

# SISTER HENRIETTA

## A COMMITTED LIFE

By Mandy Goedhals

Nurses in South Africa will recognise the name of Sister Henrietta Stockdale, as a pioneer of the profession, and the moving spirit behind the achievement of state registration for nurses in Southern Africa, one of the first regions in the world to achieve this.

Sister Henrietta was an Anglican nun whose whole life was dedicated to God through her religious order, the Community of St Michael and All Angels, which was formed in Bloemfontein in 1874, and which she joined in 1877. Recently, the Anglican Church in Southern Africa decided to recognise Sister Henrietta CSM & AA by placing her on its annual calendar of commemorations, and a special service was held for this during the recent Provincial Synod in Bloemfontein. This means that in future, on 6 October every year, Anglicans in Southern Africa will remember Sister Henrietta and give thanks to God for her life of dedicated service, especially as a nursing pioneer, offered through her community to people of all races and creeds.

There is a statue to Sister Henrietta in Kimberley, a library is named after her at the University of the Free State, and her life is recalled in histories of nursing. Often, however, it is more interesting and inspiring to know something about the personal lives, the struggles and difficulties of great women, than simply listing their important official achievements.

Henrietta was born in England and her father was an Anglican priest. The family was not rich and from an early age she helped her mother with her younger brothers and sisters, and taught in the village school. From the time she was confirmed in 1862 when she was 15, Henrietta prayed and raised money for the Anglican diocese in Bloemfontein, by selling her handwork, including embroidery and decorative picture frames. She also committed herself to work there for two years, and trained as a nurse at Clewer Hospital and at the Children's Hospital at Great Ormond Street in London. In 1874, she left her English home and set sail for Sout Africa. At first, she had no intention of becoming a nun, but she soon realised that her nursing vocation would be best carried out as part of a religious community and so became a novice of the Community of St Michael and All Angels. At the age of 27, she offered her life to in Bloemfontein, in a tiny community with an uncertain future. She was full of enthusiasm and dedication. In 1908, she looked back on the

day and said:

"We were all young people then, mostly in our twenties, some low in their thirties, and how daring and devoted and full of enthusiasm we all were. We would have stopped at nothing..."

In 1876, Bishop Webb of Bloemfontein and Sister Henrietta, then still a novice, went to Kimberley to offer the sisters' assistance in combating the perpetual public health crisis in the mining camp. The Community agreed to run a hospital, and while the buildings were being renovated, Sister Henrietta worked as a midwife in the mining camp, living in a corrugated iron hut, sometimes without enough to eat.

Many of the things she suffered could not be told here, but in one case the people were so poor that there was not sufficient food for her and she would have been thankful to have had even enough bread — she suffered real hunger. In all cases she had to do the work of the house as well as nurse the mother and care for the baby — look after the other children, cook their food, clean the place.

Her health eventually broke down, but her vocation was strengthened, and in 1877, she returned to Bloemfontein to make her final profession as a fully-fledged Sister of the Community of St Michael and All Angels. When they took on responsibility for the work of the hospital, the Community had pledged not to interfere with the religious views of the patients, and to care for people of all denominations without distinction, but this did not mean that Henrietta felt that her faith could be ignored. Someone speaking to Sister Henrietta about the patients once asked: "I suppose you try to help their souls as well as their bodies?" She replied quickly: "Why, yes, or we might just as well nurse a lot of broken-down old horses".

Henrietta made a point of asking to be called to the bedside of dying patients, at any hour of the day or night.

Her nursing care for patients was

outstanding, and in this she was exercising the caring gifts which the 19th century expected of women. But as matron first of the Carnarvon Hospital and then, from 1882, of the Kimberley Hospital, she was clear that her major work involved professional training of nurses, organisation and management. In her years at the hospital, the number of beds increased from nine to 170. Hospital administrators, all men in those days, found it hard to grasp the idea that women were capable of exercising that kind of responsibility. But Henrietta was determined, and we may be sure that they eventually got the message.

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wrote of her work in 1879: "I have got such a famous staff, and we are all so happy together".

Henrietta's work as a nursing pioneer in southern Africa is very important, and nurses rightly remember Sister Henrietta Stockdale and women like, Cecilia Makiwane and Dora Nginza, who laid the foundations and set examples for their profession.

But we must take care not to put Henrietta on a pedestal. Like all of us, she had the limitations of her own experience and context. She was perhaps not sufficiently critical of the economic and political factors that created the social needs her nursing skills sought to alleviate. Even within the sphere in which she worked, she certainly had limitations. The life of a

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throughout Southern Africa. This required an Act of Parliament, and she was involved in forming political strategy to achieve this. A doctor who supported her wrote of her approach: "She was a wily old fox and would have made a good general . . . her tactics were above reproach. She was a determined woman in the garb of a Holy Sister who knew what she wanted and how to handle important people".

Again, she was pushing forward the boundaries of what was expected of women in her day. As a result of her efforts, state registration for nurses was achieved in 1891, a first of its kind in the world.

Whatever her emphasis on professional standards and her concern with good management, Sister Henrietta also practised the domestic virtues associated with Victorian women. Joy was important, and she

nun is not about perfection, about sitting around looking calm and holy, nor is it concerned with rushing around ensuring that perfection is achieved, nor is it simply about good management. Henrietta was not a perfect human being, but had faults and knew difficulties; felt tired and disappointed, and experienced failure as well as success, as we all do.

Today, we remember with thanksgiving the life of Sister Henrietta, and the design, the shape and colour of her particular piece in the great mosaic of nursing life in South Africa. But there are others whose lives are not so well known, whom we should also acknowledge. It would be good if their stories could be collected too. Although all are unique, perhaps we will see in their lives, as we do in Sister Henrietta, similar qualities of humanity, self-sacrifice and dedication. 🙏