

# PROFILE OF A LEADER:

## Scharley Phoebe (Wright)

### Brown

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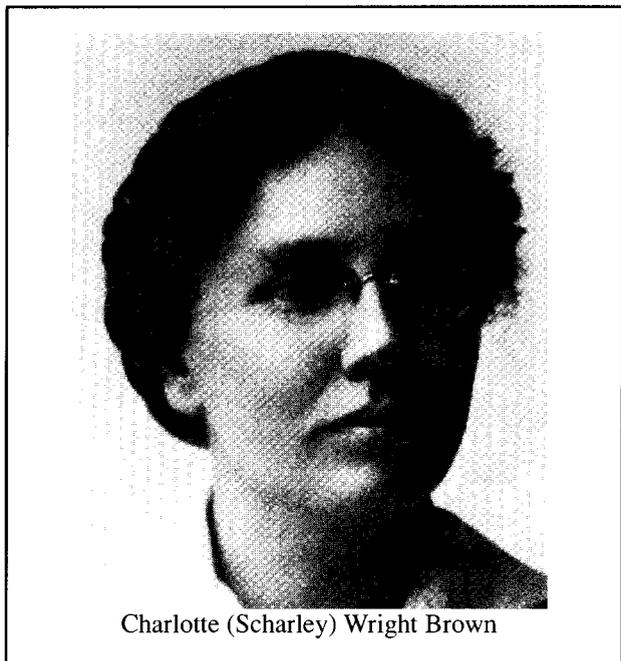
### Abstract

This brief article profiles Charlotte (Scharley) Wright Brown, a leader in registration for nurses in British Columbia, founding member and first president of the Graduate Nurses Association of B.C. (later the Registered Nurses Association of B.C.), and third president of the Canadian National Association for Trained Nurses (later the Canadian Nurses Association). She and a small, dedicated executive group led the fight for registration for nurses from 1912 to 1918, and she helped establish the national organization on a strong and purposeful footing. Despite her major contributions, few records have been kept about this extraordinary nursing leader.

The honour of being the first Registered Nurse in British Columbia was given to Scharley Phoebe Wright Brown, one of a small group of dedicated nursing leaders who organized the provincial nursing association and fought for six years to obtain registration. As founding president of the Graduate Nurses Association of B.C. from 1912 to 1917, she was selected to be Registrant No. 1 when the legislation passed in 1918. Helen Randal, another of B.C.'s influential nursing leaders, who had taken over as president of the Association and been appointed Registrar, bestowed this honour.

The honour was well earned. Scharley Phoebe Wright had been elected president at an inaugural meeting of 68 nurses from throughout the province to form the GNABC in 1912 (Goldstone, 1981; Kerr, 1944; O'Brien, 1987; RNABC *Minutes*, Sept. 10, 1912). At the time, she was employed by the New Westminster board of education as the city's first school nurse (Obituary, 1944). The driving objective for the GNABC was to bring about registration for nurses, a relatively new idea to protect the public from untrained women calling themselves nurses. Nova Scotia was the first province in Canada to enact such legislation in 1910, and other provinces were taking similar steps (Mussallem, 1992).

Scharley Wright took an active role in the registration effort, as well as in other endeavours of the fledgling association. The GNABC carried out an exceedingly well-thought-out lobbying effort, sending postcards to every Member of the Legislature and letters to Cabinet members and to community leaders and other



Charlotte (Scharley) Wright Brown

influential groups, such as the superintendents of B.C. hospitals, the local Councils of Women, and the local medical associations. The initial Bills faced many delays, and Scharley Wright urged "all should work with more determination and enthusiasm for its passage at the next session" (RNABC *Minutes*, March 31, 1913). Later, when the Legislature proposed amendments to place the Association under control of the College of Physicians and Surgeons, the executive reacted strongly, and nurses increased their lobbying efforts to have the these proposals removed (Goldstone, 1981).

