

# A LIFE WELL SPENT, A WORK WELL DONE

## Flora Madeline Shaw R.N. (1864-1927)

When today's Flora Madeline Shaw Chair in Nursing was established at McGill University, Montreal, in 1957, it represented the successful culmination of a 30-year fund raising campaign by the Alumnae Association of the School for Graduate Nurses<sup>1</sup> in honor of the Perth, Ontario, native who had served as the institution's first Director. It also recognized and honored Shaw's contribution both nationally and internationally as a leader in nursing education.

Born January 15, 1864, Flora Madeline Shaw was one of five daughters and three sons born to Henry Dowsley Shaw (1833-1886) and Flora Madeline Matheson (1836-1894)<sup>2</sup>, and thus the descendant of two of Perth's most prominent founding families.

Her paternal grandfather was Irishman James Shaw (1798-1878) who came to Upper Canada in 1820 and served as a clerk to Captain William Marshall<sup>3</sup> Superintendent of the 1820-1821 Lanark Settlement. Shaw married Ellen Forgie (1802-1882) in 1823. He was later appointed to "*oversee provisioning of the numerous navvies working on the Rideau Canal*"<sup>4</sup> and by the mid-1830s had established himself as a prosperous merchant at Smiths Falls. In 1848 he expanded his mercantile activities to Perth where he opened a large general store, 'James Shaw & Son'. In 1851 James Shaw was elected to the Legislative Assembly of the United Province of Canada and sat, with one brief interruption, until 1867 when he was named to the Senate of the new Dominion of Canada. He remained a member of the Red Chamber until his death 11 years later. In 1859 James Shaw's son, Henry Dowsley Shaw, married Flora Madelina Matheson, the daughter of another prominent Perth merchant, Roderick Matheson.

Roderick Matheson (1793-1873) arrived in Canada from Scotland in 1804 as a Drummer with the Canadian Regiment of Fencible Infantry, but shortly joined the Glengarry Light Infantry (GLI) as an Ensign having 'recruited for rank'. Matheson saw extensive service in the War of 1812, was wounded three times and was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant and GLI Paymaster. Arriving at Perth in 1817 he opened a saddle and harness-making shop. He married Mary Fraser Robertson (1809-1825) at Montreal in 1823, and when she died he married Annabella Russell (1811-1854) while on an 1830 trip to Scotland. By 1840 Matheson had constructed a large mercantile store at No. 1 Gore Street East and, next door at 11 Gore Street East, a substantial home<sup>5</sup> where his granddaughter Flora Shaw was born 24 years later. In 1863, shortly after his son Henry Dowsley Shaw married Flora Madelina Matheson, the Shaw and Matheson stores

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<sup>1</sup> The McGill University School for Graduate Nurses is now the Ingram School of Nursing.

<sup>2</sup> Roderick Matheson (1860-1861), unmarried; Flora Madeline (1864-1927), unmarried; Henry Montague (1865-1931), married Anna Fitzpatrick; Annabella Matheson (1867-1867), unmarried, Clark Wilson (1869-1870), unmarried; Helen Isabel (1871-1871), unmarried; Mary Russell (1872-1941), married Dr. Thomas W. Beeman; Kathleen Dowsley (1874-1958).

<sup>3</sup> William Marshall (1774-1864), Captain in the Regular Army and Lieutenant Colonel of Lanark Militia, served on the staff of the Perth Military Settling Department from late 1815 and was appointed by Dalhousie as Superintendent of the Lanark Settlement in 1820.

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Foster J. K. Griezic, Professor of History, Carleton University.

<sup>5</sup> Now the Perth Museum.

were amalgamated and from 1908 operated as 'Shaw's of Perth'. Roderick Matheson was one of the original Magistrates appointed at Perth in 1823. In 1847, he was named a life member of the United Province of Canada Legislative Council, where he sat until 1867, when, with the founding of the Dominion of Canada, his friend Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald made him a Senator. He suffered a stroke in December 1867 (preventing him from ever taking his seat in the Senate) and died in 1873.

