An early medical woman doctor of New Zealand

Dr Ada McLaren (nee Wilkinson)

1869 – 1951

Researched and compiled by
Ada's great great niece

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Early Medical Women of New Zealand

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Early family background

Ada Wilkinson was born in Southbridge, Canterbury on 9 February 1869.

Ada was the eighth child of ten born to Elizabeth (nee Reeve) (1833 – 1880) and Thomas Walker Wilkinson (1824 – 1902) who married in Christchurch, New Zealand in 1855.

Thomas Walker Wilkinson, and his brother James Pawley Wilkinson, had arrived in Lyttelton, New Zealand on the *Samarang* on 31 July 1852. They came from the Earl Shilton area, in Leicestershire, England.

Elizabeth (Lizzie) Reeve and her sister Sophia (Sophy) Reeve had sailed together to Lyttelton, NZ on the *Minerva*. They arrived in February 1853. The Reeve family were a farming family at Higham-on-the-Hill in Leicestershire, England. Lizzie & Sophy were qualified and experienced teachers. On their arrival in Christchurch, they established a school in Lichfield Street, Christchurch.

Sophy married James Pawley Wilkinson, sibling of her brother-in-law, Thomas, who had married her sister Lizzie.

Ada was the younger of the two daughters who survived to adulthood and the youngest of the six children who survived beyond childhood.

Ada Wilkinson and siblings

Thomas Walter (TW) Wilkinson b.1856 – d.1921, (65 years), known as Walter, received one of the first four scholarships given by the Board of Education (of NZ) for pupils of rural schools.

James Reeve (JR) Wilkinson b.1857 – d.1951 known as Jim, (aged 94 years). He also won a scholarship from the Board of Education. Completed BA at Canterbury College of the University of New Zealand followed by an MA. Both his degrees were in sciences: Chemistry, Physics and Engineering. He married Kate Walker.

Fred Wilkinson b.1858 – d.1900. (42 years). He left NZ in 1890 for Madagascar and South Africa.

Charles Wilkinson b.1860 – d.1861

Harry Wilkinson b.1861 – d.1872

Edmund (Ted) Wilkinson b.1862 – b.1918 (56 years, died of the Spanish flu). Ted had also studied sciences (especially biological sciences) at Canterbury College of the University of New Zealand.

Kate Wilkinson b. 31 May 1867 – d. July 1963 (96 years).

Ada Wilkinson b. 9 February 1869 – d. 1 March 1951 (82 years).

Charles Wilkinson b.1870 – d.1871

Lily Wilkinson b.1873 – d.1874

Kate and Ada were born in Southbridge, a rural area south of Christchurch. Kate and Ada attended a private school, the Young Ladies Seminary, in Southbridge. It was started by a Mrs Alice Luxton.

In 1872-3 the family were living at Witham's. This was described as the corner of North Rakaia and Taumutu Junction, near Southbridge.

Thomas Walker Wilkinson, Ada's father, was farming, as he had been on East Hagley (Hagley Park), Christchurch. He had been the first person to plough any of the large Hagley Park in central Christchurch.

With the opening of the Rakaia Bridge in 1873, opportunities to move further afield (south of Christchurch) became more realistic. In 1878 the Wilkinson family purchased land for farming. They moved to the southern side of the Rakaia River and settled at Higham, west of Chertsey.

Ada's father, uncle and her older brothers, Thomas Walter Wilkinson, and Fred Wilkinson were working on the farm. Initially they had been involved in clearing some areas of the original tussock grass. They then grazed sheep and harvested crops such as wheat, barley, and oats as well as grass seed.

There were huge demands on their time with water needing to be 'carted 11 miles' (nearly 18 km) from the Rakaia River and firewood brought from the Alford Forest area further to the west – over 30km from their farm.

Ada's sister Kate had referred to Kate and Ada attending a school in Chertsey for a period.

Ada's mother, Lizzie, died in 1880 aged 47. At that time Ada was 11 years old and her sister, Kate was probably 13 years old.

Kate, took over her late mother's role in running the home. This included preparation of meals for farm workers, plus washing, gardening, and sewing. In later years, members of the family saw Kate as having 'missed out' on a formal education including tertiary education. That said, Kate was highly self-educated in areas such as mathematics, physics, astronomy and poetry. Kate also played correspondence chess. She was an avid reader.

