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## **REFLECTING ON OUR HISTORY**

### **THE NURSES THAT ROARED: NURSES FROM HISTORY WHO FOUND THEIR VOICES AND CHALLENGED THE STATUS QUO**

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Right Running Head: The Nurses that Roared

In this article we explore how nurses from history challenged norms of nursing and society, and consider how they can influence and inspire nurses today. We discuss the role of nurses in the fight for women's suffrage, campaigning for the vote and caring for women who suffered in their fight to achieve it, and present examples of outstanding bravery in the past and present day. The article contains examples of the bravery of some relatively unknown nurses in wartime, who also fought for equality and inclusion, and nurses who challenged the care of marginalised groups, campaigning for improved treatment, sometimes at great personal cost. Finally we consider the courage of present-day nurses. Drawing on the global

campaign of “Nursing Now”, we suggest that learning from these exceptional nurses and acknowledging and highlighting their contribution can inspire us to strengthen and promote nursing and to empower women globally.

Key Words: Nurses in History; Feminism and Nurses; Empowerment; Inspirational Nurses

Nurses through history have raged and roared, disrupting established social systems and challenging assumptions about the place of women in areas previously considered to be men's work. However, the nursing profession has both reinforced and challenged gender stereotypes. Nursing has traditionally reinforced notions of caring as women's work, expectations of how a nurse should look and behave, and the continued use of titles such as Sister. In direct contradiction is the role of nursing as a driving force for improving whole population health, which was first established in Florence Nightingale's commitment to improving women's opportunities and social reform (despite her personal opposition to women's suffrage), and the subsequent feminist movement (McDonald 2006).

The power of nurses to take control of their own direction is becoming more evident with the work of Nursing Now, a global campaign to raise the status, profile, and influence of nursing. Nursing Now is a programme of the Burdett Trust for Nurses, a UK-based charitable organization that promotes education, research, and public awareness of nursing and health. Nursing Now was launched in February 2018 as a collaboration between the International Council of Nurses and the World Health Organization, with the Duchess of Cambridge as its Patron. The campaign is based on the Triple Impact Report of the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group on Global Health (APPG), highlighting how developing nursing will promote health, improve gender equality, and support economic growth (APPG, 2016).

As the majority of nurses worldwide continue to be women, through developing nursing careers, women can be empowered economically and as leaders in their communities.

#### NURSING PIONEERS: NIGHTINGALE, FENWICK, AND SEACOLE

Florence Nightingale is widely acknowledged as the founder of modern nursing, widely known for her achievements in caring for wounded soldiers during the Crimean war (1853-1856) and later professionalising nursing through establishing a school of nursing in 1860.

Ethel Bedford Fenwick was a suffragist who campaigned for the registration of nurses in the UK. Mary Seacole was a black British-Jamaican nurse and entrepreneur who, during the Crimean War, established the “British Hotel” behind the lines. Caring for injured soldiers on the battlefield, she was the first black woman in Britain to publish an autobiography, detailing her experiences.

All three are acknowledged in the literature and by nursing organisations internationally as establishing and advancing the nursing profession, and in so doing, creating a socially acceptable role for women. However, there are gaps in the popular history of nursing, with the influence of nurses whose images do not fit the mould being omitted from or adapted to fit populist discourse. It is less well known that Florence Nightingale was an eminent statistician who applied her knowledge of statistics to graphically map the causes of soldiers’ deaths during the Crimean War, to demonstrate the impact of her reforms.

A recent article in the *Journal of Advanced Nursing* issued a call to identify influential 20<sup>th</sup> century leaders in nursing (Girvin & Maxwell, 2018), a call that would be unusual in other professions in which the impact of influential leaders is well documented. Acknowledging

and discussing the formative ideas of significant nurses from history is crucial if we are to be empowered through collective memory.

In this paper we explore how less well-known nurses from history have shown courage to disrupt the status quo and take on non-traditional roles; how they “stepped out of the shadows and demanded to be heard” (Stilwell, 2018, p. xx). Nurses were heard in times of adversity, during wartime, as part of social movements such as women's suffrage, and when faced with injustice and discrimination in peacetime. Through their courageous actions, nurses from history anticipated the Triple Impact Report's call to advance gender equality through strengthening nursing (APPG, 2016). We explore their stories to draw parallels with the work of Nursing Now in raising the status and profile of nursing (Nursing Now, 2018).

