

Christina Bates. *A Cultural History of the Nurse's Uniform.*

Meaghan Beaton

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MEAGHAN BEATON

Review of

Bates, Christina. 2012. *A Cultural History of the Nurse's Uniform*. Gatineau, QC: Canadian Museum of Civilization Corporation.

Pp. 270, images, paperback, ISBN 9780660201849, \$39.95.

A Cultural History of the Nurse's Uniform is a fascinating look at the history of Canadian nursing uniforms from the 1870s to today. Christina Bates approaches her subject through the “metaphor of biography” which emphasizes that “material objects are dynamic, that they have agency, that they are valent” (p. 223). She examines how the social and cultural meaning of uniforms, and nurses’ relationship with these clothes, have shifted over time, and how these sartorial transformations can be used to investigate nurses’ experiences and the evolution of professional nursing identities. Bates argues that studying this clothing, together with a wide range of material, archival, oral and scholarly sources reveals a rich history of nursing uniforms and workers’ experiences. What emerges is an engaging account of nursing’s modernization that makes important contributions to gender, labour, social and material cultural history.

Bates’s study sheds light on everything from nurses’ fluctuating relationships with their uniforms to exposing those larger social, cultural and political shifts in, and historical understandings of, work, class, respectability and femininity. Uniforms identify a person’s profession, and denote power by marking an individual’s levels of competence, expertise and authority. Further, they regulate individuals in very particular ways. For example, early uniforms “disciplined nurses’ bodies into appropriate behaviours that would make them efficient and respectable hospital workers” (p. 44). Clothing marks bodies and mediates power relationships within health care settings. Uniforms also opened doors for women to work as professionals in hospital settings beginning in the late 19th century. In particular, they became a way for “innocent, respectable women to enter the male-dominated hospital milieu as professionals trained in the handling of bodies” (2). As Bates notes, women’s work at this time was intimately tied to ideas of maternal feminism, and the idea that women were inherently natural caregiv-

ers. Nevertheless, the emergence of uniforms modernized nursing and helped women to carve out professional careers in the Canadian health care system.

Chapters one through six offer a chronological history of the nurse’s uniform. It begins with the emergence of nursing as a modern profession in the 1870s and, with it, the arrival of uniforms designed specifically for workers. The narrative spans the uniform’s standardization in the early 20th century, through to the relatively recent phenomenon of the abandonment of the traditional white uniform in favour of scrubs. Chapter seven is devoted to the history of caps and bibs, material that would have worked better integrated into the first six chapters. However, the author argues that because caps (described as “the ultimate symbol of achievement in nursing” [178]) and bibs played such unique roles in the development of a nursing identity, these pieces merit special attention in a stand-alone section.

Chapter eight explores rituals associated with the uniform. Various sartorial rites of passage during training and entry into the profession marked nurses in particular ways and played key roles in the construction of occupational identity. The uniforms of those working in private and public health care outside of hospital settings, such as those employed with the Victorian Order of Nurses, are examined in chapter nine, and skillfully integrated into an examination of the broader history of public health in Canada. Chapter ten offers concluding thoughts, arguing that the history of nursing cannot be properly contextualized without incorporating an analysis of those important material culture transformations embodied in the uniform.

A Cultural History of the Nurse's Uniform incorporates a wide-ranging scope of primary and secondary sources. Bates, a curator with the Canadian Museum of Civilization, drew on the museum’s extensive Canadian Nursing History Collection, which boasts the largest depository of

nursing uniforms in the country. This collection represents a remarkable cross-section of uniforms collected from various training schools across Canada, in addition to other invaluable primary sources including scrapbooks, photographs and letters. Photographs of many items from this collection, including images of nurses in their uniforms from different eras, are beautifully featured. Excerpts from personal scrapbooks and student yearbooks, and pictures of various material cultural items from hospital collections such as graduation pins, are also included. The book also presents images of advertisements for uniforms that appeared in the Eaton's catalogues, drawing attention to the ways that the uniform was marketed to professionals during an era of increased consumerism. In addition to these primary and material sources, Bates also draws on an impressive range of secondary sources. Important works by scholars such as Kathryn McPherson are integrated into this study to produce a meticulous history of nursing in Canada.

One of the most engaging aspects of the book is how the uniform played an integral role in the construction of nursing identities. As Bates argues, uniforms "created loyalty by excluding others" (p. 61). While this clothing crystallized a professional identity, it is critical, as the author notes, to examine what groups had access to nursing education. Not surprisingly, certain groups were overtly excluded. Until the 1940s, the *Indian Act* placed significant restrictions on Aboriginals seeking higher education. As the author notes, even after restrictions were removed, systemic barriers continued to hinder Aboriginals from pursuing nursing as a vocation. Even through to the postwar period, nursing remained largely the domain of white females. However, this homogeneity changed radically starting in the 1950s and 1960s when the profession saw the entry of more racialized minorities and men to its ranks.

