

The Dufferin Fund and Female Medical Care

by Shuqing Liu

I. Introduction

In 1885, with the help of her political and cultural “privilege” as a Western white woman, Lady Dufferin, a vicereine of India, and a representative practitioner of Queen Victoria’s will, established the National Association for Supplying Female Medical Aid to the Women of India, also known as the Countess of Dufferin’s Fund or the Dufferin Fund. The Fund contributed to cultivating women doctors and improving female medical services in India. Focusing on Lady Dufferin’s medical work in British India, I intend to explore the role of the Dufferin Fund in constructing and understanding colonial female medicine.

Some locations of Dufferin and other female hospitals mentioned in the Medical History of British India corpus

II. Analysis

Formal and scientific medical services for Indian women were tremendously limited for a long time before the late 19th century because of “[t]he rules of seclusion which bound both Hindu and Muslim women” ([Lang](#) 47). Due to the native customs, most Indian women could not approach any men, including doctors, except for close relatives, which cut off Indian women from medical care except for some scattered efforts by missionaries ([Lang](#) 46; [Roberts](#) 445). After hearing of this phenomenon, Queen Victoria decided to provide medical aid for Indian women. She conveyed her ideas to Lady Harriot Dufferin,

who would visit India with her husband, Lord Dufferin, a diplomat and Governor-General of Canada who was appointed as the new Viceroy of British India in 1884.

Following the wishes of Queen Victoria, Lady Dufferin founded the Dufferin Fund whose objectives “were to provide medical instruction, including teaching and training in India, for women as doctors, hospital assistants, nurses, and midwives; to organize medical relief for women and children, including the establishment of hospitals, dispensaries, and wards under female superintendence; and to supply trained female nurses and midwives” (Arnold 263). “By 1899, the *British Medical Journal* reported that 324 women were undergoing medical training [...] and over 1200 nurses, midwives and compounders (chemists) already qualified,” which “was greatly assisted by [...] the pan-Indian Lady Dufferin Fund” (Allender 225). “By 1907 more than 2 million women a year were being treated at institutions wholly financed or partly funded by the Dufferin committees” (Arnold 263). These data indicate that the Dufferin Fund indeed contributed to the development of medical care for Indian women.

To further evaluate the role of the Dufferin Fund, I looked through the raw texts of the [Medical History of British India](#) corpus (MHBI) with AntConc. (I did not use the POS-tagged files mentioned in the introduction of the Text Analysis page because it is not necessary in this essay.) The search term “dufferin” yields 144 hits, covering 13 files. Its clusters focus on “Dufferin (Victoria) Hospital(s)” and “Dufferin Fund,” with collocates such as “lady,” “women,” “dispensary,” and “medical.” These results indicate that in the medical history of British India, the term “Dufferin” represents the institutional female medical aid established by Lady Dufferin and inspired by Queen Victoria (with no mention of another “Dufferin,” that is, Lady Dufferin’s viceroy husband, the seemingly more powerful man). This representation implies the strength of Western women, especially the vicereines, in

participating in and even making a difference in colonial affairs.

Rank	Freq	Freq(L)	Freq(R)	Stat	Collocate
1	181	48	133	9.48136	hospital
2	101	82	19	3.24243	the
3	75	0	75	14.65038	victoria
4	43	7	36	12.12375	howrah
5	43	12	31	7.95554	general
6	40	33	7	2.51131	of
7	35	2	33	5.37904	total
8	32	27	5	9.25213	dispensary
9	27	15	12	2.77015	and
10	24	13	11	2.68505	in
11	21	20	1	12.29533	lady
12	21	17	4	12.65481	bhawanipur
13	20	6	14	9.04441	women
14	19	13	6	5.51594	s
15	18	13	5	4.60926	at
16	17	16	1	9.85705	institutions
17	16	6	10	2.39406	to
18	16	3	13	5.48514	p
19	14	13	1	6.27901	medical
20	13	9	4	12.04028	suburban
21	13	9	4	8.69347	south
22	13	0	13	9.34402	fund
23	12	12	0	8.33809	police