Neither Jim (James) or Ted (Edmund) were at home on the farm by 1880. Both of Ada's older brothers were studying at the Canterbury College (of the University of New Zealand) in Christchurch. Both had been awarded scholarships.

Ada: secondary & tertiary education

Education scholarships

With their education scholarships Ada's brothers had first attended Halswell School, then Papanui School followed by Pigeon Bay School. Walter and Jim went on to Lincoln Road High School (later Christchurch West High School), then Hagley High School. When Jim went on to higher education, in about 1872, Walter went back to run the farm. Fred also assisted on the farm at Higham from a very young age.

We do have records from prize lists that Ada attended Binglands Side School (of Christchurch Main School), later Linwood School. Ada was listed as being awarded 1st prize for Standard 1 in 1881.

During the period when Ada was at primary school age there were no schools close to their home at Higham. Ada's brothers seemed to have taken a level of responsibility for their young sister and it is highly likely that she lived with them and their wives/partners in Christchurch (or elsewhere) while attending primary and secondary school.

High School Qualifications

Note: We know that Ada's older brothers were both supportive and encouraging of higher education. Both Jim and Ted had studied at Canterbury College (of the University of New Zealand) in Christchurch and achieved well. They both continued and tutored / lectured at that level with Jim in Christchurch at Canterbury College and Edmund at Lincoln College. Both these brothers studied sciences, with James (Jim) completing his master's degree.

Ada initially began her secondary schooling at Otago Girls High School. She had moved south to Dunedin to live with her brother Jim and his partner, Kate Walker who had grown up in Dunedin. Jim held a position as a tutor at Dunedin Teachers College. When Jim needed to move back to Christchurch because of ill health, Ada moved with them.

Ada enrolled at Christchurch Girl's High School. At that time, this school was on the corner of Armagh and Montreal Streets beside Cranmer Square, Christchurch. This was just a couple of town blocks from the university.

After completion of her secondary education at Christchurch Girl's High School, Ada enrolled for a BA at Canterbury University. A BA was the only degree that was offered at Canterbury at that time. Just as at Oxford University, a BA could, and frequently did, include major subjects in the sciences. It also had Latin and Mathematics as compulsory subjects.

Ada & family: early 1890s

Early in the 1890s when Ada was a university student, Ada's brother Jim and his partner, Kate Walker were very involved in the NZ Dress Reform Movement and in the Women's Suffrage Movement. We understand from family comments that Ada was also involved in these activities.



Photograph: Wilkinson family records. The photograph was also published in the *New Zealand Graphic and Ladies' Journal*.

Ada's brother Jim and his partner Kate married in NZ's first dress reform wedding in Christchurch Saturday 13 January 1894. The early to mid 1890s was a busy period in the Wilkinson family. By 1892-93 Ada was recorded as living away from other family members and was living in the Church Square, Addington area of Christchurch.

Deciding to study medicine at Edinburgh University

In the early1890s, when Ada and her siblings, were involved in both the suffrage movement and the women's dress movement, Ada and her older sister, Kate, each received a fortuitous legacy / bequest from an aunt, Eliza Thompson (née Wilkinson), a sister of Ada's father in Leicestershire, England.

It is also thought that one of Ada's professors who had other connections with members of Ada's family, probably encouraged Ada to study at Edinburgh. Professor John Macmillan Brown of the Canterbury College of the University of New Zealand was one of Ada's professors. The Professor also knew Ada's two older brothers who attended Canterbury College.

Ada's brother Jim, 12 years her senior, tutored for Professor McMillan Brown. Jim and his wife Kate (nee Walker) were, like Professor McMillan Brown and his wife Helen (née Connon), foundation members of the NZEI (NZ Education Institute) established

in 1885 and still in existence and influential today. Helen Connon had been the first woman to be admitted to any College of the University of New Zealand. Professor McMillan Brown was himself a graduate of Edinburgh University.



Ada's family in New Zealand when Ada was starting her medical studies at Edinburgh University in 1896. The two missing at this time were Ada herself and her brother Fred. (The Wilkinson Family book)

This also occurred at about the same time as Edinburgh University announced it would accept women to study medicine.