#### NURSES AND WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE: THE FIGHT FOR THE RIGHT TO VOTE

Now, as in the past, for many women nursing is one of the few professions they can legitimately join that provides them with voice, a community, and power (Kuokkanen and Leino-Kilpi, 2000), and for some, a political voice. The bravery of the nurses within the women's suffrage movement shows how we may capitalise on this power to bring about social change.

The call for women to be given the right to vote in public elections began in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century in both the UK and the US. In the UK the Sheffield Female Political Association, established in 1851, petitioned the House of Lords for women's suffrage. The women's suffrage movement in the UK saw acts of criminal damage by women as a means of protest that was crushed through imprisonment, which the women responded to with hunger protests. These hunger strikes were met by the aggressive and damaging approach of forcibly feeding

the women through large tubes inserted into their mouths or rectums using physical restraint and steel gags, leading to broken teeth, bowel disorders, pleurisy, and sepsis (Robinson, 2018).

Momentum for women's suffrage in the US developed at the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention. In 1920 the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the US constitution gave women the right to vote. However in the UK it was not until 1928 that women gained the right to vote on an equal footing with men.

### **Catherine Pine**

Catherine Pine played a significant role in the struggle for women's suffrage in the UK, but her contribution is largely unacknowledged. This remarkable woman provides inspiration for nurses today, her values, aspirations and courage being particularly pertinent to the role of nursing in the world.

In 1908 Catherine Pine and Gertrude Townend, members of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), which campaigned for women's suffrage in the UK, established a nursing home where suffragettes were cared for as they recovered from hunger strikes and the forced feeding endured in nearby Holloway Prison. It was here that Emmeline Pankhurst was nursed after her release from prison, and it is because of her well-documented life that we have some record of Catherine Pine's contribution to the suffrage movement. A participant in the boycott of the 1911 census, Pine wrote on her census return, "No vote, No Information," underlining the words "emphatically" in red and black ink (Liddington, 2014, p. 152). It is notable that despite this protest, Pine was never arrested, and never participating in the direct action undertaken by some members of the WSPU, such as arson or smashing

windows. Consequently, she was never imprisoned and was not entitled to one of the suffrage campaign medals. In recognition of her contributions, Emmeline Pankhurst awarded a special suffrage medal to Catherine Pine, which Catherine bequeathed to the British College of Nursing (Crawford, 2003).

### **Mary Rodwell**

Born in 1874, Mary Rodwell was a nurse who was also part of the women's suffragist movement in the UK. She completed her nurse education in London and worked at the Samaritan Free Hospital and in nursing homes in London. Mary was a member of the Women's Freedom League (WFL). This movement included more working-class women than the WSPU, aspiring beyond women's suffrage, to improve women's lives more generally. A member of Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service, Mary Rodwell died in 1915, drowned while valiantly caring for the war-wounded on the hospital ship *Anglia*. A memorial to her in Collingdale Hospital reminds nurses "...who come after, of their courage self-abnegation and devotion to duty when the hour of trial came" (Confederation of Health Service Employees, 2009).

## **NURSES IN WARTIME**

### **Elsie Knocker and Mairi Chisholm**

Born in 1884 and orphaned at six years old, Elsie Knocker trained as a nurse at the Children's Hip Hospital at Sevenoaks in Kent, and later as a midwife at Queen Charlotte's Hospital, London. Elsie was a keen motorcyclist; she and her friend Mairi Chisholm became motorbike dispatch riders for the Women's Emergency Corps in the First World War. Having witnessed the aftermath of appalling atrocities of war, Knocker and Chisholm left the Corps in November 1914 to establish a dressing station one hundred yards from the trenches in



Belgium named *Poste de Secours Anglais*. For more than three years they cared for wounded soldiers; often under fire, they bravely transported casualties to a hospital 15 miles away. This station was unsupported by the Red Cross and relied on private donations. The two women undertook many battlefield rescues, carrying fallen men on their backs to their first-aid station, laying the wounded on the floor or propped against the wall, and transporting the dead to the mortuary without assistance (Atkinson, 2009).

### **Mabel Keaton Staupers**

A member of the National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses (NACGN), an association of African American Nurses founded in 1908, Mabel Staupers encountered racial discrimination after graduating from nursing school. Mabel bravely campaigned for the inclusion of black nurses in the U.S. Army and Navy during the World War II, organising protests against plans to draft white women to become nurses rather than employing black nurses. Staupers's goal was achieved in 1945 with the Armed Forces Nurse Corps accepting applications regardless of race. In 1948, the American Nurses Association (ANA) allowed African-American nurses to become members, and in 1949, the NACGN was dissolved by its members who unanimously voted to accept a merger with the ANA. The NACGN had completed its mission. Staupers' fight against discrimination was recognised in 1951 when she was presented with the Springarn medal by the National Association for the Advancement for Coloured People, a medal awarded annually to recognise outstanding achievement by an African-American (Fondiller, 2001).

