

cal with those heard in the twenty-first century.”

But let me leave you with a concern, a certain gnawing disquiet I feel whenever I have to choose between reading Harrison's/Cecil/NMS or Le Carré/Rendell/James. To be sure, as Posen points out, “one does not go to fiction for help with diagnostic or therapeutic problems,” but where better do we see

the human condition splayed open for us than in great writing? And this takes me back to my question regarding erudition. For what is erudition? Is it an accumulation of lived wisdom, or is it the ability to pepper our thoughts and writings with references plucked from electronic databases and indexes such as that prepared here by Posen? If we read Posen, and then proceed to the

sources he thoroughly records, this volume will have served a useful purpose. If not, I wonder if it's not just more data flak.

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Lifeworks

Retrospective on nursing

A caring profession: centuries of nursing in Canada

Christina Bates, Principal Curator
Canadian Museum of Civilization
Gatineau, Quebec
June 17, 2005 – Sept. 4, 2006

When the Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) announced in 1998 that it was closing its in-house library and archives, the decision was met with a mix of indignation and sadness by many nurses familiar with the collection. Intellectually, I expect, they accepted the fact that maintaining a collection is a costly endeavour; and, clearly, space at CNA House in Ottawa was at a premium. Emotionally, though, there was a sense that the nursing profession risked losing control of its own history and of the many artifacts and documents that helped tell its story.

Despite letters of protest from within its ranks, the CNA remained firm in its decision. Over a number of months the collection was assessed, and the library and archives were gradually dismantled. Eventually, the association struck a partnership with the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC), the Canadian War Museum and Library and Archives Canada — one that saw the collection divided up and distributed appropriately among these three institutions. Meanwhile, the CNA tried to reassure its members that the move would ultimately guarantee broader ac-

cess to the collection for nurses and the public alike.

Today, there is every indication that this has been accomplished. In June 2004 the CMC, with its partners and using funds raised by the CNA and the Canadian Nurses Foundation, launched the *Canadian Nursing History Collection Online*, which provides Internet access to nearly 2000 artifacts relating to civilian and military nursing. Now comes *A Caring Profession: Centuries of Nursing in Canada*, a sweeping exhibit that will run until Sept. 4, 2006, at the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Gatineau, Quebec. Its principal curator is Christina Bates, CMC's Ontario Historian and Assistant Director, Archaeology and History.

By the museum's description, *A Caring Profession* is “the most extensive exhibition to examine the impact of nursing on the lives of Canadians.” Organized in nine sections and highlighting an array of personalities, it is a fascinating trip through time, geography and nursing

culture. No doubt much of the voyage will ring familiar to physicians, too.

The first section, “Nursing in Canada,” introduces visitors to this country's two parallel nursing traditions: the religious Catholic model, represented by lay nurse Jeanne Mance, who in 1642 established Montréal's



Canadian Nurses Association Collection / Canadian Museum of Civilization

Student and graduate nurse, Mack Training School for Nurses, St. Catharines, Ontario, circa 1901.



Transporting a patient to hospital by rail speeder, Hines Creek, Alberta, 1945.

first hospital, the Hôtel-Dieu; and the secular British-inspired model, represented by Florence Nightingale. Visitors then move through time within each of the exhibit's six subsequent sections, each exemplifying a working environment: "In the Hospital," "At the Bedside," "In the Home," "In the Community," "On the Frontier" and "On the Battlefield." These areas variously benefit from a rich array of historic nurses' uniforms and equipment, video clips, vintage films, journals, old photographs, medals and other artifacts, some of them contemporary.

For example, "In the Community" incorporates a clip from the 2002 film *Street Nurse*, in which we see Toronto nurse Cathy Crowe making her rounds among homeless clients. Complementing this is Crowe's 40-lb working backpack and its contents. In "On the Frontier," old photographs capture nurses going about their work by horseback, railway speeder and canoe. Regarding the latter, visitors come upon this quote from "J.F." of the Matatchewan, Ont.,

Red Cross Outpost Nursing Station, circa 1930: "The Mounties were really upset the next day ... when they found out that I canoed through white water in the middle of the night in a canoe alone [to get to an emergency]."

It is here that the complexities of organizing such an exhibit become apparent, for across many of these sections there are obvious overlaps. For example, Cathy Crowe's work is placed in the section on community nursing, but an argument could be made that when she started this work over 15 years ago she was on the frontier, albeit an urban one. Likewise, nurse training is placed in the "At the Bedside" section, within the context of hospital-based schools of nursing. Grouping it with related information from the exhibit's

eighth section, "On Campus and On the Picket Line," would have provided a more comprehensive picture of the evolution of nursing education in Canada. It is in the latter section that visitors discover, for instance, that the University of British Columbia introduced a university degree program in nursing in 1919, the first of its kind in the British Empire. Regrettably, visitors learn little about today's nursing curriculum or its students.

Indeed it was with "On Campus and On the Picket Line" that I experienced my only real disappointment with *A Caring Profession*. This section struck me as a bit of a catch-all that tried to cover too many important issues (e.g., professionalization, unionization) in too little space. The result was a lack of the focus that other sections had managed to achieve. This is unfortunate; more than any other section of the exhibit, this one aimed to take us into the future.

That future will be a challenging one, as CNA Executive Director Lucille Auffrey underlines in a repeating

videotaped message near the end of the exhibit. It will be a future in which the current nursing shortage will get worse before it gets better, and in which important decisions must be made about the nature of interdisciplinary practice and about the nature of the health care system itself.

The final section of the exhibit, "The Nurses' Station," is a novel creation designed with interactivity in mind. Fashioned after a real nurses' station, it is staffed part-time with nurse volunteers who have undergone an intensive orientation to the exhibit. Visitors can ask the nurses questions, engage them in discussion and post handwritten comments on a message board. The station also offers books and electronic resource materials.

Moving through roughly four centuries of nursing history takes time and stamina. I allowed myself several hours, gradually working my way through every section, artifact, video clip and written description. At the end of this exploration I was struck by the scant attention paid to men in Canadian nursing. Also lacking was a comprehensive overview of the well-established trend toward nursing specialization in this country.

These concerns aside, *A Caring Profession* is a stunning and worthwhile exhibit. If the CNA contribution was its starting point, many other organizations and individuals across the country were eventually brought on board, adding considerable variety and richness to the material presented.

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A book co-edited by Christina Bates, Dianne Dodd and Nicole Rousseau has been released to coincide with the launch of the exhibit. Called *On All Frontiers: Four Centuries of Canadian Nursing*, it compiles the latest scholarly research on the history of nursing in Canada. The book is published jointly by the University of Ottawa Press and the Canadian Museum of Civilization.