

Nursing: An Exquisite Obsession

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Nursing: an Exquisite Obsession

by

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DEDICATION

For my husband Roger who has been at my side through thick and thin for more than fifty years.

And for my children, Andrew and Gillian, who I hope may be as proud of me as I am of them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Very little in my nursing career, including this book, has been planned. But I have been fortunate to have had wonderful mentors throughout my nursing career and in preparing this book. It was Margretta Styles, one of my best loved mentors, who first said ‘Nursing is for me an exquisite, excruciating obsession’ and thus supplied the title of this book and its final chapter: as it was for her, so it has been for me. It was Norma Lang who helped me to understand that ‘If you can’t name it, you can’t control it, finance it, teach it, research it, or put it into public policy’ and challenged me to think about and articulate my understanding of ‘this thing called nursing’. These two people have provided inspiration and the intellectual challenge that has driven my thinking about nursing ever since I first met them at the International Council of Nurses in 1990.

Other mentors also have greatly influenced my life in nursing, and therefore this book; they are no longer with us but their memory lives on in me and in the many others who benefited from their wisdom. In particular I owe a huge debt to Baroness Jean McFarlane, Marjorie Simpson, Grace Owen, Trevor Clay, Bob Tiffany, Monica Baly and Dame Sheila Quinn. What all these had in common was that like me, they ‘burned for nursing’ and were willing to share with me their vision of how nursing could and should be.

Without the encouragement and editorial skills of Rebecca Linssen and Charlotte Lindsay of Quay Books the manuscript would never have become a book: the first task, delegated to Charlotte, was to cut what I had written by 50%! A major source has been journal articles that I wrote, some nearly half a century ago; in some cases I still have the originals, but for others the RCN librarians did some wonderful detective work in the RCN library archives.

Dame Betty Kershaw and David Rye who lived with me through the good years and some of the bad years in the RCN read some of the earlier drafts, and moderated some of my more extreme comments.

But the biggest debt is to the hundreds, maybe thousands, of nurses both in the UK and around the world, whose lives have touched mine, and from whom I have learnt so much.

PREFACE

Several years ago Dame Sheila Quinn, who had just published her own autobiography, suggested that I should write mine. At the time I dismissed the idea as mere self-indulgence, and in any case I was far too busy. But one of the pleasures of growing older, and having time for such things, is coming across old photos, ancient yellowing press cuttings and other memorabilia, and remembering old times. The storeroom under our stairs is stuffed with boxes of papers and photos, which I should have thrown out but somehow couldn't bear to. Christmas cards from old friends often carried the message 'Do you remember when...', and as I found myself moving from my dotage into 'anecdotal', sharing memories about past escapades more and more provoked the response 'You ought to write a book about it!'



I was also increasingly concerned that today's nursing issues were exactly the same as those that had happened in the past, but that the profession seemed to have lost its corporate memory of them. When *A Voice for Nurses: A history of the Royal College of Nursing* was published in 2007 I was disappointed to find that it stopped at 1990. It seemed that the period since that time was very poorly documented and unlikely to be adequate for any future historian. In view of the radical change that was taking place in the Royal College of Nursing at that time I felt it was important that it should be documented and, in the words of the Welsh comedian Max Boyce, 'I was there'. For my own experience of events at that time, I found, as I have found many times before, that writing about it was cathartic and comforting. It was 'for my eyes only'; there was at that time no thought of publication.

Some time later I was asked to review the autobiography of another old friend, Mary Spinks. At her suggestion I sent what I had written to her publisher, asking, rather tentatively, whether it might be suitable for publication. Quay Books publisher, Rebecca Linssen, encouraged me to complete the manuscript and submit it. So I did.

I hope that readers will enjoy my story and perhaps relate it to their own experiences. But I hope also that my account of the development of the Royal College of Nursing during the last years of the 20th century and the early years of the 21st will be useful for understanding how and why the Royal College of Nursing has changed over the past decade and will therefore be a small contribution to its next history.