It was understood that Ada, like her brothers, had a very strong interest in sciences. No one in the family had trained in medicine before, in New Zealand or overseas. From my research, it appears that Ada left NZ for England in early 1893 and arrived in England probably later that year. By then she was in her mid 20s.

This links in with the very full Wilkinson family records noting a 'gap' in the information about Ada following the completion of her second year at Canterbury College in the early 1890s.

It would seem likely that once in the UK, Ada, at least initially, based herself with her mother's family, the Reeve family, at Higham-on-the-Hill in Leicestershire where her maternal grandparents farmed. It is guessed that Ada probably worked locally in a children's nursery.

Later when referring to her pay in her first position as a medical doctor, Ada compared that amount very favourably with what she could earn working in a children's nursery.

Ada's family seemed to have been accepting of her decision to go to Edinburgh to study medicine. At that time, it is unlikely that they were able to support Ada financially.

Note: 1892 was the first year in which women had been admitted to study in any faculty of Edinburgh University.

Studying medicine at Edinburgh University

In 1896, for the first time; Edinburgh University formally accepted female students into their medical school. It was known that prior to that time, a few females had enrolled as males. Many of those from outside of the UK were likely to have been of British heritage. There were also other pathways in Edinburgh for women to study to become medical doctors. These included:

- The Edinburgh School of Medicine for Women (ESMW) set up by Sophia Jex-Blake in 1886.
- The Edinburgh Medical College for Women (EMCW) founded in 1889 with Elsie Inglis, a former student of Sophia Jex-Blake, as one of the key proponents. EMCW closed in 1898.

Clinical training for female students was an issue in those early years. Eventually the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary (ERI) let women in for their clinical studies, both surgical and medical. It is understood the ERI would not allow the female students in with the male students for their clinical studies. Eventually after the raising of funds to open new wards, the women students were allowed to enter two wards at the ERI. This was a couple of years before Ada enrolled.

The 'medical learning' situation at Edinburgh was not as straightforward as it sounded. Professor Roger Jeffery, social historian of the University of Edinburgh, as it is now known, writes:

Why was Edinburgh a popular choice for nascent women doctors in the late Victorian era? Edinburgh was also popular with men, of course. The qualifications open to women suggest one reason why they came to Edinburgh. The Triple Qualification (TQ) offered by the Royal Colleges of Physicians and of Surgeons of Edinburgh, and the Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow, was open to women from 1886. Between 1880 and 1914, the TQ was as popular as the London University medical degrees for women medical students, because – or despite – the TQ being seen as less demanding than the university degrees. The University of Edinburgh's medical degrees were not open to women until 1892, though only in 1916 were women able to join all the medical classes offered to the men by its professors. Until then, women took courses offered by the Extra-Mural School of Medicine, organised by the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh.

Excerpts from the privately published book, "The Wilkinson Family", follow. These include quotes from Ada's letters to family members (sister Kate, brothers and nieces,

especially Elsie, the only member of the next generation born before Ada left NZ for the UK)

Life was very difficult in the grey northern city of Edinburgh. Ada must have been incredibly lonely and homesick much of the time, and with very little female companionship.

Accommodation when at Medical School in Edinburgh

There did not appear to have been any 'halls of residence' as we know them today. Ada rented very spartan 'lodgings' in Edinburgh. Initially she walked everywhere and then later purchased a bicycle. She had to carry the bicycle up three flights of stairs to keep it in her room. She found carrying the bike up the stairs to her room very challenging. (My guess is that the stairs were likely to have been quite steep – Ed.)

Ada began her medical studies at Edinburgh University in August / September 1896. She also paid fees to study during the following summer break.

6 Aug 1899	"It is rough to work hard mentally and to never have enough food. Really it is a wonder I have kept as well as I have."
1899	"I have bought a bike, very thrilled, but have to carry it up three flights of stairs to my lodgings." Note: the bike cost £5-10-0
1899	"I could not walk for more than a quarter of an hour at a time, but I wobbled too much and had a bad heart attack, which lasted for about three hours." "…tried going to lectures but did no work hardly, but that has been too much and I am now in bed again" (she then spent some weeks in a rest home).
4 Jan 1900	One of the girls who passed her finals last summer has just got an appointment with £100 per year at a lunatic asylum. I'm always glad to hear anything like that. A good number of women doctors go to India still. There are an awful lot of medical missionaries …
29 Jan 1900	I am writing this in a pathology lecture, for a more slow hopeless man could not exist. He has been known to say "I have already indicated to you" 45 times in one lecture.
1900	'The constant hard work, strain and loneliness is telling on me dreadfully now. My face is thin, wrinkled and old looking with just the remains of some prettiness left. If I could only be home for just a week and away from life in lodgings.
22 May 1901	Ada's fiancé Tom (Dr McLaren Junior) left for South Africa on the 19th May 1901.
27 April 1902	'The exams are getting very near now. Dr Bruce (one of the lecturers) expects I shall pass. They are a miserable lot this year (referring to Ada's classmates), most will get through but most