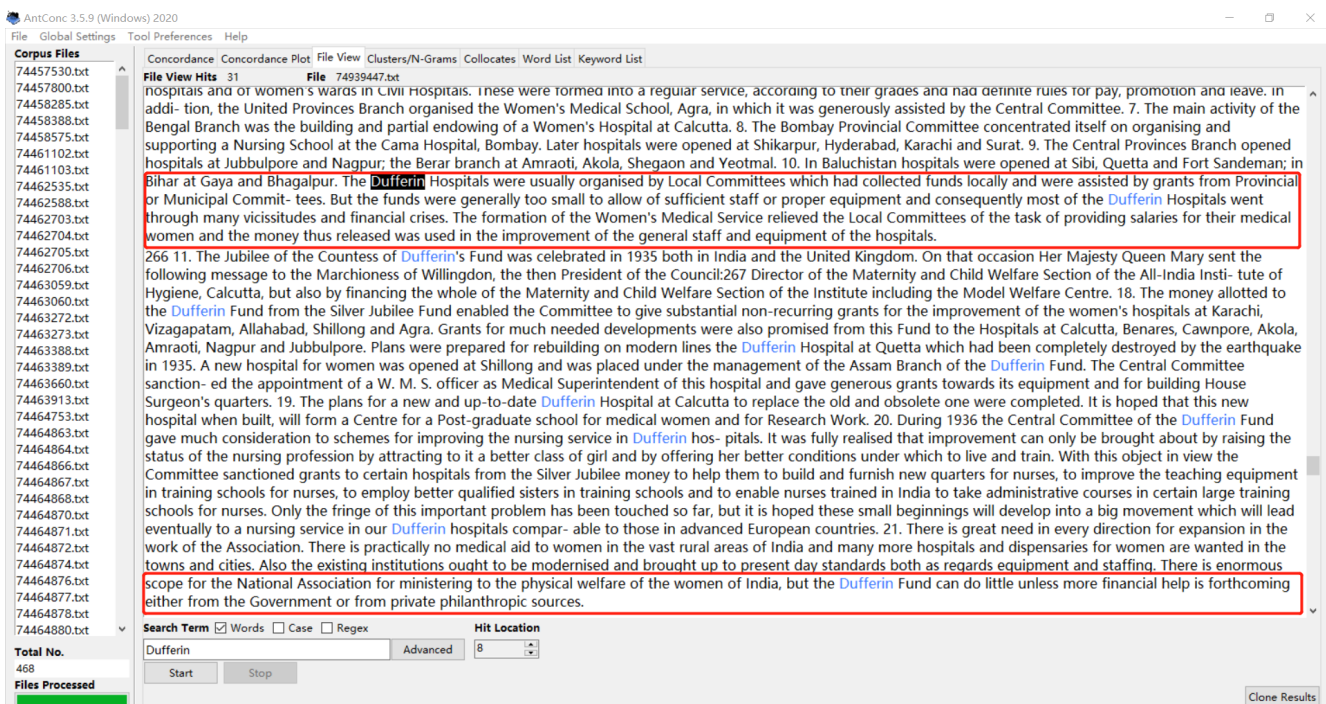
Screenshot of AntConc search results: Collocates of “Dufferin”

However, medical care for Indian women did not become widely available even though it was set up and supported by Western white women. By examining the file view of these results, I found some materials confirming the accomplishment of the Dufferin Fund and the difficulties it confronted.

For example, one file clearly points out that “[t]his [the Dufferin Fund] was the first national effort for the establishment of medical relief for the women of India and the earliest training school for nurses and midwives financed by the Countess of Dufferin’s Fund was begun at the Cama Hospital, Bombay” (*MHBI* [74939447](#)) However, shouldering ambitious aims of female medical aid, the Dufferin Fund, as a non-official organization, would encounter much hardship, particularly because of gender discrimination. “The Dufferin Hospitals were usually organised by Local Committees which had collected funds locally and were assisted by grants from Provincial or Municipal Committees. But the funds were

generally too small to allow [for] sufficient staff or proper equipment and consequently most of the Dufferin Hospitals went through many vicissitudes and financial crises” (MHBI 74939447).

Despite the medical success of Dufferin hospitals, they obtained limited help from the government and the state, which prevented the Dufferin Fund from making greater medical achievements. This reflects the universal dilemma of female medical services – they are significant to be paid attention to and do gain some “investment,” but meanwhile they are also not significant enough to occupy too many funds and resources in official expenditure and plans, always positioned as “vital inferior.” This dilemma was not alleviated even though the medical care for women was carried out by powerful and dominant women “colonizers.” After all, those in power in the colony are always male colonizers who naturally display superiority to their female counterparts.

