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# My history hero

## Elizabeth Blackwell (1821–1910)

Chosen by **Amanda Foreman**, historian and author

**E**lizabeth Blackwell was the first woman doctor of medicine in the modern era. She was born in Bristol and emigrated to the United States at the age of 11. Her application to the Geneva Medical College in New York was treated as some sort of joke and no one thought she would actually turn up. But she did just that and went on not only to earn her medical degree but to come top of her class. In 1859, her name was added to the General Medical Council's medical register.

Barred from practising in established hospitals, Blackwell founded a teaching hospital of her own, the New York Infirmary for Women and Children. During the American Civil War (1861–65) she trained women doctors and nurses for the front. She later returned to England and co-founded the London School of Medicine for Women. She was a professor of gynaecology there until her retirement in 1907.

### When did you first hear about Elizabeth Blackwell?

I first came across Elizabeth Blackwell when trying to find out whether Florence Nightingale's work in the Crimean War (1853–56) had influenced the development of nursing during the American Civil War. It turned out that Dr Blackwell knew Florence Nightingale well and frequently shared ideas and discoveries with her. At one point they considered setting up a hospital together.

### What kind of person was she?

Poor Elizabeth was, according to the writer Elizabeth Gaskell, "very like a school mistress and rather repulsive in her manner". She never married and had few friends or interests outside her mission to bring medicine to women. I think in essence she was terribly shy. It didn't help that she caught an infection at La Maternité hospital in France, which resulted in the loss of one of her eyes.

### What makes her a hero?

She is a hero for her single-minded determination to become a doctor. There is no doubt in my mind that Elizabeth sacrificed her personal happiness for the sake of her ideals.

### What was her finest hour?

Her finest hour was the bravery she displayed in July 1863, when New York City was convulsed by the worst rioting in the history of America. Called the Draft Riots, for three days white rioters expressed their anger over the Civil War and the federal draft by lynching any free black they could find.

Elizabeth Blackwell



Elizabeth Blackwell in c1877. According to Amanda Foreman, Blackwell "sacrificed her personal happiness for the sake of her ideals"

risked her life by sheltering her black patients from the fury of the mob outside the hospital.

### Is there anything that you don't particularly admire about her?

Elizabeth Blackwell was unable to empathise with or accept other people's weaknesses. She almost ruined her sister Emily's life by her relentless demand for perfection. She certainly ruined Kitty's, her adopted daughter, who never had a life of her own.

### Can you see any parallels between Elizabeth's life and your own?

We are both Anglo-Americans. We have both lived, had our educations, and made our careers on either side of the Atlantic. Perhaps this is why I have felt so drawn to her – because I know exactly what she means when she writes that her work and her home never seem to be in the same place. **II**

**Amanda Foreman** is a historian and author. Her 1998 book *Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire* (HarperCollins) was the basis for a 2008 film starring Keira Knightley and Ralph Fiennes. Her latest book *A World on Fire* (Penguin) is an epic history of the American Civil War. It is now available in paperback