Flora Madeline Shaw's interest in nursing was probably inspired by her maternal aunt, Johanna 'Joan' Matheson (1842-1916), an 1883 graduate of Bellevue Nursing School, New York, who, during the 1885 Northwest (Riel) Rebellion, joined the first corps of nurses ever to serve with a Canadian military expedition. On her return from Moose Jaw, aunt Joan went back to work at Bellevue Hospital where she was Head Nurse 1889-1890.

Flora Shaw received her early education at a private school in Perth and then attended Mrs. Mercer's Boarding School for Young Ladies<sup>6</sup> in Montreal. In 1894, at the age of 30 years, she entered the Training School for Nurses at Montreal General Hospital, the first such school in the province of Quebec.<sup>7</sup> Even as a student she demonstrated such administrative and teaching abilities that when she graduated in 1896 she was appointed 'Second Assistant' to the school's founder and Superintendent, Gertrude Elizabeth 'Nora' Livingston (1848-1927). After holding that post for three years Shaw moved to Boston where she briefly worked as Head of Nursing at a small women's hospital before returning to Montreal in 1900, having accepted the position of Livingston's 'First Assistant'.

In 1904 Flora Shaw returned to school, enrolling at Columbia University Teachers' College in New York. While studying at Columbia she engaged in other nursing-related work in New York, taking charge, for a time, of the new Florence Nightingale Hall of Presbyterian Hospital. She also taught a course in dietetics<sup>8</sup> at Presbyterian and other nursing schools in the city. She was awarded her Columbia Diploma in 1906, with a major in 'Teaching for Nursing' and a minor in 'Hospital Economics'.

Returning once again to Montreal General Hospital's Training School for Nurses Shaw took charge of a new program there, and at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto, of preliminary instruction for probationary nursing students, launching the first such class to be given in any school of nursing in Canada.

In 1908 Flora Shaw represented the Montreal General Hospital Alumnae Association at the founding meeting of the Canadian National Association of Trained Nurses (CNATN), later known as the Canadian Nurses Association (CNA), of which she was elected the first secretary-treasurer.

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<sup>6</sup> Advertised in *Steiger's Educational Directory For 1878*, Mrs. Mercer's Boarding School for Young Ladies offered "... the best professors attend the school ... resident English, French and German teachers. Pupils prepared for the 'Certificate of Associate Arts', McGill University. Students can also attend lectures of the 'Ladies Educational Association'. Course offered in 'Practical and Theoretical Cookery'."

<sup>7</sup> Founded in 1890.

<sup>8</sup> Nutrition.

A year later, however, Shaw was forced to retire from nursing when diagnosed with tuberculosis, a widespread scourge of the day and especially so among nurses. Over the next four years she spent time in sanatoria at Saranac Lake, New York, at St. Agathe, Quebec, and in England. By 1914, however, her 'cure' was considered complete and she returned to Montreal.

During World War One Flora Shaw did not join the many Canadian nurses who went to war as part of medical teams sent to England and France. She was 50 years of age when the war began, well beyond the Army Nursing Corps' maximum recruitment age of 38 years, and her fragile health barred her from service with the Red Cross or a Volunteer Aid Detachment. Her younger sister, Kathleen Dowsley Shaw (1874-1958), however, enlisted with the Canadian Army Medical Corps in 1915, served in France until 1917 and then, until 1919, served as Matron on 47 voyages of the Hospital Ship *Araguay* transporting wounded from the England to Canada.<sup>9</sup>

Unable to participate directly in the war effort, Flora Shaw went to work at the Montreal office of the Canadian Patriotic Fund (CPF) as a volunteer social worker. Montreal social activist and businessman Sir Herbert Ames (1863-1954)<sup>10</sup> created the CPF to assist the families of Canadian soldiers sent to fight in Europe. The CPF encouraged Canadians to 'fight or pay', and in particular sought to reassure married soldiers<sup>11</sup> that their wives and families would be cared for. The CPF operated across Canada and raised nearly \$50 million, distributing those funds through a vast network of local volunteers like Flora Shaw.



