



From SRN to CBE
Celebrating 50 remarkable years in nursing







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in nursing

by

Mary Spinks (formerly Donn)



A division of MA Healthcare Ltd





Quay Books Division, MA Healthcare Ltd, St Jude's Church, Dulwich Road, London
SE24 0PB

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record is available for this book

© MA Healthcare Limited 2014

ISBN-10: 1 85642 507 X

ISBN-13: 978 1 85642 507 0

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Printed by Mongo Print, Bournemouth





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Dedication

In loving memory of Leslie and dedicated to the inspirational nurses I met along the way.





Acknowledgements

My grateful thanks go to my dear friends, Pamela Mummery and Dr Anita White, who inspired me to write this book. I have been helped by my many friends and ex-colleagues, David Bowden, Gillian DeMarco, Roger Evans, Sheila Forde, Ray Greenwood, Janet King, Una Lynch, Lindy Maxwell, Stephanie Oates, Jane Reid, Liz Robb, Martin Smits, Geoffrey Walker, Mary-Lyn van der Watt and Brian Wilson.

My friends at the Association of Operating Room Nurses, especially MaryJo Steiert and her colleagues who updated me on the “USA scene”.

To Mark Allen, Rebecca Linssen and Liz Rhodes of MA Healthcare who helped to bring the book to fruition.

My apologies to anyone that I have missed out.





FOREWORD

by Baroness Emerton, DBE, DL

What was it like 58 years ago to be released from a tight-knit family and the confines of a cloistered life in Ireland to cosmopolitan life in London and the regime of an East London nurse training school?

In this book author Mary Spinks (formerly Donn) describes how she adapted to the change in culture and settled into a programme of nurse training as it was ten years after the introduction of the NHS. Little did she think that this was in fact the beginning of a very successful career, ultimately recognised by the award of the Commander of the British Empire for her services to nursing.

I first met Mary in 1968, during the implementation of the Salmon Report. Her potential was already evident and proved by rapid promotion until she achieved the post of Regional Nursing Officer. Mary took an active interest in the development of nurse education as it moved away from local training schools into further education.

Mary's final position gave her the opportunity to pursue her passion for promoting and enabling scholarships for nurses intent on carrying out research to enhance quality care for patients. She became Director of the Florence Nightingale Foundation, which was dependent on charitable funding, and vigorously promoted a range of scholarships.

Mary has captured in this book the immense privilege of being a nurse.

Audrey Emerton





FOREWORD

by Dr Peter Carter OBE

This text captures the evolution of nursing from the 1950s into the 21st century.

This is a beautifully written book in which Mary Spinks shares with the reader significant amount of personal disclosure concerning family relations, religious tensions and the undoubted love of her late husband Leslie.

It also captures the spirit of nursing over several decades and will be a lasting chronology for those researching the history and development of nursing not only in the UK but internationally.

It is also a testimonial to Mary's tenacity, intellect and her ability to embark on new ventures.

I feel privileged to be asked to write the foreword for this book and I hope it finds its place in the libraries of all nursing schools. I believe it will also be of interest to the broader public.

It represents a lifetime of commitment, achievement and will inspire the next and future generations of nurses.

Dr Peter Carter OBE
Chief Executive
Royal College of Nursing







LEAVING HOME

Will this boat ever leave? That was what I was thinking as I stood on deck, tears streaming down my face. On the quayside stood my family, waving tear-stained handkerchiefs. I should have felt a sense of adventure at the prospect of starting a new life training to be a nurse; instead, all I felt was a great sadness and sense of loss.

We were a closely-knit family. There was not much money in the Ireland of the forties and fifties, but much loving and caring. This was intertwined with respect for our parents and elders, a degree of discipline and emphasis on educational achievement. Our teachers, both the nuns and the lay teachers, knew our family and had no doubt provided references to the matron at Whipps Cross Hospital where I was heading.

Whipps Cross Hospital was known as a bastion of Irish Catholicism. It had an Irish matron and a Catholic Church five minutes' walk away. Convent schools in Ireland had links with such institutions and many of us would not have been allowed to leave the country without such arrangements being in place. It is said that when the British pulled out of Ireland after it became a Republic in 1922, the Catholic Church took over as the powerful ruling body. This shows the influence of the Church on the Irish people and may, in some way, explain how some of the clergy maintained the abuse of the vulnerable over many years.

When Winston Churchill was canvassing near Whipps Cross in his constituency of Woodford Green one Sunday, some Irish nurses were heckling him and demanding that he give the six counties of Northern Ireland back to the Republic of Ireland. Churchill glared at them and declared 'I will give you back the six counties when you give us back Whipps Cross'.

Entrants to nursing in the teaching hospitals from Catholics in the Republic of Ireland were, on the whole, not welcome unless their families already had an involvement in medicine or nursing. Maybe it was for the same reason that, during the Crimean War, Florence Nightingale was allegedly concerned that the Sisters of Mercy in the Crimea would try to convert the soldiers to Catholicism.

I was born in 1940, the third of five children, with two older sisters, a younger sister and a brother, the youngest. My very happy childhood consisted of school and during holidays we helped out on my mother's family farm. Potato picking and harvesting the crops were busy times. Riding the horses,





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two Clydesdales, up to the upper fields for grazing during the night, was one of my highlights on summer evenings.

My father, who had spent his apprenticeship in the hardware business, owned and run by British firms, finally realised his great dream and opened his own business in 1949. At that time, the banks in Ireland, mainly still owned by the British, considered new businesses a high risk and my father was, therefore, refused a loan. Some friends and relatives lent him money and became shareholders until he could buy them out.

To his death, he always remembered that fact and never wanted to be indebted to banks. One can only wonder what he would have made of the banking situation today.

As the first Catholic hardware merchant in Cork, he was very popular with the nuns and priests in the many convents and monasteries that existed at that time. The nuns unfailingly provided a delicious tea for him, when he made his deliveries to the convents where he was always welcomed. The fare was not so appetising at Mound Melleray Abbey, where the monks led a frugal existence. I loved to accompany him on the trips to the convents, as it meant lots of cakes.

Although it was mainly 'ups' over the years, there were some 'downs'. One of the 'downs' was caused by the polio outbreak in 1956. Every business needs time to get established and the polio outbreak resulted in Cork city becoming a ghost city. The cause of the outbreak was never really established, so people shied away from contacts with others in crowded places.

It was at about this time that my thoughts turned to the future. Nursing in Ireland was almost the same as entering the convent, so that was out. My mother advised me that the family hardware business, already at risk because of the polio epidemic, would not support all of us children. Money was tight, university fees were expensive and it became clear that I should look further afield. Unemployment was high and the only professions open to girls were teaching and nursing. There was little sense of vocation and like so many Irish girls who came to nurse training in the fifties, I was an economic emigrant. The National Health Service, just ten years old in 1958, was expanding and more labour was needed. We were cheap labour. We were paid a pittance, but our board and food were all supplied free at that time.

So the plan was that I should go to Whipps Cross for the three years' training and then return to Cork to do my midwifery. As the plans progressed,





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I felt I was in for an experience and an adventure. I did not realise what a big step it would be to leave a closely-knit family and I was to suffer from homesickness for many years.

Even as a child, I had been a show-off, an attention-seeker and an extrovert. I remember going dancing one evening, against my parents' wishes, while my elder sisters dutifully went to bed. This involved sneaking out through my bedroom window and getting back in the same way, but it was good practice for life at Whipps Cross.

