next four years. It was during this time

that her friendship with businessman Edward Trout blossomed:

When she [Jenny] taught a good, large country school near Stratford, Ontario, he [Edward] would keep a sharp lookout after business in that section, and come around Friday afternoons with the fine fleet steed and a good riding rig his employer furnished, and would take her home. Of course, that was a nice journey for her, and nice for him, too, to ride alongside of a graduate of the Ontario Normal School, who as teachers outranked all others; but the real interest was not in the teacher, that was only incidental, it was in the girl. There was sure to be needed business for Saturday, and on Monday another happy journey to the school.<sup>6</sup>

The couple were married August 25, 1865, at Knox Presbyterian Church in Stratford. Two years later Edward and his brother John established the **Monetary Times**, a financial weekly published in Toronto. When John Trout died of tuberculosis in 1876 leaving Edward as sole proprietor, the paper was a highly respected business journal in Canada.<sup>7</sup>

The first six years of marriage for Jenny were marked by nervous disorders which would reduce her to a semi-invalid. However, she found some

temporary relief in electrotherapeutics considered at the time as the best means of combating nervous disorders.<sup>8</sup> It was during these years of sickness that Jenny realized she wanted to take up medicine.

Jenny passed the first step in 1871 when she passed the Ontario College of Physicians and Surgeons' "matriculation" exam for competence in English, Latin, a third language (ancient Greek, French, or German), mathematics and natural philosophy.<sup>9</sup> Later that year, Trout, along with Emily Stowe, who had a medical degree from the New York Medical College but required further course work for her license to practice in Ontario, became the first women to enter an accredited medical school in Canada—the School of Medicine at the University of Toronto.

The two women did not have an easy time in the classroom as they were the focus of crude practical jokes by the male students and lewd stories from some professors. Trout confronted one professor by threatening to go to his wife if he ever told such stories in her hearing again. He evidently took her advice to refrain from such tales.<sup>10</sup>

In the Spring of 1872 Jenny successfully completed the session in Toronto and decided to continue her studies at the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia where she would spend the next three years. An established and respected institution with courses in electrotherapeutics (an interest of Trout's), the Woman's Medical College promoted "a Christian spirit in students and faculty" by granting admittance to women training to work in Protestant foreign missions for half of the normal fees.<sup>11</sup> Foreign missions were one of the few doors of opportunity available for female physicians in the late 19th century.<sup>12</sup> Trout's later life-long support for Christian missions may have been influenced by her years in Philadelphia.

In March 1875 Trout received her M.D. degree from the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania and returned to Toronto where, the next month, she easily passed the examinations of the Ontario College of Physicians and Surgeons.<sup>13</sup> Emily Stowe made no effort to confront the all-male examining body and so Trout became, and remained until 1880, the only woman physician licensed to practice in Canada. Being the wife of the co-owner of the prestigious *Monetary Times*, Trout's accomplishment received wide attention in the press, not all of it favorable. One newspaper in a small town near Jenny's native Stratford, Ontario, viewed the accomplishment with ambivalence:

That lady's scholastic experience must have been refreshing, particularly when

we take into account the timidity, modesty, and general refinement of the sex. We must not forget however that "strong-minded females" are also to be met with, swinging blue cotton umbrellas.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, in July 1875 Trout opened her Toronto practice featuring "special facilities for giving treatment to ladies by galvanic baths or electricity."<sup>15</sup> The practice of electrotherapeutics often involved application by means of the hand requiring the presence of a female physician. Dr. Trout's practice grew rapidly; the Therapeutic and Electrical Institute encompassed six houses adjoining the family residence. It had well heated rooms and numerous baths and could house some sixty patients.<sup>16</sup>