‘Nursing is for me an exquisite, excruciating obsession’

Margretta Styles

On nursing: Toward a new endowment

PROLOGUE

'Nursing is for me an exquisite, excruciating obsession'
Styles MM (1982) *On Nursing: Toward a New Endowment*.

It is often said that in Wales everyone knows everybody else and that half of the population is related to the other half. It is a cultural characteristic that in any new meeting, for example in the taxi from the station to home, the first exchange will not, as in England, be 'What is your job?', but 'Where do you come from?' Very soon the participants will have shared the most intimate details of their life histories and their family trees.



Rhodri Morgan, formerly First Minister of Wales, Chancellor Swansea University

It happened at a nursing conference dinner in 2001, which was hosted by the (then) new Chief Nursing Officer for Wales, Rosemary Kennedy. The guest of honour was Rhodri Morgan, the (then) newly-elected First Minister of Wales, and I was seated next to him. Never one to miss such an opportunity, I bent his ear about a number of issues, but in particular about the decision that we had recently made that in future all student nurses in Wales would be educated to degree level. The decision was fiercely resisted in many quarters (the precursor of the 'too posh to wash, too clever to care' debates which continue more than a decade later), and I wanted him to understand what we were doing and why.

Whenever I argue the case for undergraduate education for nurses, I refer to the row I had with my father when I was 18 years old and about to leave school. I had been offered a place to read Classics at University College London, subject to achieving the right grades in my A level exams, but I did

not think I had done very well and was not going to try again but was going to Cardiff Royal Infirmary to be a nurse.

In the Welsh valleys when I was growing up in the 1940s and 1950s, education was highly valued. It was seen as the escape from the only alternative – for the boys to going down the pit, and for the girls to secretarial or shop work. It was especially valued in my family because my father had had to fight so hard for his education and had finally ‘made it’.

On hearing my decision, my father put his face close up to mine, wagged his finger at me, and said: ‘Good gel, I don’t care what you do afterwards, but you get your education first!’

At this point in my story, Rhodri Morgan bent closer and asked what was my maiden name. ‘It was a dreadful name,’ I replied, ‘I was constantly teased as a child. It was Hickery – like the nursery rhyme.’ ‘Good God,’ he said, ‘you’re Ernie Hickery’s daughter aren’t you! You’re my third cousin.’ He proceeded to describe a line between my maternal grandmother and his father, TJ Morgan, who had been Registrar of The University of Wales, and whom I vaguely remember my mother talking about as Uncle TJ. Given the ‘everyone related to everyone else’ characteristic of the Welsh, this was interesting but no big deal until he added: ‘I remember it well because for months you ruined our family mealtimes. For months the conversation was always about what could “the family” do to help poor Ernie, who had this wilful, pigheaded daughter who was quite bright and he wanted her to go to university, but all she wanted to do was to be a bloody nurse!’

I did get the grades, and I did take up the place at University College London. Nursing just had to wait.

PART I: BEGINNINGS



Upper sixth form, Pontywaun Grammar School 1958–9
(June is on the left of the middle row)

CHAPTER I: ROOTS

I am proud of my Welsh heritage. I was brought up in the South Wales valleys and I am through and through the product of my roots. The values and ideals of the community in which I was raised – social justice, equality, rights and responsibilities, public service, standing up for what you believe in – still permeate everything I say and do today. We lived in Risca, just a few miles down the valley from Tredegar, the birthplace of ‘Nye’ Bevan and the NHS. I was not actually born in Wales, however; I was born in Sheffield, in 1941, as an accident of World War II. Not the usual sort of accident of war – it was just that my father was in a reserved occupation as a full-time trade union officer in the steel industry, and when war broke out he was relocated from Wales to Sheffield.

At the end of the war we moved back to Wales, and my father was appointed Divisional Officer for the British Iron and Steel Trade Association. Looking back I am very much my father’s daughter. Born in 1904 in Gowerton, near Swansea, he left school at the age of 14 and went to work in the local steelworks, where he soon became involved in the developing trade

union movement. He took every opportunity to ‘get an education’, using the evening classes provided by the Workers’ Educational Association. In 1929, aged 25, he won a scholarship to Coleg Harlech, which had recently been established in association with the Workers’ Educational Association. The scholarship lasted for a year, after which he went back to work in the steelworks. He worked there until in 1935 he won another scholarship, this time to Swansea University. Again, the scholarship was for 1 year only but, supported by the union, he combined study with work in the steelworks until finally, in 1939, he was able to graduate. It is undoubtedly this experience that explains his emphasis on the importance of education for his daughters – my younger sister Kay and me.

