

KEEPERS OF THE FLAME*

THE HISTORY OF NURSING AT THE SOMERSET HOSPITAL

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'...And she must look upon her vocation with reverence, for the divine flame of life is often entrusted to her hands.'

A century ago, when Florence Nightingale's revolutionary definition of the nursing profession rang round the world, it had a particular significance for a newly-established hospital in South Africa — the New Somerset Hospital in Green Point. This institution, which opened its hospitable doors for the first time in August 1862, was destined to play a significant and decisive role in the history and progress of nursing in South Africa. Here, in the course of a century, nursing was raised from menial drudgery, undervalued and underpaid, to an honoured profession.



Mrs. M. Wright, the present Matron of the Somerset Hospital.

A subscription of £50,000 was raised and presented to the Angel of the Crimea by a grateful people. This money she promptly put to use in founding the Nightingale School for Training Nurses — the first of its kind in the world. The Nightingale System for training nurses spread far and wide and reached this country not many years after its inauguration. It was designed to send nurses trained in the System to other hospitals to act as missionaries for the System. Many of those trained under the Nightingale

*Based on an unpublished article by Dr. L. Blumberg, presently Chairman of the Somerset Hospital Board, and on information in the brochure *The Somerset Hospital Celebrates its Hundredth Birthday*, by Col. C. Graham Botha.

System arrived in the Cape Colony from time to time. The first trained nurses to be appointed to the staff of the Somerset Hospital were trained under this System and brought with them their revolutionary leader's new approach to their profession.

It was, however, no easy matter to provide the hospital with an adequate and efficient nursing staff. What the hospital required, wrote the Resident Surgeon, was 'respectable women earnestly interested in nursing... A gentlewoman skilled as a nurse is much required in this hospital as the chief of sick nurses'.

In 1877 the first properly qualified nurse was appointed as matron at a salary of £60 p.a. She was Sister Helen Bowden, who came from England with another Sister of the Order of All Saints. Sister Helen was trained at University College Hospital, London, and thoroughly understood the principles and ideals of the Nightingale System. She had been a nurse in the Franco-Prussian War. She went to the Bellevue Hospital, New York, the first of the American hospitals to be organized on the Nightingale plan. At the Bellevue Sister Helen accomplished marvellous pioneer work in re-organization and in founding the first training school for nurses in America.

An engaging portrait of this intrepid pioneer of the nursing profession is drawn in a book which tells the remarkable story of the Bellevue Hospital, *A Candle in Her Hand*, by Dorothy Giles (G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1949):

'In spite of her temper and her insistence on authority in every province connected with the Training School, she accomplished a great work for Bellevue. It is quite probable that a weaker spirit or a more conciliatory nature would not have borne the brunt of those first three years of an experiment which was without precedent in the country.'

Such was the personality of the first matron of the Somerset Hospital. During the 5 years she spent at the hospital, she built up a nursing staff; and her talents and organizing ability greatly benefited the institution. Her standards were high and her vigilance never relaxed. She made no compromises with what she considered her duty. In the annals of the Somerset Hospital her name is held in high esteem.

In the early years of the hospital's existence nurses were often drawn from the Community of All Saints, an order of the Church of England, which had charge of the nursing at the University College Hospital in London. The first of these nurses had arrived in South Africa in 1876. Sister Helen was succeeded by Sister Catharine who was appointed matron at £72 10s. 0d. p.a. Sister Catharine came from England, bringing with her two ward sisters.

In 1885 Sister Mary Agatha became matron of the hospital. In 1886 she introduced a system for the training of nurses and thereby initiated the nurses' training school. She served the hospital for 10 years, then relinquished the post for 3 years, and resumed the position in 1898. By her good guidance and administration she revolutionized the nursing department of the hospital. In 1901, when she asked to be relieved of her duties, she received a letter of appreciation from the Board of Management for her good services. She was a very able woman with a forceful personality and occupies an important niche in the story of nursing in the New Somerset Hospital.

A friend and contemporary of Sister Mary Agatha was Sister Henrietta of Kimberley who often visited her at the Somerset Hospital. Together these two dedicated women were instrumental in bringing about the first Nurses' Registration Act in 1891. Sister Henrietta's Chapel in Kimberley was proclaimed a national monument this year.

Proper accommodation for the nursing staff was a problem for many years. Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897 presented the occasion for a special venture: funds were raised and a Nurses' Home was built to commemorate this historical event. Mr. John Garlick,* grandfather of Mr. R. C. Garlick, at present joint managing director of Garlick Limited, initiated the scheme with a substantial gift of money, and the public subscribed liberally. The foundation-stone of the first Nurses' Home was laid in August 1901 by their Royal Highnesses the Duke and Duchess of York, afterwards King George V and Queen Mary. The Nurses' Home was occupied in 1906, being formally opened by Sir Walter Hely-Hutchinson.

The opening years of the present century showed great progress in the training of nurses and improvement in the nursing staff. After the retirement of Sister Mary Agatha, a graduate of the Somerset Hospital, Miss Lowry, accepted a temporary appointment as matron and through her unre-

mitting efforts achieved further improvements in the nursing department. In 1903 Miss J. C. Child became matron. Her period of office until 1907 was marked by great development and progress in the Nursing School, with a corresponding enhancement in the prestige of the nursing staff. Her assistants were Miss L. Paul, followed by Miss N. Nutt. The latter became a notable figure in South African nursing history.

The Nursing Department continued to progress under the regime of Miss Hawkins from 1907 to 1915. The World War of 1914-1918 brought stress and difficulties which were increased by financial stringency. Notwithstanding these obstacles, there was no retrogression in the development of the hospital. Miss Lyle followed Miss Hawkins as matron until 1921 when Miss Goodacre, now Mrs. Goodacre Perry, took over the administration of the hospital. Under her excellent leadership nursing reached the highest standard yet achieved. Miss Goodacre was succeeded by Miss E. M. Pike who maintained the high standard of her predecessors.

On 1 March 1939 the Somerset Hospital opened its doors as a non-European hospital and welcomed a community which had up till then had no opportunity of being trained as medical and surgical nurses and midwives. Miss M. Saint of the Lovedale Hospital was appointed as matron. Her wise guidance and control, and her tolerance and sympathy toward the staff were acclaimed and her contribution to the success of the new venture was of inestimable value.

The present matron, Mrs. M. Wright, is a worthy successor to the pioneers in her profession who laid the foundation of the excellent training system evolved in the Somerset Hospital. The high standard of nursing for which the Somerset Hospital has become known throughout South Africa is being ably maintained by Mrs. Wright.

The present staff consists of 1 European matron; 3 assistant-matrons, one of whom is Coloured and in charge of the Shipley Maternity Department; 4 European sisters; 22 Coloured sisters; 1 Coloured male charge nurse; 36 Coloured staff nurses; 218 Coloured student nurses and 56 Coloured student midwives.

The hospital is justly proud of its nursing achievements. Some of the graduates have specialized in orthopaedic and paediatric nursing and have taken further certificates in courses for health visitors, school nurses and sister tutors. Some have emigrated to other countries and hold positions in Britain and Canada.

Thus, over the years the flame of dedication and devotion has been kept burning brightly at this unique historic hospital at the southernmost point of the continent of Africa.

* Mr. John Garlick was also the prime mover in bringing about the establishment of the Nelspoort Sanatorium. At the entrance to the Sanatorium is a bronze bust of the late Mr. John Garlick, with an inscription stating that the institution owes its existence to his generosity. The inscription reads: 'John Garlick of Cape Town, whose munificence enabled this Institution to be established'.