PROFILE OF A LEADER
Mary Agnes Snively: Realistic Optimist

Mansell, D.

Abstract
This paper examines the leadership Mary Agnes Snively gave to Canadian nursing during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, with a particular focus on her practical views regarding nursing education. Although surrounded by the Victorian values of her day, Snively developed a vision of nursing education that was both optimistic and realistic. This investigation of Snively's ideas as they were articulated in papers she presented to the American Society of Superintendents of Training Schools for Nurses in 1895 and 1898, is further testament to the validity of the accolades, "Mother of Nurses in Canada," given her in 1904 by her biographer.

Mary Agnes Snively: Realistic Optimist
Florence Nightingale brought legitimacy and credibility to nursing, which, as a result of her reforms, became an acceptable occupation for Victorian women to pursue. Although welcomed as a "new profession for women," Canadian nursing was in need of leadership and organization (North, 1882). One nurse who worked diligently to organize professional nursing in Canada was Mary Agnes Snively. In 1883, Snively and her colleagues promoted the establishment of a separate independent professional association of nurses which would work together to direct educational policies and standards affecting the profession (Hampton, 1893). They formed the American Society of Superintendents of Training Schools for Nurses of the United States and Canada in 1897. She had been active along with other outstanding members of the nursing profession in the organization of the Canadian Nurses Association in 1908, and it was she who personally connected this association with the International Council of Nurses at its triennial meeting in London, England in 1909 (Lawrence, 1931, p. 20, 31).

Pauline Jardine (1999) portrays Mary Agnes Snively as a creature of her time; however, Snively's practical approach to nursing education was progressive for her day. She believed in evolution rather than revolution and in her 1895 paper, she marvelled at how far nursing had progressed in just 35 years, but she also recognized that there was a long way to go. As early as 1895, she had recommended the establishment of uniform standards for nursing education. She realized, however, that these standards in nursing education could not be attained or that curriculum uniformity be maintained across the country, but rather suggested that they begin with a small group of schools.

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Miss Stively might be one from which the group as a whole could benefit” (Ellis, 1944, p.704).

Stively’s commitment to Canadian nursing was an echo of the motto of the Toronto General Hospital School of Nursing: “To Be is Greater than To Acquire” (Lawrence, ’91, p.25). Indeed, Stively displayed “the essence of leadership” in her loyalty to the organization, her enthusiasm for the profession, and her belief in nursing education (Kerr, 1946, p.114). As such, she provided Canadian nursing with a solid intellectual foundation.

Epilogue
In 1895 Mary Agnes Stively made the following observation:
“We stand to-day up-on atonements of our predecessors, and our gathering here is proof that we realize how much yet remains to be accomplished. We are living not for the present only” (Stively, p.34).

Stively’s efforts to organize professional nursing culminated in the coming together of the Canadian National Association of Trained Nurses with the Canadian Association of Superintendents in 1924 to form the Canadian Nurses Association. She must have been proud of the strides that Canadian nurses had made. As changes to the health care system affect the gains the profession continues to make, nurses would do well to remember these sentiments.

1 See Jean E. Browne’s biographical narrative of M.A. Stively entitled “A Daughter of Canada”, in the October, November, and December issues of The Canadian Nurse published in 1924.

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