

Isabel Maitland Stewart: Educator, Researcher, Innovator, Mentor

Part I: Early History and Career at Teachers College

This is the first of two articles about Isabel Maitland Stewart. This *Courier* issue examines her early history and career at Teachers College up to 1925 when she received the appointment as Director of Teachers College Department of Nursing. Part II, the Fall 2009 issue, deals with her tenure and leadership as Director and her retirement years.

One hundred ten years ago, Teachers College Columbia University (TC, CU) seized an innovative opportunity to move nurses beyond their initial diploma educational level by educating them to assume leadership positions in hospital settings. This pioneering venture, championed by Isabel Hampton Robb and Dean James Russell, attracted and shaped a new generation of nursing leaders. More importantly, Teachers College, Columbia University's program set the standard for preparing nursing educators. Many view Isabel Maitland Stewart as the strongest and most persistent advocate for preparing nurse educators.¹

Born in Ontario, Canada in 1878, the fourth of nine children, Miss Stewart developed her organizational and leadership skills "taking charge and ruling," as a brother commented with "a benevolent autocracy." Her parents believed that education should be given without gender bias. They encouraged and "expected" that all their children would be critical thinkers, and partake in family conversation and debate. Coming of age in the Canadian West where men outnumbered women, Miss Stewart exemplified the "adventurous and free spirit" of many young women who planned careers other than marriage.²

Like fellow Canadian Isabel Hampton Robb, Miss Stewart began her working career as a teacher. After graduating from Manitoba Normal School in 1895 and gaining advanced education at Winnipeg Collegiate Institute, Miss Stewart discovered that teaching elementary students did not provide the satisfaction she sought in a career. In her words, "I decided that teaching third graders in a small town was too tame a life for me."³

The nursing profession forever owes a debt of gratitude to the enthusiastic friends who convinced Miss Stewart that nursing would provide the meaningful, stimulating, and productive career she sought. Over the objections of family who felt that Miss Stewart was "throwing away a good education," she walked through the doors of Winnipeg General Hospital Training School (WGHTS) in 1900.⁴ Bringing her teacher's acumen to her position as a nursing student created conflicts within Miss Stewart regarding the educational and societal roles of women. She wanted to revolutionize nursing education and she found the passionate statements of such nursing leaders as Isabel Hampton Robb and M. Adelaide Nutting akin to her own. From 1903 to 1908, Miss Stewart transitioned into her professional roles as a Private Duty Nurse, Winnipeg District Nurse and finally Head Nurse at Winnipeg General.

Through her organizational skills, she assisted in the formation of a Western Canadian Visiting Nurses Society and an Alumni Association of the WGHTS. She knew that education and organization were key components to developing strong nurse leaders and looked beyond the borders of Canada to a professional nursing education program in the United States: the relatively new program at Teachers College (TC).

TIME AT TC

When Isabel Maitland Stewart entered the program at TC, she intended to stay to complete her advanced nursing education and then return to Canada to create a similar program. She earned her Bachelors in 1911 and her Masters in 1913 and modified her original plan by staying at TC.

In 1908, Miss Stewart entered a fiscally challenged program led by the indefatigable M. Adelaide Nutting. Miss Nutting attracted nursing leaders to come on campus to lecture the next generation of nursing leaders about nursing and social issues. By 1909, when Miss Stewart became Miss Nutting's assistant, she had met women such as Annie W. Goodrich and Lillian D. Wald, and heard their lecturing about legislative issues affecting nursing education and public health issues respectively and the responsibilities of municipalities in it all. Suffrage rallies were numerous and Miss Lavinia L. Dock was a most vocal proponent of suffrage. Miss Stewart describes one event in this way:

I wouldn't say we students all were suffragettes, but there was a substantial group. For example, Miss Nutting was, but not quite as strong as Miss Dock. Miss Wald was... And we had parades up Fifth Avenue... starting about 1910, and all the various groups of women were grouped according to their professions or vocations. I marched in all those parades. Little "Dockie" carried the flag and... Miss Nutting was in the parade.⁵

In this politically energized atmosphere, the program at TC struggled with its share of economic hardships. Miss Nutting was funding the department on interest earned from previous invested donations, but the funds were not enough to sustain the program long-term. She sought to develop other avenues of funding. Instructors such as Isabel Hampton Robb "donated" their lecture time to see the program provide nurses with the leadership education they sought. And Miss Stewart continued to advocate for expansion of the existing Hospital Economics Course into a program to develop future generations of nurse educators and leaders. The funding solution came from Columbia University Trustee and philanthropist Mrs. Helen Hartley Jenkins. The New York Times headline on December 3, 1909 read, "Big Gift to Advance Training of Nurses - Mrs. Helen Hartley Jenkins Endows a Post-Graduate Course at Teachers College." In the article, Miss Lillian Wald said:

The nursing profession was overwhelmed by the size of the gift... it is the first time in the history of the nursing profession when an educational institution has been endowed to give post-graduate training to nurses... The gift will give Miss Nutting perfect freedom in the development of her plans and as an institution it will splendidly round out the educational opportunities for nurses.⁶

Neither the New York Times nor Miss Wald revealed the amount of the gift, but in 1923 the TC Board of Trustees disclosed the amount of the "1910 gift had been \$150,270.23."

