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Dame Sarah Swift, RRC DBE

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Dr Claire Chatterton, Open University The UKAHN Bulletin

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Sarah Ann Swift was born on her father's farm in the Lincolnshire Fens on 22 November 1854. Her father, Robert, was a tenant farmer at Kirton Sheldyke near Boston. During her childhood the family moved to Donington, where she was educated at the Grammar School. In 1877 she moved to Scotland where she trained as a nurse at the Dundee Royal Infirmary. This seems an unusual choice given the distance from rural Lincolnshire. It may be that her decision to train in Dundee was influenced by the reputation of Rebecca Strong, the Nightingale trained Matron who was doing pioneering work in the city (McGann,1992).

Following the completion of her training in May 1880 she worked in a variety of nursing posts. A testimonial from Dr Robert Sinclair, Physician to the Dundee Royal Infirmary, stated that she was "a most admirable nurse in our Infirmary, noted for her skill, devotion and tenderness. The esteem and confidence in which she was held is amply proved by the fact that she was asked by the directors to accept the offer of Matron." (RCN Archives, undated). She, however, declined and instead went to work with the Sisterhood of SS Mary and Modwenna, an Anglican community which had been founded in 1870 in Dundee. The Sisterhood provided nursing to the poor of five parishes. In addition, they provided a home for 'incurables', and her first post after qualifying was as Sister-in-Charge, where she stayed for seven years. (Archives Hub, 2018). She then had posts as Ward Superintendent at the City Infirmary, Liverpool, and Head Nurse at the London Fever Hospital. In 1889 she travelled to the USA to look at nursing practice in New York (Bowman, 1967). In 1890 she worked as Superintendent of Nursing at the Seamen's Hospital in Constantinople, returning with a fever before moving to Guy's Hospital, where she was to remain until her retirement (Stanhope, 1969).

She began her career at Guy's by taking the unusual step of becoming a probationer again. As McGann (1992, p.163) notes, "At the age of 36, and with ten years' experience of hospital nursing, Sarah Swift was not the usual paying probationer. It is likely that she wished to benefit from the lectures given by the medical staff ... at Guy's since her training at Dundee had not included any theoretical instruction." Once she had completed this further training she was appointed Assistant Matron at Guy's, then Superintendent of the training institute before becoming Matron in 1901. During her time as Matron, she introduced a preliminary training school for student nurses, a new nurses' home and established a League of Nurses for Guy's Hospital's nurses, past and present. Although she had a reputation for being a strict disciplinarian, she also seemed to have cared deeply about improving the pay and working conditions of the nursing staff and developing recreational and social facilities for nurses (McGann, 1992). She retired in 1909, at the age of 54, and the news was "received with the utmost regret in the nursing world, especially by those nurses who trained under her auspices." (RCN Archives, 1909) One of her students, Emily McManus, said of her, "Miss Swift had a wonderful gift of making you feel that she trusted you and expected much of you... Throughout my nursing life I have been grateful to Miss Swift for teaching me that there was no situation that could not be tackled and never to be afraid of responsibility" (cited in Stanhope, 1969, p.34).

Her retirement was cut short when Britain entered the First World War. Her skills of organisation were to be put to good use when she took on the role of Matron-in-Chief of the Joint War Committee of the British Red Cross Society and Order of St John. This included inspecting more than 1,500 hospitals recognised by the War Office both at home and abroad, as well as hostels and hotels used by nurses in transit. The work of the nursing department also involved checking the qualifications of trained nurses who volunteered; interviewing and selecting them and dispatching them to home hospitals or hospitals abroad administered by the Joint War Committee. The popular image of the Red Cross nurse is usually that of a VAD (a member of the Voluntary Aid Detachments). However, over 6,000 trained nurses were selected by Sarah Swift's department to work both overseas and on the home front (Joint War Committee, 1921, p.93). Later, in 1915, the nursing department also took on responsibility for interviewing VADs and assessing their suitability for nursing (McGann, 1992).

Despite all this activity, and in the midst of the war, Miss Swift was also instrumental in founding the College (now Royal College) of Nursing in 1916, together with the Hon. Arthur Stanley (M.P) with whom she was already working closely in his capacity as Chairman of the Joint War Committee (McGann et al, 2009). They galvanised the support of several other hospital matrons to found an organisation that now has over 435,000 members and is the world's largest nursing trade union and professional body. Miss Swift was the first member to be recorded on the RCN's roll of membership.

After the war she continued her involvement with the British Red Cross until 1935 when she retired as Matron-in-Chief. She reportedly said, "I love organising – that has been my work" (Red Cross Journal, 1936, p.38). She never retired from the College of

Nursing. She was a member of the College's Council from its inception until her death. She was also the College's second President (from 1925-7) and also acted as an honorary treasurer. Prison nursing was also another interest. Prior to 1918, trained nurses were not employed in prisons and prison wardens were expected to provide care. In 1918 two trained nurses were employed at Holloway and by 1928 the Prison Nursing Service was established. Sarah Swift played an instrumental role in its establishment and her work in this area included chairing the Nursing Advisory board of Holloway Prison. Her last public appearance was at the coronation of King George VI. She died at home the following month, in June 1937, aged 82.

Her name is not generally well known, probably because she left no personal papers, and avoided interviews. One of her obituaries talked of "her great modesty" and "dread of any kind of publicity" (Nursing Times, 1937). With interest fostered by the centenary of the RCN and the First World War, her work has become more prominent and her name appears on a building at the University of Lincoln, a playground in the village of Kirton in Lincolnshire near where she was born and a vascular ward in St Thomas' Hospital (now part of the same NHS Trust as Guy's). She may have been diminutive in stature, but her achievements were immense. She worked tirelessly to raise the standard of nursing education and practice and to improve working conditions for nurses. It is rather fitting that her nickname amongst her staff was allegedly, "the mighty atom" (Bowman, 1967, p26).

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