

PROFILE OF A LEADER

Mary Agnes Snively: Realistic Optimist

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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 accolade, "Mother of Nurses in Canada," given her in 1924 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 1893, 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 and Mary Agnes Snively played a significant role. In 1908, Snively spearheaded the formation of the Canadian National Association of Trained Nurses so that Canadian nurses could have formal representation on the International Council of Nurses, an organization in which Snively had been active since its inception.

Nineteen ninety-nine is the centennial year of the International Council of Nurses, and it seems fitting to remember a Canadian nursing leader who, in 1924, was described as the "Mother of Nurses in Canada."¹ Although most often commended for her efforts in the professional organization of nursing, Snively's objectives for nursing education were similar to those of today: standardization and uniformity. Given the Victorian environment within which she developed her vision of education and the par-

ticular way in which women were viewed, her optimism was tempered with a sense of realism.

Mary Agnes Snively was born in St. Catharines in 1847. She began her nursing career at the Bellevue Training School for Nurses in 1882. Her choice of Bellevue was significant, as the training program had been described as representing "almost revolutionary progress...in the system of nursing the sick" (North, 1882, p.38).

Following completion of the Bellevue program, Snively accepted the position of Superintendent of Nurses at the Toronto General Hospital and remained there until her retirement in 1910. During those 25 years her leadership was driven by three words: enthusiasm, courage, and inspiration (Snively, 1898, p.5,6). She presented herself as a powerful individual and the Toronto General Hospital's administration viewed her as "the personification...of the new order of womanhood with a new profession to create and direct through its first course of action" (Lawrence, 1931, p.12). That she practised what she preached was evident when, 35 years later, the Toronto General Hospital published a tribute to Snively's life:

She had made a name for herself in the history of Canadian nursing; and had brought honour to the School for Nurses of the Toronto General Hospital. She had made President of the 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.30,31).

Pauline Jardine (1989) 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. The

ideal hoped for was that uniformity of education would gradually extend to all Canadian nursing schools.

Snively also promoted the idea of state registration, and felt that a uniform educational policy was the first step towards this goal. This policy included a fixed curriculum, a board of examiners, and centres in which the examination process would take place. Snively noted that "at present, however, this ideal seems beyond our reach; still by keeping the ideal before us, we shall attain a higher standard than would be possible were we to rest satisfied with present methods" (Snively, 1895).

At this meeting a committee was struck to draft a 2-year curriculum, and Snively became Chair. She reported at the next meeting in 1896 that she had experimented with the 'new' curriculum at the Toronto General Hospital. Her success with this venture was reflected in the growing importance nursing education played in the eyes of the Administration of the Toronto General Hospital.

In spite of her apparent success at the Toronto General Hospital, standardized nursing education did not extend to the growing numbers of nursing schools emerging across Canada. Indeed, in 1913 the Dominion Registration Committee to the Canadian National Association of Trained Nurses reported that it was of vital importance to the profession that there be uniformity of standards and that the training and registering of nurses be the same in all parts of Canada (Canadian Nurses Association, nd). Nursing education and all of its relevant components and ramifications continued to be investigated throughout the first half of the twentieth century but a reading of her papers suggests that Mary Agnes Snively had established the essential foundation.

In her 1911 presidential address to the Canadian National Association of Trained Nurses, Snively noted that "self-sacrifice, loyalty to duty and heroism are requisite for success in nursing" (Canadian Nurses Association, nd). It is safe to say that these traits were evident in her personal life as well. Following her official retirement from nursing, Snively settled in Toronto and became very active in various missionary societies. She continued to be active in the Canadian National Association of Trained Nurses as Archivist and Honourary President and in 1921, was given a Life Membership.

Mary Agnes Snively died in 1933. A year later, the Canadian Nurses Association set aside \$2000.00 to fund three medals to be awarded to nurses whose work exemplified Snively's ideals of nursing and service (Wilson, 1934). Nine of the fifteen recipients of a Snively Medal were involved in nursing education, a direct reflection of Snively's legacy. In 1944, the memorial was revised so that Mary Agnes Snively's memory could be perpetuated by a special lecture to be given at the time of each general meeting (Canadian Nurse, 1944). As Kathleen Ellis noted, "the suggestion has been made that the most appropriate memorial to

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

Snively'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, 1931, p.25). Indeed, Snively 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 Snively made the following observation:

"We stand to-day upon attainments 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" (Snively, p.34).

Snively'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. Snively entitled "A Daughter of Canada", in the October, November, and December issues of The Canadian Nurse published in 1924.

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