will not make good doctors, in fact I would not take a dose of medicine ordered by a single one of them."

9 May 1902 Thank goodness I am always well dressed for I am always as careful as I know how to be and everything Sybil (a relative) kindly sells or gives me … You may know how well I look after my things when I tell you that I have worn one veil for 7 years.

Note on Ada in The Wilkinson Family book

'Ada's bias was showing. This feisty lady would not have taken kindly to being denied a vote in Britain for example. New Zealand women had had the right to vote for several years.'

Ada wrote to her family in New Zealand. She was obviously 'homesick' and lonely. At the same time she was a very independent and determined woman.

Ada did have her maternal grandmother whom she first met until in the UK. Ada's grandmother lived at Higham-on-the-Hill in Leicestershire along with some other members of the Reeve family. Ada was able to visit them very occasionally.

How did Ada pay for her university and personal costs?

Primarily, Ada used her legacy, bequeathed to both her and her sister Kate, in NZ, by their aunt in Leicestershire, to pay her fees and her living costs. She continued to live very frugally. Whenever possible, Ada tutored other students or assisted in medical school laboratories, just as some students do today.

Ada's university medical fees in 1896-97 academic year including during the summer period were as follows:

1896-97 academic year:	£1396
1896-97 summer.	£23
Total	£1419

Using a straight conversion to 2023 currency values this is equivalent to £241,522.00 or NZ$500,508.46 per annum

Ada also studied and worked very diligently with the aim of being awarded either monetary or medical equipment or related prizes.

Ada continued to study during 'summer break' periods.

Social Life Medical School

Ada did not seem to have written about any social life for her in Edinburgh. Her primary purposes were to focus on:

- her studies and achieving well
- managing her finances and coping with living with very limited funds
- working to complete her MB.ChB.

Ada did write about how it was hard being away from home and not being able to go easily into the countryside.

Ada did mention another New Zealander who was a student in the medical school at Edinburgh when she was there. He had already graduated from Otago Medical school. Dr Charles Begg went on to become New Zealand's most decorated member of the Medical Corps during the First World War. He died in 1919.
See note on page 19.

Smoking and Alcohol

Ada was most unlikely to have smoked or to have consumed alcohol. She had grown up in a family where none of the following were a big part of life, if at all.

The Wilkinsons were not a strongly religious or church-going family. They tended to be very conscious of eating healthy foods. Additionally, with Ada's funds being extremely limited I very much doubt she could have afforded to buy cigarettes or alcohol.

There is no evidence to support the notion of Ada either smoking or consuming alcohol. There does not seem to be any reference to church attendance or any affiliation with a church or religious group.

Several members of Ada's immediate family in New Zealand were vegetarian; quite a few were also involved with the Temperance Union.

Personal / intimate relationships

During her time at Edinburgh University Medical School Ada did have a close relationship with another medical student. Thomas (Tom) Dick McLaren graduated as a doctor from Edinburgh University in July 1899.

By that time Tom and Ada were engaged, Tom departed for South Africa where he became the District Surgeon based in Herschel. He then became a surgeon in the South African Field Force. His work had him riding on horseback out to different bases to carry out his surgical medical work. He was often away for several days at one time on a single journey.

Tom had told Ada that he would bring her to South Africa when he had suitable living accommodation after she had graduated.

Ada mentioned that Tom was earning very well in South Africa – GB £500 a year
Tom and his family came from the Midlothian area to the south of Edinburgh. Tom's father, also Dr Tom McLaren, was a medical doctor; Tom, Ada's finance, may also have had a younger sister who studied medicine at Edinburgh University. Tom's family were supportive of Ada who seemed to have maintained her independence strongly.

