The Material of Practice: The Canadian Nursing History Collection

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Abstract. The Canadian Nursing History Collection is a special holding of over 1500 artifacts at the Canadian Museum of Civilization and the Canadian War Museum. The most significant of its kind, the collection includes uniforms, pins, diaries, instrument kits, and military medals. Researchers and the public will access the collection through an on-line catalogue, a major exhibition, and a book.

The material culture of nursing represented by this collection provides nursing historians with a whole new body of evidence for insights into nursing history. The sample of hospital uniforms, from 1900 to the present, for example, raises new questions and theoretical approaches.

Résumé. La Collection sur l’histoire des soins infirmiers au Canada est un regroupement spécial de plus de 1500 objets du Musée canadien des civilisations et du Musée canadien de la guerre. La plus importante de son genre, elle comprend des uniformes, des épingles, des journaux, des trousses d’instruments et des médailles militaires. Les chercheurs et le public y auront accès par le truchement d’un catalogue en ligne, d’une exposition importante et d’un livre.

La culture matérielle des soins infirmiers que cette collection représente fournit aux historiens de cette profession un tout nouvel ensemble d’éléments de preuve qui leur permettra de mieux cerner l’évolution de ce secteur. Par exemple, l’échantillon d’uniformes d’hôpital de 1900 à nos jours soulève de nouvelles questions et suscite de nouvelles approches théoriques.

The Canadian Nursing History Collection (CNHC) is a special repository of over 1500 artifacts at the Canadian Museum of Civilization and the Canadian War Museum. The core of the collection was formed by the transfer of museum objects from the Canadian Nurses Association

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(CNA) in 2000. This collection, the most significant of its kind, provides a rich source of material evidence about the history of nursing in Canada. It represents a collaborative approach among four national agencies to the preservation, research, and presentation of a remarkable heritage.

Since its inception in 1908, the CNA has produced and collected a substantial quantity of written material, photographs, and artifacts, documenting its own activities, and nursing in Canada and around the world. The collection was enriched by a donation of approximately 200 artifacts from the Nursing Sisters Association of Canada. The CNA received donations on an ad hoc basis, but also actively built its collection by soliciting certain kinds of objects, such as pins from almost every nursing school across Canada.

In 1999, the CNA began to look for a home for its unwieldy collection, and a partnership resulted with the National Archives of Canada, the Canadian Museum of Civilization, and the Canadian War Museum. The Museum of Civilization was entrusted with civilian artifacts and the War Museum with the nursing sisters collection. The Archives became custodian of almost 35 metres of textual records, 1700 audiovisual materials, and 9000 photographs.1

Through this unique collaboration among national cultural institutions and nursing organizations we have avoided the pitfalls that occur when varied collections are dispersed. Too often, museums and archives work in isolation, duplicating research and missing important intellectual links between artifactual and archival collections. By combining efforts, the institutions will better serve the research community through a combined on-line catalogue, and the general public through collaborative exhibitions.

In addition to the CNA artifacts, the CNHC collection includes objects already in the museums’ permanent collections, such medals and portraits of Georgina Fane Pope, matron-in-charge of nursing sisters during the South African War, and 40 artifacts including medical instruments, certificates, textbooks, and a religious medallion relating to the career of Gertrude Laporte, who graduated from L'Hopital du Sacre-Coeur, Montreal, in 1947 (see Figure 1). In addition, the museums are actively augmenting their collections with artifacts, which fill in the gaps in the story of nursing. The following are brief descriptions of some of the categories of objects in the collection.

**Uniforms**

There are 37 uniforms from nursing schools across Canada, starting with a blue cotton dress, bib, and apron worn by Edna Muir while training at the Montreal Western Hospital from 1917 to 1920, through to a 1970s
polyester pantsuit worn by a student at the Miss A. J. MacMaster School of Nursing, Moncton. The Canadian War Museum has 13 military uniforms from all three services, both dress, and the more rare working uniforms, mostly from World Wars I and II.