In addition, the GNABC minutes for the period show the organization was active in several areas: lack of standards for nursing education in the province; postgraduate education for its members; and, once Canada entered the World War in 1914, with the war effort. The GNABC also was beginning to take an active interest into working conditions and rates of pay for nurses in B.C. (Goldstone, 1981).

During the six years of lobbying for registration in B.C., Scharley Wright also became active on the national scene. She was third president of the Canadian National Association of Trained Nurses (CNATN, later the Canadian Nurses Association) from 1914 to 1917, in a term extended because of World War I. During her tenure in office, the national organization was involved with the purchase of *The Canadian Nurse* and better remuneration for its editor. The journal had been started in Ontario in 1905, but had been through many financial difficulties; CNATN purchased the journal in 1916, and its editorial offices were moved to B.C. Under Scharley Wright, CNATN finally became incorporated, and she was instrumental in achieving affiliation with the National Council of Women, and support

for Red Cross work (Meilicke & Larsen, 1992). As well, once War seemed inevitable, she was involved, along with Jean Gunn of CNATN, with development of a list of qualified nurses who would be able to serve in the military (Riegler, 1997).

She herself enlisted in the Canadian Army Medical Corps, and was stationed at a convalescent military hospital in Alberta (Meilicke, 1981). On December 28, 1915, she wed Robert Bryce Brown, of a prominent New Westminster family (B.C. Division of Vital Statistics, 1915). She was the first married CNA executive officer. Following the War, as was typical of married women of her era, she retired from nursing. However, she continued to take an active role in the health affairs of the community, becoming involved in public health and welfare work. She was president of the local Victorian Order of Nurses and a member of the New Westminster branch of the Red Cross; she was also active in church work and was a president and life member of her church's auxiliary and vice-president of the Diocesan Board Auxiliary (Mrs. R.B. Brown, prominent ..., 1944).

She was born Charlotte Phoebe Wright in Toronto June 1, 1879, where her father was a physician. She took her nursing education in Detroit, at Farrand Training School, Harper Hospital, and graduated in 1904. While a student, she was generously praised in the Harper Hospital *Trustees' Minutes* (1897-1913) for "dedication and self-sacrifice" (cited in Woodford & Mason, 1964, p. 179).

"No more perfect instance ... can be cited than the selflessness of Student Nurse Shirley [sic] (or Charlotte) Wright of the class of 1904. Her roommate and classmate ... contracted smallpox in the course of her duties and was sent to the pest house. The nursing facilities were virtually nil; even the doctors did not relish looking after the patients [and] some ... refused to attend stricken patients. Her friend Shirley [sic] did not think twice about what she felt to be her duty. She at once volunteered to accompany the sick girl to the pest house and nurse her. She was allowed to do so, with the happiest of results. ... Miss Wright's noble act of devotion to a friend won recognition from the trustees." (Harper Hospital *Trustees' Minutes*, p. 113, cited in Woodford & Mason, 1964, p. 179).

She died June 9, 1944, in New Westminster following a lengthy illness (B.C. Division of Vital Statistics, 1944; Obituary, 1944).

Despite her importance to nursing nationally and, especially, provincially, little has been written about her career. In most CNA documents and news items in *The Canadian Nurse*, she is referred to as Mrs. Bryce-Brown or Sharley Bryce Brown, leading to some confusion in her name, although she signed herself Scharley (or sometimes Charlotte) P. Brown. Information about her life and career is sketchy and extremely hard to find, mainly because

nursing has been so remiss in keeping its archival records intact and adding relevant information about its leaders. Yet to her and to similar role models, B.C. nurses owe the foundations of professional nursing.

#### Authors

The authors are members of the Canadian Association for the History of Nursing and the B.C. History of Nursing Group and do research into biographies of pioneer B.C. nurses. They are co-authors of *Legacy: History of Nursing Education at the University of British Columbia 1919-1994* and of several articles on history of nursing. Ethel Warbinek, RN, BSN, MSN, is an assistant professor emerita of nursing from the University of British Columbia and Glennis Zilm, RN, BSN, BJ, MA, is a writer and editor working mainly in health care fields.

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