Final Year and graduation

For Ada, her final year of her MBChB at Edinburgh University was very similar to her earlier years:

- ~ Fees to pay
- ~ No pay (income, scholarship, stipend)
- ~ Lodgings and food plus any other expenses to pay for
- ~ Ada continued to live alone in the same lodgings.
- ~ There was a lot of pressure to get through her studies and she worked (studied) very hard.
- ~ She suffered ill health from time to time

In her letters Ada provided general feedback to family in NZ.

Ada and Tom had corresponded after Tom had left for South Africa.

In 1902, which came as a real surprise to Ada, Tom's army contract came to an end at the end of the Second Boer War (1899-1902). Tom was able to attend Ada's graduation in Edinburgh.

Ada wrote that she wore clothes at her graduation that her maternal grandmother had hand stitched for herself years earlier and then later gave to Ada. Sadly, Ada's grandmother had passed away before Ada graduated as a medical doctor in 1902.

Graduation

In July 1902 one hundred and forty-seven students graduated with their MBChB, including Ada. They came from a range of different countries and were predominantly men.

Ada's graduation was on Saturday 26 July 1902 at Edinburgh University

As at any New Zealand university currently, graduands in 1902 were capped and awarded their degrees, at a formal procedure. The graduands with the highest level of qualification graduated first, and alphabetically for each qualification group. They were followed by graduands at masters and bachelor degree levels in alphabetical order for each qualification group.

At the same ceremony at which Ada graduated, people were awarded the following other qualifications:

Qualification	**Overall total of women**	**Total of NZ women**	**Total from NZ (M & F)**	**Total overall**
Degree of Doctor of Medicine	1 (Not NZ)	0	1	67
Degrees of Bachelor of Medicine & Master in Surgery	1		0	5
Degrees of Bachelor of Medicine & Bachelor of Surgery	14	1	8	147
Special University Certificate in Diseases of Tropical Climates	1		unknown	18
A number of special awards, scholarships and fellowships were also presented.				

Degrees of Bachelor of Medicine & Bachelor of Surgery *graduating members of Ada's class were from a range of countries as indicated below*

Country students from	**No of male**	**female**	**Total**	**% female**
totals	132	14	147	10%
Australia * Includes: Australia 2, Tasmania 1	3	0	3	0
British Guiana	1	0	1	0
Denmark	1	0	1	0
England	20	4	25	16%
India * Includes: India 4, Portuguese India 1	5	0	5	0
Ireland	13	1	14	7%
Jamaica	2	0	2	0
New Zealand	*7*	*1*	*8*	*12%*
Russia	1	0	1	0
Scotland	53	8	61	13%
South Africa * Includes: South Africa 8, Cape Colony 5, Natal 1	14	0	14	0
Uruguay	1	0	1	0
Venezuela	1	0	1	0
Wales	3	0	3	0

Ada wrote that

…funny that I was capped in our grandmother's clothes (Mrs Reeve – Ada's mother's mother from Higham-on-the-Hill in Leicestershire). I am afraid the old lady would have been shocked if she had realised when she worked it."



Ada

Ada Wilkinson at her graduation, MB ChB Edinburgh University, Saturday 26 July 1902.

Prizes and awards

During her time as a medical student at Edinburgh University Ada was awarded the following prizes, as reported in the Christchurch Press:

- Honours and prizes in botany and zoology
- First class honours and prizes in practical chemistry (100%) and in botany (81%)
- Third place in practical zoology
- The Arthur Scholarship £50 for an average of 89%

Ada also received awards in chemistry, history and physics.

Career and Employment after graduation

After her graduation Ada was appointed as Assistant Medical Officer at the County Lunatic Asylum, Whitecroft, Isle of Wight.

Whitecroft



Ada wrote 'I must say medicine is not a bad thing after all. Before I went in for it, I could not have earned more than £20 a year at a miserable nursery and now I am getting £150 all found, and I am second in importance here and live in luxury. …'

The following is an extract from the Isle of Wight Guardian:
We were introduced to the newly appointed lady Doctor, Miss Wilkinson, who very kindly, courteously and patiently took us over the institution. Miss Wilkinson expresses herself as charmed and delighted with our little hospital.'

Specialisation into fields of medicine for newer medical graduates in the early 1900s was very limited, and more so for women doctors.

