Sister Minnie Wood

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The Archives and Ancestry

The Library and Archive Services are pleased to announce the launch of their Ancestry.co.uk collection pages. This work will make 70 years of nursing, family and women’s history searchable online for the first time. Since early August key sources have been available on the Ancestry website. Copies of Nursing Registers from 1898 – 1968 for the UK and Ireland, and Scotland Nursing Applications 1921 – 1945, have been digitised and individual nurses’ records can be seen online for the first time. Most professional registers of that time were male dominated, but these nursing records are female-centric, providing a fascinating opportunity to examine women’s experience and contribution in society.

The RCN regularly provides guidance to families looking to find out more about their nursing predecessors. Now with these resources searchable online, more families will be able to explore the lives and contributions made by their relatives. All of the RCN’s records on Ancestry have the basic information of name and registration number but some include additional details that give that extra bit of insight.

RCN’s Joint Manager for Library and Archives Services, Teresa Doherty is delighted by the possibilities the online availability of these records presents: “Everyone has a nurse in the family. Finding your nursing ancestor, and discovering her achievement is a proud moment. Seeing the impact and legacy of individual nurses is now possible, raising the profile of nursing and nursing history with the public on a personal level.”

Access to the records is via the Ancestry.co.uk website. Ancestry is a subscription only website, but RCN members are able to access it for free from any of the library computers. For more information visit the Library’s Family History webpage at rcn.org.uk/library/services/family-history or contact us on familyhistory@rcn.org.uk.

Dianne Yarwood, RCN History of Nursing Society

SISTER MINNIE WOOD

I recently learnt about an inspirational First World War Nurse, Minnie Wood, when I was invited to take part in an event on Nurses’ Day, 2016, at the University of Salford, which was organised by Professor Martin Johnson. The university’s new nursing simulation laboratories was formally named after her, together with Edith Cavell (who also has links to Salford), followed by a seminar discussing Courage in Health Care (http://www.salford.ac.uk/news/events/2016/courage-in-healthcare-edith-cavell-and-sister-minnie-wood)

Minnie Wood was born in Birstall, Batley, West Yorkshire on October 14th 1880. Her father was a woollen dyer in a local mill but later became a music teacher and a confectioner. Her mother had been a
domestic servant and came from Lincolnshire. Her brothers all died in infancy and she had one younger sister, Elsie. She was privately educated at a school run by the Miss Sandbaches in Hull.

Later, she moved across the Pennines and trained as a nurse at the Salford Royal Hospital from 1905-8. She remained on the staff there as a staff nurse and then sister until she joined the Queen Alexandra’s Imperial Military Nursing Service in 1912. Her service record reveals little of her early peacetime career but they show that she was to spend all of World War One nursing overseas, mainly in Flanders in a variety of settings including casualty clearing stations, in a field ambulance and in stationary hospitals (National Archives / WO/399/9206). She recorded in her own hand on the back of a photograph, now in the Imperial War Museum (DA/6/617/A) that she embarked for France on August 21st 1914 and did not return for home service until August 3rd 1919.

She was mentioned three times in dispatches and was awarded the Military Medal, one of only 146 nurses to receive this medal during WW1. The citation reveals that this medal was awarded for her actions during the Battle of Passchendaele, “For most courageous devotion to duty. On the 21st August 1917, this lady was Sister-In-Charge at No.44 Casualty Clearing Station, Brandhoek, when it was shelled at short intervals from 11 a.m. till night, one Sister being killed. This lady never lost her nerve for a moment and during the whole of a most trying day, carried out her duties with the greatest steadiness and coolness. By her work and example she greatly assisted in the speedy evacuation of the patients and the transfer of the Sisters” (London Gazette, 17 October 1917).

Sadly one of the staff nurses in her team, Staff Nurse Nellie Spindler, was fatally injured during this bombardment and it is said, died in Sister Wood’s arms (British Journal of Nursing, 1917). Nurse Spindler was 26 and a fellow Yorkshire woman. By this time Sister Wood was 37. She did not leave any record of her experiences but the Sister in Charge, Kate Luard, of the adjacent casualty clearing station (CCS) 32, which also suffered in the bombardment, recorded this in her diary, “This has been a very bad day. Big shells began coming over about 10am- one burst between one of our wards and the Sisters’ Quarters of no. 44 C.C.S., and killed a Night Sister asleep in her bed and knocked three others out with concussion and shell-shock” (Stevenson, 2014, 50) She later wrote, “Then I came on to the shell-hole and the wrecked tents in the Sisters’ Quarters at 44. A group of stricken M.O.’s were standing about and in one tent the Sister was dying. The piece went through her from back to front near her heart. She was only conscious a few minutes and lived only 20 minutes… It all made one feel sick. Then we offered to put up their Night Sisters and they came over; three of them so badly shell-shocked that I got the C.O. to have them sent down to Boulogne there and then by Ambulance. This went on all day” (Stevenson, 2014, 151). This paints a vivid picture of what occurred and the dangerous situation in which the nurses under Sister Wood’s leadership had been working. Finally the order came through to evacuate no 44 CCS after Sister Wood and her team had worked all day throughout this bombardment.

Towards the end of the war her work took her to Germany where she continued to work on after the armistice, caring for returning prisoners of war. By 1919 she was clearing suffering the aftermath of more
than four years of war-time service. She was found to be suffering from ‘debility’ at a medical board in September 1919 and sent to a hydropathic establishment in Ilkley for a month. She then resumed her duties in the military hospitals in Devonport and then Lichfield followed by a posting to Malta in 1922, before being sent to Belfast in 1923.

She resigned from the army citing ‘private’ reasons concerning ‘only family affairs’ in January 1924. (Her mother died the same year and her father three years later so it is possible went home to nurse them).

At this point the trail has gone cold and I am still trying to find out what happened to her and when she died. She is not listed on the civil register of 1939. My research continues

She was also awarded the OBE and Royal Red Cross (2nd and 1st class) and her medals are in the care of the University of Salford. It is good that they have remembered her in this way.

With grateful thanks to Professor Martin Johnson, Dr James McInnes and Mrs Sarah Rogers.

References

British Journal of Nursing (1917) Our Roll of Honour. September 18, 149.
London Gazette (1917) Citation. 17 October.

Claire Chatterton, Open University and Chair RCN History of Nursing Society

CONFERECE REVIEWS

UKAHN ANNUAL COLLOQUIUM
9 July 2016.
The UK Association for the History of Nursing (UKAHN) Annual Research Colloquium: 11 July 2016
Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nurse Corps Regimental Headquarters, Camberley

This year the UKAHN Colloquium was held in conjunction with the QARANC and their Heritage Committee to bring a stimulating day on ‘Nursing in a time of conflict’. The day began with a moving portrayal of plastic surgery in the First World War by Dr Claire Chatterton and Marilyn McInnes, an independent researcher and granddaughter of a soldier who had been treated by Harold Gillies at Sidcup. The next speaker was Erin Spinney, a PhD student at the University of Saskatchewan whose research is set to