I remember my mother as the archetypal homemaker; when my father turned up at unusual times, often accompanied by members of some visiting delegation, she could always put a meal on the table. We children were expected to sit at the table on such occasions, and this was no doubt the beginning of my political education. Our mother made all our clothes, was an expert in crafts such as crochet and tatting, baked cakes, made brawn out of pigs’ heads, and took care to pass on her skills to us. With the benefit of hindsight and my experience in nursing behind me, I think she was frustrated by the limitations of her role. She had begun a university education at Swansea, where she met my father, but was forced to give up when her younger brother got a Welsh Church Scholarship to Oxford.

Growing up in the South Wales valleys

I attended Risca Town Primary School and then, having passed the 11-plus exam, I started at Pontywaun Grammar School in September 1952. I remember that in our first geography class the teacher, whom we called Gertie, went round the class asking us what we wanted to be when we grew up. I said I wanted to be a lawyer like Rose Heilbron, who was at the time often in the newspapers as England’s premier woman barrister; there was no mention at that time of any aspirations to be a nurse.

Yet the seed must have been there, because of all my teenage hobbies the only one that survived was my involvement with the St John Ambulance Brigade. I gave up Guides because camping with St John Ambulance (which had boys as well as girls) was much more fun! Most significantly, on Saturday mornings I caught the bus to Newport and went to St Woolos Hospital, where I ‘worked’ on the children’s ward, helping with jobs such as feeding and changing babies and playing with the older children. I remained active in St John Ambulance until after I left Risca for university. Almost

60 years later I have picked it up again, this time becoming a member of the West Glamorgan Council and the Mumbles Division.

Whatever the debates nowadays about the merits or otherwise of grammar schools, Pontywaun Grammar School was the making of many Risca kids, including me. By today's standards it was a very small school, with an annual intake of 60 children and a total roll of about 300. Everybody – staff and pupils – knew everybody else in the school. We did not have the facilities or the range of subjects that larger schools have nowadays, but what we had was a good solid education. One teacher in particular was very special to me. This was John Herbert, who taught Latin. The choice of Classics for my university education was thus fixed. Mr Herbert became my personal counsellor as well as my teacher, and is probably the person who had the greatest influence on the most formative period of my growing up.

On only one occasion at Pontywaun did I not come top of my form: in Form 5 I dropped to second place (having come 16th in religious instruction). My school reports usually recorded 'Excellent', although sometimes with a barbed comment such as 'Does excellent work but is too talkative', and 'Excellent work – but a more co-operative attitude would make her achievement the more commendable'.

All pupils were allocated to one of four 'houses': Red, Blue, Yellow, and Green. I was in the Greens, and eventually became house captain. Each year there were two inter-house competitions: sports day in the summer and the eisteddfod in the spring. I was useless in the sports day, but I excelled in the eisteddfod. An eisteddfod is a Welsh tradition, a competitive festival of literature, music and performance; competitions include solo singing, choirs, instrumentalists, poetry reading, recitation and creative writing. I participated enthusiastically in the group events, such as the house choir and the 'choral speaking', and always did well in the creative writing competitions. I frequently won the poetry, short story and essay classes for my age group, with all of my winning pieces being published in the school magazine. Reading them now I see much of what I wrote as a teenager as pretentious rubbish, but I guess it must reflect how I felt at the time. One year I won the senior essay competition on the title 'The future', in which I set out a philosophy I have always maintained: 'There is one fact, however, that we must realise: our future is what we ourselves make it. It is the moral duty of every human being to strive to leave the world a better place than he found it.'