To South Africa: marriage, baby…

Ada had seemed surprised that Tom had arranged for her to travel to South Africa so soon after her graduation. This was probably in 1903.

On 15 July 1903, not long after her arrival in Herschel, Ada and Tom were married in Herschel.

We know very little about Ada's life in South Africa although it did seem that she gave birth to a baby daughter who did not live very long.

Ada did not work in medicine. It seems that she was lonely and unhappy.

She then returned to England on her own. It was understood by family that very soon after the ship had departed it had a portion of the boat break off. The boat was successfully sailed back into port at Durban.

Back in England

We are not sure of the date of Ada's return to England from South Africa. It may even have been that Ada made a further trip back to South Africa before 1910 (shipping passenger lists).

British Medical Registers (1910-14) listed Dr Ada McLaren as having been employed by:

- Assistant Medical Officer County Lunatic Asylum, Whitecroft, Isle of Wight
- Assistant Medical Officer Private Asylum Lindville (St Finnbarr Hospital), Cork, Ireland
- Clinical Assistant W R Aslyum Menston, at High Royds Hospital West Yorkshire (near Leeds)
- House Officer, Physician at Lewes Rd Hosp & A Dispensary. Brighton. Note: This was the first mental health hospital for poor women which opened in Brighton in 1905. The 10-bed hospital in Round Hill Crescent, staffed by female medics, was only operational until 1912, when it moved to Hove. Its pioneering treatment, under the management of Dr Helen Boyle, helped revolutionise the treatment of mental disorders.
- Assistant Medical Officer of Health & School Medical Inspector, Colchester.

In 1910 Ada studied and passed her DPH (Diploma in Public Health) at Cambridge University. She graduated in 1911.

By the time of the publication of the 1915 British Medical Register, Ada had moved to Birmingham. She lived in a Council House in Margaret St, close to the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. She worked as Assistant School Medical Inspector in Birmingham. In 1911 Ada studied advanced bacteriology at Birmingham University. Ada then took three months unpaid leave to also study tropical medicine at Birmingham.

Serbia. With the break-out of the Austro-Hungarian war (just prior to World War 1) a few female doctors in or from Scotland wanted to offer their knowledge, skills and expertise. As well as being fully qualified medical doctors, many of this group had also been very involved in the suffrage movement. Ada herself had been similarly involved in New Zealand before she left to study in Edinburgh.

The British Army would not accept or employ them in the British Army Medical Corps. The War Office had replied to Dr Elsie Inglis's offer of women medical doctors with "My good lady, go home and sit still".

With the co-ordination of a Dr Berry, the first First Scottish Women's Hospital Unit lead by Dr Elsie Inglis, left for Serbia in December 1914.



First Scottish Women's Hospital Unit to Leave for Serbia, Dec 1914, RCSEd

On 23 June 1915, Ada was appointed surgeon with the Anglo-Serbian Hospital which was universally known as the Berry Mission in Serbia. This was as a member of **the second Scottish Women's Hospital Unit** to leave for Serbia.

From 10 November 1915 for some weeks, all of the Second Unit staff were held as prisoners at Vrnjatchka Banja by the Austro-Hungarians. They were held as prisoners in the same large house in which they had been carrying out their medical duties. In December 1915, all Second Unit Staff were moved as common military prisoners-of-war to Kevavara, in Hungary. They were interned there for more than two months. In

late February 1916, they were taken by train from Vienna to Zürich. They travelled from Zürich via Berne to London.

NOTE: Vrnjačka Banja is 200 km south of Belgrade (Beograd on the map) in Central Serbia, set amongst the foothills of the Goč Mountain to the south, and the Gledićke Mountain range to the north. Besides Goč (1,147m) and Kopaonik (2,017m), there are also the mountains of Željin (1,785m), Jastrebac (1,492m) and Stolovi (1,375m). The mountain area of Vrnjačka Banja is interlaced with green meadows and mountain streams that lead into the Zapadna Morava River.



At that time, there was a big typhoid breakout in Serbia. Sadly, one third of the doctors and nurses who were in the Second Scottish Women's Hospital Unit in Serbia died of typhoid.