While Bates's discussion about those groups that found themselves often excluded from nursing's ranks is compelling, it also raises important questions that are not fully addressed. Notably, the inclusion of many first-hand accounts from female nurses highlights the dearth of similar accounts from male nurses who became more visible in medical settings beginning in the postwar period. Including more accounts of men's relationships with their nursing uniforms

would have provided much-needed context for the critical changes the profession faced during this era. In addition, the author briefly discusses those Aboriginal nurses who, for the most part beginning in the postwar period, returned to their communities to work. However, this analysis raises intriguing questions about representations of Western medical practices in Aboriginal communities which are not fully explored. Bates briefly points to the example of a parka worn by a nurse in a northern Aboriginal community which was used as a "material bridge" between the state and Indigenous cultures (p. 220). However, this short illustrative story raises myriad questions about how nurses negotiated this relationship between their formal training and communities, and points to further questions about sartorial representations outside of the urban hospital setting.

Some of the most compelling aspects of this study focus on the way that nurses carved out and marked their individual identities by challenging and subverting those limitations that were imposed on them through the nature of their education and work. As nursing professionalized over the course of the 20th century, training schools proliferated and with this expansion there emerged an impulse for hospital and school administrators to exert control over trainees. Schools used everything from strict residence rules to the uniforms themselves to impose moral codes on students' appearances and behaviours. While this control shaped virtually all aspects of trainees' lives, for the most part nurses adhered to this discipline. Nevertheless, cracks often appeared. Practising what Bates refers to as "everyday resistances" (p. 87), nursing students found inventive ways to resist the regulation of their professional and social lives by administrators. These everyday resistances allowed students to express themselves within a system that exerted incredible control over their daily lives. Resistances included everything from subtly altering prescribed uniform measurements and defying stipulations for hair length, to more overt challenges such as disobeying strict residence rules. In this way, nurses found ways to express their individuality and femininity within a system that, for decades, attempted to impose strict moral codes on them.

Bates also demonstrates how uniforms became integral components of public and private rituals. Drawing on Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's *The Invention of Tradition*, the author describes how nurses' capping ceremonies, replete with traditions such as processions and lighting candles are deeply connected with the construction of a larger professional nursing identity. Other informal rituals also played integral roles in the production of a nursing student's identity, such as "Rip Day," where fellow classmates, nurses, and doctors ripped a student's uniform, marking the lead-up to graduation when a student received a new uniform. Old uniforms were also desecrated by students dunking them in water or even burning them. These highly ritualized experiences helped to cement a student's identity as part of a larger nursing tradition that marked the transition from apprenticeship and schooling, to a fully trained nurse. However, this discussion raises questions about whether nurses in other Western countries participated in similar rituals. Are such nursing rituals unique to Canada? Such questions point to the possibility for future comparative studies that could shed further light on professional sartorial traditions.

A Cultural History of the Nurse's Uniform makes important contributions to the study of material culture through its examination of the relationship between nursing uniforms and the construction of professional identities. This book will be of particular interest to gender and labour scholars for the important contributions it makes to the history of women's work. Those interested in the history of medicine, education and professionalization in Canada will also find that this work is a valuable addition to the literature in these fields. However, the book's beautiful visual appeal, its accessible prose and its meticulous documentation of nurses' lives, education and work—including compelling first-hand accounts from these professionals—ensures that it will attract a broad cross section of readers to its pages, including nurses and other medical specialists. Ultimately, *A Cultural History of the Nurse's Uniform* reveals how sartorial transformations in nurses' uniforms both propelled and embodied critical changes in nursing's professionalization, and makes significant contributions to the study of material cultural history in this country.

MEGHANN E. JACK

Review of

Winkler, Gail Caskey. 2013. *Capricious Fancy: Draping and Curtaining the Historic Interior, 1800-1930*. Foreword by Roger Moss. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Pp. 408, 293 colour illustrations, ISBN 9780812243222, \$85.00.

Perhaps the most memorable work of literature concerning curtains is Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1955 [1936]). Destitute and fearful of the future of her home in the wake of the Civil War, Scarlett O'Hara is desperate to attract Rhett Butler and his money. Though the once-proud plantation, Tara, is almost as ragged as Scarlett herself, it does retain Miss Ellen's moss green velvet curtains, or "po'teers"—plenty of fabric for a new dress to seduce Rhett. Indignant of Scarlett's scheme, Mammy declares: "Miss Ellen set gret sto' by dem po'teers an' Ah ain' 'tendin' ter have you muss dem up dat way.... Not outer Miss Ellen's po'teers is you gwine have a new dress" (545). Of course Scarlett gets her own way. But Mammy's protest speaks to the

significance of curtains as markers of gender, domesticity and social status. In the chaotic world of the Reconstruction Era, Miss Ellen's "po'teers" are one of few refinements left in the house. When the drapery goes, as Mammy maintains, so will domestic decorum and the O'Hara's grasp on the gentry class.

It is this power of "po'teers" that Gail Winkler explores in *Capricious Fancy: Draping and Curtaining the Historic Interior, 1800-1930*. Copiously illustrated, descriptive in context and commentary, the book positions the social and aesthetic place of drapery and curtaining in the historic domestic interiors of Great Britain, the Continent and America through the 19th and early 20th centuries. Drawing on trade