The big problem during my teen years, from my parents' point of view, was my boyfriend Maurice. Maurice left school at 15 and, along with many

of his peers, joined his father down the pit. After the pit he went into the army. He reasoned that if he did not volunteer he would soon be called up anyway (our age group was the last to experience compulsory national service). He joined the parachute regiment, but it did not last long. I remember spending a night in the local police station where Maurice was held in the cells because he had gone AWOL: we had been in the cinema, and when the lights came up there were the military police, who marched him across the road to the police station. My parents were especially mortified because they were friendly with the local police inspector and his wife, who lived in the police station. Added to this, my sister and I were friendly with their two daughters.

The problem was that in my parents' eyes I was an academic high flyer destined for university and great things thereafter, while Maurice could barely read and write and had no interest in education. It was not a class thing – after all, my father had left school at 14 to work in the steelworks and was a keen socialist and trade union supporter. The issue was aspiration and education. Maurice had neither. I knew I was expected to go to university, and I wanted to go, but Maurice and I assumed I would then come back to Risca, find a job locally, marry, and live the same sort of life as his two older sisters, who were already married with children. That was not what my parents had planned for me.

Meanwhile I continued to excel at school. I sat the Oxford entrance exam and was called for interview. Some days later I received a letter asking me if I had considered reading Philosophy, Politics and Economics (or PPE). I had no idea what that was. Many years later, John Herbert wrote to me, saying: 'I suggested that she should decline.... I was so wrong. PPE would have been exactly the right pathway; I have had this on my conscience all my life. Did I stop June from being our first woman Prime Minister?'

I don't think so! Although I have always been interested in politics, I never saw myself as a member of parliament, much less a Maggie Thatcher. I was advised to go back to school for a third year in the sixth form (as most applicants did) and re-apply next year. In Pontywaun there was no special provision other than repeating the second year, and since all my peers would have left and I was already feeling that I had outgrown school, I was not prepared to do it. I chose University College London (UCL) instead and was offered a place to read Classics subject to success in my forthcoming A-level examinations. Only later did I come to understand the significance of my classical education, how it has shaped my ways of thinking and provided the seeds of my much later interest in concept analysis and nursing informatics.

At this point I had a major row with my father. I did not think I had done very well in my exams and announced that if I did not pass my A levels I was not willing to go back to school: I was going directly into nursing and I had already applied to and been accepted by the Royal Infirmary Cardiff. My father was furious. I can see him now, and have always remembered those words quoted in the Prologue: ‘Good gel, I don’t care what you do afterwards, but you get your education first!’ (He always addressed me as ‘good gel’ when we were having a row.) The results came out, I passed, and my place at UCL was confirmed.

If I have one regret, it would be the pain and anxiety I caused my parents during my teenage years. I was certainly wilful and pig-headed. I had terrible rows with my father that often ended in tears – my mother’s! Yet growing up during the 1950s in South Wales was much easier than growing up today. There were no drugs, there was no television, no social networking. The ‘pop scene’ was Radio Luxembourg at 11pm on Sunday evenings. The social scene was two Italian cafes, one at the top end of ‘the road’, and one at the bottom end that had a jukebox and served frothy coffee. Wednesday was early closing day and the pubs were shut on Sundays, except for the working men’s club. People went to church or chapel at least once on Sunday, and after evening service the young people went on the ‘monkey parade’, which involved walking in small single-sex groups along the main road from one end of the village to the other, eyeing the groups of the opposite sex. The parameters were narrow and the boundaries were clear. Perhaps that is why I was so rebellious!

Expanding horizons

Going to university in London was a huge culture shock. At Pontywaun I had been a big fish in a little pond; at UCL I was a very little fish in a very big pond, and it was a struggle to swim. At Pontywaun I had always been top of the class; in the Classics Department at UCL I was usually at the bottom.

Early in our first term my tutor asked me to investigate a subject of my own choosing, and I chose early Roman comedy. I spent a long time in the huge College library, which was bigger than any library I had seen before and had a wonderful ‘book smell’ that I still remember and love. I was quite proud of what I produced, but was quite taken aback when we discussed it in my tutorial and my tutor said that I was now more knowledgeable about the subject than he was (which I am sure was not true) and I should go back to the library and expand what I had written as my assignment for my next tutorial. It was a way of teaching and learning that I have held on to

throughout my career, and quite different from what I later experienced in nursing education.