Figure 1

Medical bag and contents, Gertrude Laporte, graduated L’Hopital du Sacre-Coeur, Montreal, 1947. Canadian Nursing History Collection, Canadian Museum of Civilization, 988.1

Figure 2

Student's uniform, Montreal Western Hospital of Nursing, Edna Muir Todd, graduated 1920. Canadian Nurses Association Collection, Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2000.111.421
Caps
The Museum of Civilization collection has been augmented by the donation of the Gloria Kay Nurses’ Caps collection, consisting of 167 caps, representing 130 schools of nursing, starting in the late-19th century. This collection is well-documented by Mrs. Kay’s research notes. In all, there are 267 caps in the CNHC.

Figure 3

Nurses cap, Cornwall General Hospital School of Nursing, Cornwall, Ontario, Mary [Bolton] Ryan, graduated 1918; Graduating class, Cornwall General Hospital School of Nursing, Mary Bolton second from left. Gloria (Barwell) Kay Nurses’ Caps Collection, Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1999.267.29

School Pins
The CHNC contains 234 pins, mainly from the Canadian Nurses Association Collection, representing approximately 175 schools from every province in Canada, from the 1880s to the 1980s. Usually made of enamelled gold, the pins are decorated with school emblems and symbols, and engraved on the back with the name of the graduate and the date of graduation.

Figure 4

Graduate Nurses Pin, Winnipeg General Hospital, Lillian R. Pettigrew, graduated 1931. Canadian Nurses Association Collection, Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2000.111.199
Military Medals

The Canadian War Museum holds military medals awarded to leading nursing sisters, such as Colonel Elizabeth L. Smellie, Matron-in-Chief during World War II.

Figure 5

Medals set, Colonel Elizabeth L. Smellie, (Royal Red Cross; the British War Medal, 1914-1920; the Victory Medal, 1914-1919, with Oak Leaf [Mentioned-in-Despatches]; Canadian Volunteer Service Medal; War Medal, 1939-1945; King George V Jubilee Medal; Canadian Centennial Medal). Canadian Nursing Sisters Collection, Canadian War Museum, AN20000105-049.

Instrument Kits

The CNHC has many instruments which shed light on nursing practice, including eight syringe kits and five nurses’ instrument bags, such as the leather 1919 pouch belonging to Ruth Vivian Hart of the Royal Victorian Hospital which contains vials, scale, beakers, and a set of instruments such as probes, forceps, and scalpel. A collection of 50 representative textbooks from 1897 to the present give directions on the procedures associated with these instruments. A recent donation of the Alumnae Association of the School for Nursing, Toronto General Hospital collection includes a sterling silver chatelaine suspending instruments such as a pen knife, pill box, thermometer holder, and scissors, a gift to a 1900 graduate.

Nursing Leaders

Among the collections are medals, graduation robes, and other objects once owned and used by nursing leaders such as Agnes Snively, Jean I. Gunn, Helen Mussallem, Ethel Johns, Kathleen Ellis, Helen G. McArthur; and nursing sisters Georgina Fane Pope, Elizabeth L. Smellie, and Emma E. Pense. The Canadian War Museum has portrait paintings of Margaret Clothilde Macdonald, Elizabeth Smellie, and Emma Pense, among others.

Nursing Organizations

Most of the memorabilia such as pins, commemorative spoons, badges, souvenirs, and flags relate to the CNA and the International Council of
Nurses. There is even a brick from Florence Nightingale’s home presented to the CNA in 1943 by the National Council of Nurses of Great Britain.

ACCESS TO THE COLLECTION

The partnership agreement among the CNA, the National Archives, the Museum of Civilization, and the War Museum was predicated on the provision of access to the collection for students, researchers, and the general public. While the collection is distributed among the two museums and the archives for safekeeping, the plan is to link the collections intellectually. Three on-going projects are aimed at creating a profile for the collection and an appreciation for the history of nursing. Like all cultural endeavours, the execution of these projects is dependent on funds. The Canadian Nurses Foundation is dedicated to raising support through its Lighting the Lamp campaign.

The first project consists of a special portal to our on-line catalogue of artifacts at the two museums, launched June 2004 (www.civilization.ca/tresors/nursing/ncint0le.html). The website contains introductions to the types of collections, illustrations of representative artifacts, search mechanisms particular to the collection, search tips, and a bibliography. Search results will include existing information on the use, owner, and date, along with an image of the object. Over time, it is hoped that more contextual information will be added to the catalogue. A second phase will link the related collections at the National Archives of Canada.