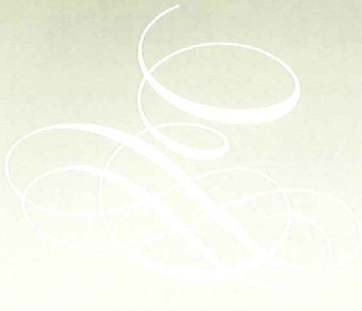
Miss Wald, who had spoken with Mrs. Jenkins about a gift, hoped the monies would be utilized for a cooperative TC-Henry Street Settlement Project to establish outreach programs for Henry Street clients and affiliations for students. Mrs. Isabel Hampton Robb had also spoken with Mrs. Jenkins about the impact her gift would have on the Nursing Department as a whole to perpetuate the work started in 1899. (In a note to Miss Nutting, Miss Stewart noted that Mrs. Robb's vision was more appealing to Mrs. Jenkins). Miss Nutting did now have the "perfect freedom" to establish the first program of its kind to educate nurses to become teaching nurses. The chief architect? Isabel Maitland Stewart.⁷

Miss Stewart was passionate about education and nursing. She wanted women to be enthusiastic about their choice to be nurses. She wanted to enable women to be leaders as nurses and as members of their communities. She knew that "women could not rise to the full demands of any vocation or profession without education and knowledge of the social conditions and needs of their day."⁸

Miss Stewart researched colleges and nursing programs; then, in her capacity as chairman of the NLNE's Curriculum Committee, she delivered her *Report of the Committee for Approaching Women's Colleges* in 1913 proposing ways to attract educated women to nursing:

1. Through addresses and talks before groups of college women.
2. Through the publication of articles on nursing in college papers.
3. Through the distribution of literature dealing with the opportunities in nursing as a profession.
4. Through fraternity organizations which have members in the nursing profession.
5. Through vocational bureaus for college women.⁹





At left: Isabel Maitland Stewart, FNYNS, MC14 Nurses House Collection.

Below: Pitcher originally owned by M. Adelaide Nutting and donated to the Foundation of NYS Nurses by Margaret Tyson. Legend has it that this pitcher was presented to Nutting as a gift from Isabel Maitland Stewart.



These strategies were successful in making women aware of the importance of a career in nursing.

Miss Stewart stayed at TC as an Assistant Instructor, Assistant Professor, Assistant to Director M. Adelaide Nutting, ultimately succeeding Miss Nutting as Director of the Nursing Department in 1925. Even with her years of experience under Miss Nutting, Miss Stewart questioned her ability to measure up to Miss Nutting. She expressed these doubts in a 1926 letter to her predecessor:

"I was very uncertain...I don't think I will ever be a real administrator, but I think I can keep things going and I hope growing a little—and hope I shall not make too many mistakes."

Miss Nutting replied:

"Don't my dear, I beg of you, allow such an idea to take root...but please don't for a moment indulge the luxury of even dreaming that you could abandon your charge. You have at least – a 10 year job before you."¹⁰

Miss Stewart served as Director of the Nursing Department and the Helen Hartley Jenkins Foundation Professor of Nursing Education until 1947. As we shall see in Part II in the Fall *Courier*: Miss Stewart's vision and innovations will leave lasting footprints on our profession for generations.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Vern L. Bullough, Olga M. Church, Alice P. Stein, *American Nursing: A Biographical Dictionary*, (New York: Garland Publishing Co., Inc, 1988), 298.
- 2 Barbara Sicherman, and Carol Hard Green, *Notable American Women: The Modern Period*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1980), 660; Goostray, Stella. "Isabel Maitland Stewart: The story of a national and international leader in nursing education." *AJN* Vol. 54, No. 3, (New York: *American Journal of Nursing Co.*, 1954), 302.
- 3 Isabel M. Stewart, "Isabel M. Stewart Recalls the Early Years," *AJN* Vol. 60, No. 10, 1426; Barbara Sicherman et al, 660.
- 4 Miss Stewart entered nursing during what she defined as the "Boom Period (1893-1913)." Through her work, she greatly impacted the 'Period of Standard Setting and Stock Taking (1913-1933).' "Curriculum Revision An Essential Step in the Reconstruction of Nursing Education," *AJN* Vol. 35, No. 1, 58.
- 5 Teresa E. Christy, *Cornerstone for Nursing Education: A History of the Division of Nursing Education of Teachers College, Columbia University, 1899-1947*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 1969), 50.
- 6 New York Times. "Big Gift to Advance Training of Nurses." 3 December 1909. < <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=9C02EFDD1438E033A25750C0A964D946897D6CF> > (13 March 2009).
- 7 Christy, 40; Barbara Sicherman, et al., p. 661.
- 8 Patricia Cook, "Lessons from the Past: Isabel Stewart: Nursing Education Leader." *N&HC: Perspectives on Community* 16:1 January/February (1995), 23.
- 9 Nettie Birnbach and Sandra Lewenson, "Trends in Nursing History: Their Social, International and Ethical Relationships by Isabel Maitland Stewart" *First Words: Selected Addresses from the National League for Nursing, 1894-1933*, (New York: National League for Nursing Press, 1991), 164-166; Robert V. Piemonte, *A History of the National League of Nursing Education 1912-1932: Great Awakening in Nursing Education*. Doctoral Dissertation, Doctor of Education. Teachers College, Columbia University. New York: Teachers College, 1976.
- 10 Teresa E. Christy, *Cornerstone for Nursing Education: A History of the Division of Nursing Education of Teachers College, Columbia University, 1899-1947*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 1969), 75-76. ☉

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