Amongst other volunteers at that time, an English couple, Jan and Cora Gordon, volunteered to assist the Scottish Women's Hospital (SWH) efforts in Serbia and Montenegro. Jan was an engineer. Cora an artist, musician and writer. Their contributions included the delivery of hospital supplies as a part of the Royal Free Hospital Unit. They visited and assisted at the different SWH hospitals in both Serbia and Montenegro. This included at Vrnjatchka Banja where Ada was working. Ada and another NZ medical doctor, Dr Jessie Scott are mentioned in Jan and Cora's book 'Two Vagabonds in Serbia and Montenegro' (Penguin, 1939). Ada's sister Kate had a copy of this book.

In the meantime, the British Army found that they had an enormous shortage of medical doctors and surgeons to treat injured soldiers from many conflicts, including

in the Dardanelles and then at Gallipoli. These injured soldiers were from the UK plus other countries including New Zealand and Australia.

‘Lady Doctors’ were called for and were contracted to work mainly on Malta and in Egypt.

Ada’s involvement and service during World War I was as listed below

July 1916	Contracted to work for 12 months as a Civilian Surgeon attached to the RAMC (Royal Army Medical Corps). Her salary was 24 shillings a day, including allowances, but excluding duty transport. A gratuity of £60 was awarded at the end of the contract, provided employment had not been terminated for misconduct. Most of the medical women were invited to renew their contracts at the expiry of their first year's work.
12 August 1916	Embarked from Southampton for Malta on the Hospital Ship (H.S.) Gloucester Castle as part of the Women's Medical Unit RAMC.
September 1916 – March 1918	Served at Malta in the War Hospitals run by the RAMC and the Malta Garrison.
21 March 1918	Left Malta for Egypt.
21 March 1918 to 14 September 1919	‘On duty’ as a Civilian Surgeon attached to the RAMC in Egypt. Worked as a specialist bacteriologist. This would have been at the British Hospital in Port Said. Patients / injured service personal including ANZAC troops were treated before travelling back to their home country.
1 August 1919	Contract expired.
14 September 1919	Arrived in England on 12 September and demobilised two days later.

British Hospital in Port Said, Egypt



A ward in the British Hospital, Port Said, Egypt



Note: Charles Begg, whom I mentioned earlier, was another New Zealand medical doctor who had graduated from Edinburgh University the year after Ada. He also worked as a doctor in the Suez and Egypt as follows:

Charles Begg was New Zealand's most decorated member of the Medical Corps during the First World War.

Born in Dunedin in September 1879, he attended Kaikorai School and Otago Boys' High School before studying medicine at the University of Otago Medical School in 1898. He graduated with distinction from the University of Edinburgh in 1903. He graduated with an MD degree in 1905 and the following year returned to New Zealand, where he went into general practice in Wellington. In December 1909, he married Lillian Treadwell. The couple had two sons.

Appointed commander of the New Zealand Field Ambulance at the outbreak of the First World War, Begg arrived in Egypt in December 1914 and was stationed at Zeitoun. Sections of the Field Ambulance saw their first action during an Ottoman attack on the Suez Canal in early February 1915. There were few casualties in this exchange, and they departed for Gallipoli on 17 April.

When the Anzacs landed on 25 April 1915, casualties were unexpectedly heavy. Begg sent his bearer sections ashore while his surgical teams provided treatment on various ships. As the casualties mounted, many did not get the surgery they needed. On 28 April, Begg set up a dressing station on the beach, where surgeons worked under constant fire. In late June, a Turkish shell destroyed the station. Begg, although wounded, relocated his depleted unit further along the beach. By early August, this dressing station had treated more than 15,000 wounded Anzacs.

The workload after the assault on Chunuk Bair in early August was almost impossible to cope with. Hundreds of men lay unprotected on the beach. Begg appealed directly to his superiors and infantry units arrived to help the bearers. Together with the navy, which resumed barge transport, they managed to clear the beach by 13 August.

After a short convalescence in England recovering from enteric fever, Begg returned to Gallipoli in early November. He helped to plan the successful withdrawal of Allied soldiers from Anzac the following month.

We know that Charles Begg's and Ada McLaren's paths would have crossed at the British Hospital in Port Said. They would almost certainly have known each other also at Edinburgh Medical School.