Only six months after the opening the Institute, Dr. Trout, in gratitude to God's blessing upon her practice, began operating the free dispensary for the poor. As one historian has noted, the dispensary "aptly expressed her dedication to direct social action based upon an overriding commitment to Christian social values."<sup>17</sup> Dr. Trout attempted to defray the mounting costs of the dispensary, where she saw at least fourteen patients a day, by delivering lectures on medicine in Toronto, Brantford, Meaford and Hamilton.<sup>18</sup> However, the fees from the speaking engagements could not meet the costs of the dispensary and what has been described as "an extraordinary departure in late Victorian Ontario, and . . . particularly extraordinary for an upper-middle-class woman of Scottish descent" closed its doors in July 1876.<sup>19</sup>

The Institute, meanwhile, fared somewhat better. A male physician joined the Institute in 1880 as a consulting physician, the first time in Ontario that a male doctor was a "consulting physician" at a female-run institution. Branches were established in Hamilton and Brantford. Trout also gave her attention to other causes, serving for a time as vice-president of the Association for the Advancement of Women and as President of the Christian Woman's Temperance Union.<sup>20</sup> The load of all these efforts was however, placing a strain on Dr. Trout's health and she was forced to withdraw to a retreat in Florida in February 1882.

Unfortunately, her hoped for improvement in health never came and at the end of that year, at age forty-one, Jenny announced her retirement from the medical profession.<sup>21</sup> Retirement gave Trout the time to devote her efforts to another cause: the establishment of a Canadian medical college for women. It was a reasonable cause for a woman who had already helped many young female medical students by providing housing, private tutoring,

material assistance and even the financing of the medical studies of a few.<sup>22</sup>

In April 1883, Trout offered to donate \$10,000 to help establish a medical school for women in Toronto with the condition that a majority of women sat on the governing board and were admitted to the staff of the school.<sup>23</sup> A subsequent struggle ensued over control of the proposed college and Trout, disappointed and in failing health, shifted her support to another initiative to establish a medical college for women at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. She became the largest single donor to the Kingston Women's Medical College, organized in affiliation with Queen's University in June 1883, when she pledged \$200 a year for the next five years in addition to an annual \$50 scholarship.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, plans to establish a medical school for women in Toronto progressed until it opened its doors on October 1, 1883, followed just a day later by the official founding of the Kingston Women's Medical College.<sup>25</sup> After only a little more than a decade of separate existence the two schools merged in 1894 to form the Ontario Medical College for Women in Toronto.<sup>26</sup>

Many years before the merger of the two schools she had helped establish, Trout had receded from public view. Her "interest in medical matters was gradually eclipsed by her increasing interest in Bible study and missions"<sup>27</sup> and in bringing up two adopted children: her grandnephew Edward Huntsman and her grandniece, Helen Huntsman. She and Edward traveled to France in 1889 for the Paris Exposition and visited England and Scotland. In 1903, they purchased some land in Florida and built a winter residence, returning to Toronto for the

summers. The final retreat from the Canadian winters was made in 1908 when the family moved from Toronto to Los Angeles. Jenny Trout died there thirteen years later at the age of eighty.

In the past decade, Jenny Trout has been rediscovered by Canadians. Her struggle to become the country's first licensed female physician has been documented by at least two historians. A postage stamp bearing her portrait has been issued. A half-minute public service advertisement re-enacting Trout's harassment by male students and professors at the Toronto School of Medicine ran on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's national network. A half hour segment of a series derived from the public service advertisement series focused on Trout as not only the first female physician but an early Canadian feminist. Even McDonald's Restaurants Canada, seeking to promote national pride by means of paper placemats, included Jenny, "Ms. M.D.," as one of the featured historical figures.

Sadly, Trout's connection to the Restoration Movement in Canada is largely unknown by its modern day adherents. Her courage and determination in pursuing a career in medicine, in an era when such was not viewed favorably, her subsequent compassion and service to the poor, and her active role in helping other Canadian women pursue careers in medicine were all very personal expressions of Jenny's faith in God. Her mind and her heart were concentrated on doing "much good work for the Master."<sup>28</sup>

**Darrell Buchanan** resides in Toronto, Ontario, Canada.