

First Female Graduates In Malaya

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Dear Sir,

It was exactly 100 years ago, in 1911, that the first two ladies graduated with a degree in Medicine¹.

Eugenie Nunes was one of six in the second batch of undergraduates who completed the course in Dec 1910² and convocated the following year. She was from Pakistan, the country to which she returned after graduation. As a result, not much else is known about her history.

Emily Pakiam Hitchcock was one of seven from the third intake. She completed studies in 1911 and graduated in mid 1911. A few details are known, and these are documented to show aspects of the first local lady graduate in Malaya.

Emily Hitchcock was born in Ceylon in the late 1870s. Her mother, Laura Lee, was Ceylonese of Tamil origin. Her father, Dr Hitchcock, was also Ceylonese of Tamil origin. She had an older brother, Victor Emmanuel Hitchcock (the author's great grandfather), who became an engineer in Malaya.

Emily Pakiam married in 1913, after which she settled in Ipoh. She and her husband ran the Lanka Clinic, a private practice. During the influenza pandemic of 1918, the husband and wife team had their work cut out for them³. She was also the only lady doctor in the area for quite some time, and worked mainly when there were special requests for lady doctors³.

She and her husband were very comfortable, financially. In fact, the author's grandfather described Emily Pakiam as "a feisty lady who owned race horses"³.

She became a widow in 1938, after which she stopped working and moved to Kuala Lumpur. She passed away in 1962³.

Very few girls had the privilege of doing tertiary study in the early 1900s. Amongst females, tertiary education was even rarer, especially in the male-dominated society of those days. It was probable that if resources were to be spent, these would rather be dedicated to sons rather than daughters. In addition, social pressure was against females being too educated.

The discrimination (against tertiary education of females) was a global sentiment. In 1849, Elizabeth Blackwell became the world's first female physician by graduating from Geneva



Wedding picture of Emily Pakiam Hitchcock in 1913

College in New York⁵. In the 1880s, Emily Stowe became the first female Canadian doctor⁶. It was interesting to note that it took only about 30 more years for the first female medical graduates to be produced in Malaya – a sign of a growing change of mindset and broadening of views globally and locally.

Emily Pakiam Hitchcock was the first among local girls to graduate in Malaya, having been trained in Medicine, a fairly challenging field. 2011 marked the 100th year of such pioneering efforts.

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