In the first year I was allocated a place at Canterbury Hall in Cavendish Square, a hall of residence for women from all the colleges of London University. This provided me with my first experience of people from other countries and other cultures. I had my first taste of curry in the rather seedy Indian restaurant round the corner from the Hall. I became more and more interested in the world outside the UK.

Despite the vibrant culture and supportive tutor, I found my first months in London difficult. I think this was the reason that that half way through my first term I got engaged to Maurice. Somehow I felt that an engagement ring gave me some kind of status among my colleagues that made up for my lack of academic success. My parents, of course, were in despair. At the end of my first year I booked myself and Maurice on a holiday to Greece organised by the United Nations Students Association, whose chairman that year was a Greek called Kostas Kleanthous. I was of course thrilled to see all the antiquities that I knew from my academic studies, but Maurice did not seem interested in anything or happy in the company of the group. With hindsight I think I was already beginning to realise how much I had changed since leaving Risca; I could see that the world was a far bigger place than I had ever imagined, and that Maurice just did not fit with it.

At the end of my first year, in despair at my lack of academic success, I suggested to my personal tutor, Dr Jack Kells, that perhaps I should leave before I was pushed. He laughed and said that if the department had made a mistake in accepting me as a student they would stand by their mistake. He thought I would probably not get a first but was perfectly capable of getting an upper two. He told me I should stop worrying and start to enjoy myself. So I did.

I was very lucky in getting a place in Canterbury Hall in the second year as places were in short supply and first-year and overseas students were given priority. I stood for election as Hall President and came second in the poll, so I became Vice-President, which guaranteed me a place for my third year. I became Secretary of the Classics Society, which was the Department's 'social arm'. I started going to the students' union meetings. My academic performance improved, although alpha marks remained elusive.

By the beginning of my third year I knew I could not marry Maurice and go back to live in Risca. About a month into term I went home for the weekend, and when we went for a walk I told Maurice that I could not go through with it: as soon as I finished university I was going into nursing.

In the middle of the night on our doorstep he shot himself using a double-barrelled shotgun. He was admitted to the Royal Gwent Hospital, and he survived. Not only was attempted suicide at this time a criminal offence, but in a community like Risca it was a major scandal. I had to get back to London. If I was going to start a new life I had better start it immediately.

I tried to get on with university life but I had terrible nightmares and flashbacks. I could not concentrate on anything. Nowadays I suppose we would call it post-traumatic stress disorder. I knew that I needed to talk about it, but I did not know who to talk to. I thought about who among my university friends might be able to help. The first two people I thought of were away for the weekend, but the third – Roger Clark – was in.

Every year the whole Classics Department (staff and students, about 30 of us in all) went away for a residential weekend somewhere, where we were able to get to know one another and integrate the new intake of students. Roger and I had worked together on the organisation of that year's event, so when I arrived on his doorstep Roger thought that it was something to do with Classics Society business. 'No,' I said, 'I just need somebody to talk to about something. I don't need you to do anything, I just need to be able to pour it all out.' He looked at me and walked across the room. 'I'll put the kettle on,' he said.

One day Roger said: 'I think you are sufficiently rehabilitated by now, and the Hall Ball is coming up. I can get free tickets because I'm on the committee. Would you like to go?' In those days, university balls were grand occasions. The favourite venue was the Royal Festival Hall, full evening dress was required, and the event started at 11pm and ended at 5am with breakfast and a walk home through the Covent Garden flower market. That year we went to three.

At Christmas a problem arose. I wanted to spend the minimum possible time in Risca. To this end, I arranged to stay in Canterbury Hall along with the overseas students but there was a gap of 3 days when Hall was closed. 'Well you'd better come and stay with us in Sevenoaks,' said Roger. 'We've plenty of space and I'm sure my parents wouldn't mind.' Years later my (future) in-laws said that of course they 'knew', but I can honestly say that at that time the thought had never entered my head. I was in no fit state for a new relationship. In fact, having decided to start nursing as soon as I graduated, I assumed that I would be less and less available and Roger would soon find someone else.