*Flora Madeline Shaw, RN (1864-1927)*

In the years following WW1 Shaw sat on the executive committee of the Victorian Order of Nurses of Canada (VON), and on the Board of Management and Advisory Nursing Committee of the Montreal branch of the VON.

At the same time Shaw worked on a committee promoting university education for nurses. That work led, in 1920, to an offer from McGill University to become the first Director of the newly established McGill School for Graduate Nurses, then the only school of its kind in Canada. She accepted, but before taking up her new duties, undertook, at her own expense, a six-week refresher course at Columbia. The McGill School offered certificate and degree programs developed for nurses holding diplomas from hospital Schools of Nursing. Over the next seven years, as the McGill school grew under Shaw's Direction, its graduates came to fill leading positions in the nursing world throughout Canada and the United States.

*By 1927 Miss Shaw could report that of a total of 122 graduates, 15 were superintendents of schools of nursing, six were assistant superintendents, seven were supervisors, 32*

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<sup>9</sup> See profile of Kathleen Dowsley Shaw elsewhere on this website.

<sup>10</sup> Shoe manufacturer, insurance executive, philanthropist, self-taught social scientist, Member of Parliament 1904-1920, League of Nations financial director.

<sup>11</sup> 20% of all Canadian soldiers during the war were married.

*were instructors, 31 were engaged in public health nursing, one was a missionary and one was the executive secretary of the Canadian Nurses Association.*<sup>12</sup>

While leading and managing the McGill School for Graduate Nurses, Flora Shaw also served as president of the Association of Registered Nurses of the Province of Quebec (ARNPQ) from 1922 through 1926, and as President of the Canadian Association of Nursing Education from 1922 until 1924. In response to the desire of the profession to improve the qualifications of working nurses, in 1923-1926 Shaw organized extension courses, jointly sponsored by McGill and the ARNPQ, for working nurses in Montreal.

*Alive always to anything which would raise the standard of nursing, she was active in securing important amendments in connection with the Registration Act for Nurses in the Province of Quebec.*<sup>13</sup>

In 1926 Flora Shaw was elected President of the Canadian Nurses' Association (CNA) and, in July 1927, represented the CNA at the annual conference of the International Council of Nurses held at Geneva, Switzerland. On her way back to Canada, while awaiting the August 24<sup>th</sup> sailing of her ship from Liverpool, England, she fell ill and was admitted to the Liverpool Royal Infirmary, "for what was, at first, considered a slight illness"<sup>14</sup>. A few days later, however, on August 27, 1927, Flora Madeline Shaw died of a pulmonary embolism.

Her body was returned to Montreal via the SS *Anadania*, and to Perth by rail. She was buried in Elmwood Cemetery<sup>15</sup>. Her obituary in the CNA newsletter, *The Canadian Nurse*, observed that,

*... the influence of her pioneer ancestors shows plainly throughout her professional career, as Miss Shaw was not only a pioneer in the branches of the nursing field in which she was engaged, but became the most outstanding graduate of her own school, one of the most distinguished leaders and authorities in connection with nursing education in her own country, and internationally well-known and highly-respected figure in the nursing world.*

*Cut off at the height of her career, but after many years of devoted service, Miss Shaw's work will remain as an important part of the foundation of advanced nursing education in Canada, and her memory will be treasured by her friends and associates.*

*A life well spent,  
A work well done,  
A soul at peace ...*<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *In Caps and Gowns: The Story of the School for Graduate Nurses, McGill University 1920-1960*, by Barbara Logan Tunis (1966).

<sup>13</sup> *The Canadian Nurse*, October 1927.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Plot A1/26

<sup>16</sup> *The Canadian Nurse*, October 1927.

In addition to the Shaw Chair in Nursing at McGill University in Montreal, in her hometown Flora Madeline Shaw is memorialized by a stained glass window at St. James Anglican Church.

- *Ron W. Shaw (2018)*