### **NURSES WHO PROMOTED THE CARE OF MARGINALISED PATIENTS**

Among the many who have made outstanding contributions to the nursing profession are Annie Altschul and Felicity Stockwell, who shared a commitment to defining the unique

work of mental health nurses by examining their practice and the lived experiences that shape their work.

### **Annie Altschul**

Annie Altschul was born in Vienna in 1919, escaping to London from Hitler's regime in 1938. She qualified as a general nurse, a psychiatric nurse, a midwife, and a nurse tutor. She was shocked by the negative attitudes and unkindness of some nursing and medical staff in the UK towards the travelling community (i.e. Gypsies and roaders), and felt it incumbent upon herself to try to make reparation for such prejudice. The importance of human relationships in nursing became a focus of her practice; as a psychiatric nurse, she sought to confront the contradictions and deficits she saw within the mental health system. She challenged a culture obsessed with confining and controlling patients, and set out to transform nurse training so that students would acquire a questioning mentality and learn to contextualise the service they were providing. She was never afraid to speak out in support of the nursing profession, and even more loudly on behalf of patients and clients, particularly elderly and psychiatric patients. Her oft-repeated mantra was that the moral strength of a nation was evident in how well it treated its most vulnerable citizens (Nolan, 1999).

### **Felicity Stockwell**

After completing psychiatric nurse training in 1957, Felicity Stockwell opted to undertake general training in one of London's largest teaching hospitals. She was awarded a research grant, which she used to critically examine the practices within nursing and the time allocated to the care of various types of patients.

Her findings shook the nursing community in London, and her book, *The Unpopular Patient* (Stockwell, 1972; 1984), received much attention in the national press. She found that nurses tended to focus their care on some patients at the expense of others. Among those who were discriminated against were foreigners, the mentally ill, and patients who did not show gratitude. She was criticised by her peers for writing the book, which exposed a negative side of nursing, and due to pressure from colleagues which made her position untenable, she took the decision to leave London. She devoted the rest of her working life to improving the care and treatment of people with mental health problems, a group whom she felt had been poorly treated over the years. She often underplayed the courage it took for her to speak out and the toll it took on her and her family (Waters, 2008).

## COURAGEOUS NURSES IN THE PRESENT DAY

There are echoes of these nurses from history in some remarkable nurses of today who put themselves on the line to protect the vulnerable, often at their own risk.

### **Alex Wubbels**

In 2017, Alex Wubbels, the charge nurse on a burn unit at the University of Utah Hospital in Salt Lake City, was arrested for refusing to allow a police officer to take a blood sample from an unconscious patient in her care. The police did not have a warrant to take the blood specimen, and the patient was unable to consent. During her arrest, Alex was placed in handcuffs and forcibly removed from the hospital. This incident was brought to the world's attention through social media, leading to changes in police practice and health-care practice. Alex Wubbels' courage in continuing to hold the line demonstrates commitment to ethical principles, nursing codes of practice, and the protection of vulnerable patients (Olsen & Braus, 2018).

## **Kirsty Boden**

Kirsty Boden, an Australian nurse working in London, was killed while tending to people injured in a terrorist attack at London Bridge in 2017. Instead of taking cover to protect herself, she bravely ran towards the danger to help the victims, but tragically was stabbed and killed. She was one of eight people who died when Islamist terrorists attacked people at bars and restaurants. Boden bravely ran to defend the public, in defiance of terrorism. In 2018, her bravery was recognized when she was posthumously awarded the Queens' Commendation for Bravery (BBC, 2018; Independent, 2017)

## **CONCLUSION**

The collective bravery of these nurses can inspire us in our everyday practice: how, through our practice, we can challenge injustice, disrupt established gender roles, and take charge of our own futures. We need to continue to strengthen our voices and have the courage to take risks. We must learn from the courage of nurses from history and come together across the globe to draw on the strengths throughout the nursing profession to challenge ourselves, and to rage and roar in order to advance and achieve.

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PULL QUOTES (material from the text, repeated in the margins to draw reader interest)

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