From Wilkinson family notes including correspondence from Ada, Ada returned to Cairo, Egypt in 1920. She worked in a private laboratory on a boat in the Nile moored at Port Said.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL A01644

Copyright expired. The SS Niagara here with soldier patients boarding

This was a boat or, more correctly, a 'barge', that was at that time, used as a medical laboratory focusing on tropical diseases. It is highly likely that the boat was the SS Niagara. It previously been a hospital ship transporting injured soldiers from Gallipoli to / from the British Hospital at Port Said. The patients received further treatment at Port Said. In due course they were transported in hospital ships to their home countries.

The above information ties in with the British Medical Register of 1920, where Ada was listed as 'see abroad' in the register.

Ada returned to the UK again in the early 1920s and worked primarily as a General Practitioner.

By 1925, Ada was recorded in the British Medical Register as being at 137 Tettenhall Road, Wolverhampton.

During the 1920s Ada had probably investigated osteopathy. She may have travelled to New York to explore this field.

In January 1929 from London W.1, Ada wrote in the Queries and Answers section of the British Medical Journal, advocating ultra-violet for the control of pain in varicose veins saying “I have not had a failure during the four years I have used a tungsten lamp for that condition”.

By 1930, Ada McLaren was listed in the Medical Register as ‘retired’ and living at 30 Landsdowne Crescent, London W 11.

In 1934, aged 65 years, Ada visited New Zealand. While there, she spent time with family, and particularly with her older sister, Kate, in Christchurch.

Ada and Kate considered whether they could share a house together in Christchurch in their retirement. Both were very ‘strong’ women who had each led very full lives. Even though, unlike Ada and their brothers, Kate had not had the opportunities for a ‘formal’ tertiary education, she had self-educated herself in a wide range of areas.
I have very clear recollections of spending time with Kate (on my own) when I was of about intermediate school age. We had intellectual discussions about astronomy, mathematics, botany and poetry. I still have two books she gave me: an early astronomy book and a small suede leather bound book of a selection of Robert Browning’s poems.

After time together on Ada’s visit, Kate and Ada decided that it would not be workable for them to live together in retirement.

Ada returned to England and in her retirement lived in Croydon, South London.

During her retirement Ada joined a women’s Freemason Lodge in London. She did volunteer work with them.

There is no clear evidence that Ada worked as a medical doctor during WW2. She was still listed in the British Medical Register. It is known that during that period her address in the British Medical Register was c/- Bank of Egypt, London.

By late 1948, Ada had been bed-ridden with severe osteoarthritis. She was not able to write letters although occasionally she did dictate a letter to family in New Zealand, when someone was available as a scribe.

In late 1948 or early 1949 my parents and I (the writer), visited Ada in London. I was 2-3 months old. We returned to New Zealand in late January 1949. No family members had any contact with Ada after that. Before then Ada had occasionally asked other

people to write letters that she dictated, to family in New Zealand. There were no letters received after our family visit.

It could have been that without family to assist, Ada had needed to move into different managed accommodation. Family in New Zealand had not known of this or of any new address for Ada.

Until I checked records systematically, it was thought that Ada had died in 1949. It became apparent that she had continued to be on the British Medical Register into 1951. From researching and obtaining her death certificate, it was found that Ada had died at 21 Verdayne Gardens, Warlingham, in the South London Borough of Croydon. She died of a cerebral haemorrhage on 1 March 1951 at the age of 82 years.

Note: Ada's older brother, Jim, who had encouraged her education so much when she was younger also died in 1951 aged 92 years. Their sister, Kate lived until 1963 when she died in Christchurch, New Zealand, aged 96 years.

Acknowledgements

I, Juliana Smithells, of Hamilton, New Zealand researched and compiled this record of the life and work of Dr Ada McLaren (nee Wilkinson) 1869 – 1951.

Ada McLaren was my great great aunt. I have known about her all my life. My grandmother Elsie (née Wilkinson) had given to me lace that Ada had sent to her from Malta.

Thanks are given to the members of the Wilkinson family who researched and wrote The Wilkinson Family book that was privately published in March 1980.

Thanks also go to Kate Wilkinson and Tim Wilkinson, siblings, for whom Ada was also their great great aunt.

Without the encouragement and understanding of my husband Dr Tim Smithells this research and writing may not have been completed. I am very grateful to Tim for his proofreading.

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Note: after the completion of this summary, I, Juliana Smithells have discovered further information about or written by Ada McLaren (nee Wilkinson). August 2025