When finals arrived the stress brought back all the nightmares and the flashbacks. I was convinced I had failed, and was ashamed that I would be

letting everyone at home down. My father and Mr Herbert were sure I was going to get a first, and nothing I could say could persuade them otherwise.

I got alphas for my four special subjects (pre-Socratic philosophy, Plato, Aristotle, and Roman comedy) and for my general essay paper, but barely passed the language papers. I totally failed the Latin prose. Dr Handley, my personal tutor, sent a card that said: 'Can I join in and say how very pleased I am to hear by the grapevine of some most distinguished results in some of the papers which wiped out the trouble with the Latin prose and left you sailing to a clear and well-deserved result overall. Many congratulations and good wishes.' Perhaps I would have done better if I had read Philosophy rather than Classics. We shall never know. Now that I have sat on a great many examination boards, I can well understand the dilemma that the board must have had over such an erratic student.

In October I started my nursing studies. Contrary to my expectations, Roger and I did not drift apart; we stayed close, and a year later we got engaged. In those days student nurses who got married were required to leave, so we planned for a wedding in July 1966 after I qualified. Meanwhile my younger sister also got engaged and planned a wedding just 3 weeks after ours. That provided us with a good reason for our wedding not to be in Risca. Even though Maurice was now married with two children, I still feared his shadow. We decided it would be at Roger's home in Sevenoaks. As a mother of four boys but no daughter, Roger's mum, Peggy, was delighted.

Meanwhile Roger had graduated and had started work in the Registrar's department at Reading University. All University staff members were allocated to a hall of residence as members of the senior common room, and several lived in. In 1965 there was a sudden expansion in student numbers, and to provide extra accommodation the University opened up, at very short notice, two adjacent 'student houses' in Craven Road that had recently been closed pending the building of a new maternity unit for the hospital next door. Roger was asked to take over as stand-in warden of what became known as 'Craven Palace'. Three months later I arrived in Reading to begin my midwifery training, living in the nurse's home but spending all of my off-duty time with Roger in Craven Palace. Roger loved his year as warden, and so was delighted when he was asked to take up a similar position at another student house that was being refurbished as an annexe to the newly-built Windsor Hall. Foxhill House was scheduled to open in October 1966, and it had a flat for a member of staff. This was exactly the time when we would be looking for accommodation after our wedding in July.

We were married on 23 July 1966 at the little church of St Peter and St Paul in Seal. It was a lovely wedding. We went back to work on Monday, delaying our honeymoon by a week because at that time the cheap student flights to Athens went only on Saturdays. The builders were already in our flat at Foxhill; we lasted in the flat until Thursday, when the toilets were closed down, and then went 'home to Mum' until we could leave for Greece.

We had a wonderful honeymoon. It was not the kind of luxury package that a couple would have today. With our rucksacks on our backs we arrived in Athens in the afternoon and booked into the cheapest hotel we could find; it was not until 3 o'clock the next morning that we found we had chosen the street where the meat market was held. We decided to get out of Athens as soon as possible and head for Crete but there were two things we needed to do before we left. The first was to get our student cards, which would give us free admission to all the antiquities and museums. This was important not only for obvious 'cultural' reasons, but also because the museums were the only places with clean lavatories and a washbasin! The second was to go to the local hospital to sell a pint of blood. The trick, known to all students, was to sell a pint of blood at the beginning of the holiday, which would provide enough money to live on for a week or so, and then sell another pint on the last day, when getting home would enable recovery. In the villages we slept on the flat roofs of the village tavernas, where the deal was a place on the roof in exchange for eating at their taverna. To this day the only phrase of modern Greek that I can remember is: 'Please can we sleep on your roof?' In Malia we slept on the beach, and I remember waking at dawn to the heavenly scent of the lilies that were portrayed on the murals and pottery that we saw in Knossos. I can still smell them now.