

The power of the class photograph

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An important part of the collection of the Medical History Museum at the University of Melbourne is the class photographs. These date from the time of the first students to enter Melbourne Medical School, in 1862, and reveal a surprising amount of valuable information about each student cohort, such as gender mix and social mores in mode of dress. Sometimes they are the only known photographic record of an individual. These images of diverse people gathered together also reflect the university community of their day and link us to the present through their relatives, who are often other alumni or current students.

One particular student photograph brings together two recent exhibitions: *Strength of mind: 125 years of women in medicine* (1 August 2013 to 5 April 2014) and *Epilepsy: From demons to enlightenment* (29 April to 20 September 2014). The image is of the fifth-year class of 1893: 15 men and two women posing in a photographer's studio, their names in beautiful calligraphy beneath the image.

Of particular relevance to both exhibitions is 'Miss E.M.P. Stone'. Mary Page Stone (1865–1910) was among the first wave of women to

enter Melbourne Medical School, starting in 1887. Although her full name was Emily Mary Page Stone, she was commonly referred to as Mary Page Stone. Her cousins were the prominent Stone sisters: Constance was the first woman to be registered as a medical practitioner in Australia (in 1890) and Clara was one of the first seven women admitted to the Melbourne Medical School (in 1887) and first to graduate (with Margaret Whyte, in 1892). Mary Page Stone graduated two years later alongside Amy de Castilla (also pictured) and Lilian Alexander.¹ It is amazing to us in an era of selfies that these class photographs are the major images that we have of these women. The 1887 photograph of the first seven women students served as the basis for a portrait of Lilian Alexander painted by Caroline Williams in 2005 for the Trinity College Art Collection.

At the inaugural meeting of the National Council of Women in October 1903, Dr Mary Page Stone gave a paper on the suffering of people with epilepsy and the need for epileptic 'colonies'. Her presentation so moved the congress that epilepsy

became a major issue for the National Council of Women. The result was the establishment of the Talbot Colony for Epileptics, named after Lady Talbot, wife of the the governor of Victoria. This institution operated from 1907 to 1961 on the site in Clayton now occupied by Monash University.

The value of student photographs of all eras is that they bring together the university communities of the past and the present. They also capture the faces of our alumni, who will contribute in many rich and varied ways in their respective fields. These photographs form a very special part of the Medical History Museum Collection.

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The Medical History Museum is on the second floor of the Brownless Biomedical Library, University of Melbourne. See <http://museum.medicine.unimelb.edu.au>.

¹ For more information about these pioneers and subsequent generations, see essays by a range of contributors in the substantial book that accompanied the exhibition of the same name: Jacqueline Healy (ed.), *Strength of mind: 125 years of women in medicine*, Medical History Museum, University of Melbourne, 2013.

5th year medical students 1893, photograph by Talma Studios, Melbourne, 1893, 54.2 x 64.6 cm. Reg. no. MHM00511, Medical History Museum, University of Melbourne. The two women are Mary Page Stone (left) and Amy de Castilla.