A second project is a major exhibition on nursing at the Canadian Museum of Civilization to open 16 June 2005, the 100th anniversary of the first publication of the Canadian Nurse. The Caring Profession will explore the history of vocational and professional nursing in Canada from New France to the present. It will bring together two parallel but separate nursing traditions in Canada, the religious Catholic model and the secular British-inspired model. The day-to-day practice of nursing, as well as nurses’ struggle for professional recognition, will be represented through artifacts, photographs, video, and theatrical presentations. With funding, a version of the exhibition will go on a cross-Canada tour until 2008, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Canadian Nurses Association.

A third project is a book planned to be launched with the exhibition, and published jointly by the Canadian Museum of Civilization and the University of Ottawa Press. Fourteen chapters will provide an overview of nursing in Canada, and short vignettes will highlight specific individuals, events or themes. The CNHC at the museums and national archives will be used to illustrate the book.
The CNHC touches on many historical themes. First, nursing has always been basically a woman’s occupation, and gender is at the heart of nursing as a profession. There are few collections directly related to women’s history at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, and even less at the Canadian War Museum, so the CNHC will help to fill this gap. Second, the collection documents labour history by representing one of the most important of female occupations, from its efforts at professionalization to more recent unionization. Third, nursing is crucial to the larger theme of health care, since nurses are the largest single health care group in Canada. Fourth, the history of technology is reflected in the changing relationships among nurses, patients, and machines.

There is abundant, but by no means exhaustive, published material on all these themes. The role of the CNHC is to offer a new approach—a new way of looking at nursing history. Most historians turn to the written word for evidence, be it in the form of letters, reports, newspapers, census records, interviews, and government documents. There are other products of human endeavour, however, which also contain information, but on another level. Artifacts, designed, made and used by people, are profound evidence about beliefs, behaviours, and practice. Material evidence can raise new questions and theoretical approaches. In her analysis of the Canadian Nurses Association War Memorial unveiled in 1926, Kathryn McPherson demonstrates how material sources can contribute to our understanding of the role of nurses in shaping the national, and their own, identities. The monument was conceived by the artist as a tribute to feminine caregiving, but a close examination of its visual symbolism tells a much more complex story about ethnicity, imperialism, and patriarchy.³

Compelling evidence about the role of nurses is embedded in their uniforms. Uniforms are a very complex category of work apparel, and function on different and sometimes contradictory levels. Nurses’ uniforms were designed for practical as well as symbolic purposes; they related to current fashion, but they were also deeply conservative; they fostered esprit de corps, but detracted from individual expression; they represented the close caring relationship with the patient, but they also visually implied professional distance; and last but not least, they had a virginal erotic appeal.

Until the 1970s, most nurses trained as apprentices at hospitals, and wore the institution’s specially designed uniform. When hospital schools of nursing gave way to college and university training, strict rules about uniforms began to wane, and eventually the uniform was phased out completely. Several articles have been written on the role of the nursing uniform in creating professional identity.⁴ Uniforms were designed to
create hegemony by underscoring the nurses’ allegiance to their school and hospital, and fostering pride in their level of achievement. This can be seen directly in the printed hospital monogram on the uniform fabric, the starched white apron and bib, the symbolic black cap band, and the numerous group pins, crests and rings (see Figure 2). Who designed the uniforms, and who approved the designs? What message did the hospital wish to convey about its student nurses? Were the uniforms a symbol of a profession, or of servitude? What was the agenda hidden in the folds of the apron?

Marion McKay has studied the changes in nursing uniforms, and their eventual demise at the Winnipeg General Hospital and the University of Manitoba schools of nursing. In her presentation at the Canadian Association for the History of Nursing conference in 2001, she showed how nursing educators used uniforms to create professional identities in their students, and how students resisted that collective identity. In the 1960s, the uniform became the battleground between authoritarian image control, and students’ desire for individual expression and achievement.5

The study of uniforms is one of several opportunities that the CNHC offers. The material culture of nursing provides nursing historians with a whole new body of evidence, with which to confirm, as well as question, nursing historiography. For the general public, the collection will enhance their understanding of the importance of nursing in Canadian life. Combined with the holdings of the National Archives, the Canadian Nursing History Collection is a rich and untapped resource.

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