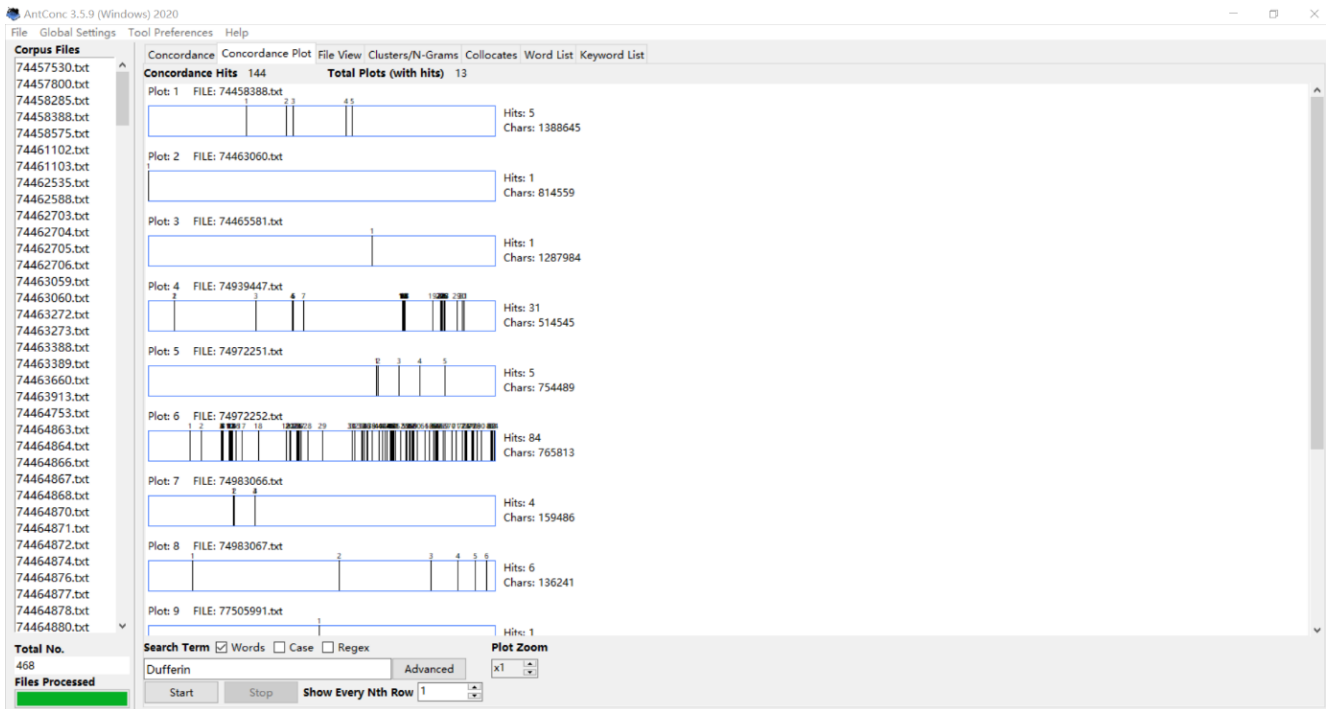


Screenshot of AntConc search results: File View of “Dufferin”

To further examine the situation of female hospitals in India, I searched for the terms “female hospital+”, “lady doctor+”,

“wom?n doctor+”, “female doctor+” with AntConc and respectively received 114, 138, 5, and 13 hits. These results mainly revolve around the construction of female hospitals and the distribution and training of women doctors, female hospital assistants, sub-assistant surgeons, and hospital attendants. For example, the file view of one search result of “female hospital+” shows that “[hospital accommodation] exists at Madras for 92 males and 20 females; at Vizagapatam for 17 males only, the female sick being treated in the general ward, pending construction of a separate ward; and at Calicut for 9 males and 6 females, the new female hospital being under construction” (MHBI [82807931](#)). It might be concluded that British India realized the necessity of building female hospitals and wards and to some degree promoted the popularization of formal and systematic female medical services, but generally female medical resources still displayed obvious inferiority to the male ones.

In addition, the concordance plot of these terms shows that, among the 468 files of the Medical History of British India corpus, these terms are respectively mentioned in 31, 28, 2, and 4 different files. Combined with the 4 files covering the term “Dufferin,” it seems that British Indian medicine does not attach importance to female medical care. As [Samiksha Sehrawat](#) points out, “although ideologically committed to improving the condition of women in India, and promoting Western medicine, the colonial state continued to be reluctant to commit itself to anything more than the lowest possible expenditure for this cause” (18). In brief, female medical services, especially those founded and promoted by private and voluntary organizations and associations, such as the Dufferin Fund, did not gain sufficient support from the state, nor did they take up a significant percentage in British Indian medical history.



Screenshot of AntConc search results: Concordance Plot of “Dufferin”

III. Summary

The Dufferin Fund promoted the institutionalization of medical care for Indian women, which contributed to Indian female history, but its financial dilemma reflects “the colonial administration’s relative lack of interest in women’s medicine” (Lal 65) and the gap between male and female medicine, which indicates the challenges of establishing really effective medical care for colonized women, especially by private and voluntary organizations. The achievements of the Dufferin Fund should not be over-optimistically evaluated although it was inspired by privileged Western white women. At least, in those official archives, the Dufferin Fund does not display as much impact as it might dream of when it was set up.

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